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Lone Wolf

Jodi Picoult & Samantha van Leer

Between the Lines

JODI
PICOULT
The Storyteller

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HODDER

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*For my mother, Jane Picoult,
because you taught me there is nothing more
important than family.
And because after twenty years, it's your turn again.*

My father trusted me with the details of his death. ‘Ania,’ he would say, ‘no whiskey at my funeral. I want the finest blackberry wine. No weeping, mind you. Just dancing. And when they lower me into the ground, I want a fanfare of trumpets, and white butterflies.’ A character, that was my father. He was the village baker, and every day, in addition to the loaves he would make for the town, he would create a single roll for me that was as unique as it was delicious: a twist like a princess’s crown, dough mixed with sweet cinnamon and the richest chocolate. The secret ingredient, he said, was his love for me, and this made it taste better than anything else I had ever eaten.

We lived on the outskirts of a village so small that everyone knew everyone else by name. Our home was made of river stone, with a thatched roof; the hearth where my father baked heated the entire cottage. I would sit at the kitchen table, shelling peas that I grew in the small garden out back, as my father opened the door of the brick oven and slid the peel inside to take out crusty, round loaves of bread. The red embers glowed, outlining the strong muscles of his back as he sweated through his tunic. ‘I don’t want a summer funeral, Ania,’ he would say. ‘Make sure instead I die on a cool day, when there’s a nice breeze. Before the birds fly south, so that they can sing for me.’

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I would pretend to take note of his requests. I didn't mind the macabre conversation; my father was far too strong for me to believe any of these requests of his would ever come to pass. Some of the others in the village found it strange, the relationship I had with my father, the fact that we could joke about this, but my mother had died when I was an infant and all we had was each other.

The trouble started on my eighteenth birthday. At first, it was just the farmers who complained; who would come out to feed their chickens and find only an explosion of bloody feathers in the coop, or a calf nearly turned inside out, flies buzzing around its carcass. 'A fox,' said Baruch Beiler, the tax collector, who lived in a mansion that sat at the bottom of the village square like a jewel at the throat of a royal. 'Maybe a wildcat. Pay what you owe, and in return, you will be protected.'

He came to our cottage one day when we were unprepared for him, and by this I mean we did not manage to barricade the doors and douse the fire and make it seem as if we were not at home. My father was shaping loaves into hearts, as he always did on my birthday, so that the whole town knew it was a special day. Baruch Beiler swept into the kitchen, lifted his gold-tipped cane, and smacked the worktable. Flour rose in a cloud, and when it settled I looked down at the dough between my father's hands, at that broken heart.

'Please,' said my father, who never begged. 'I know what I promised. But business has been slow. If you give me just a little more time—'

'You're in default, Emil,' Beiler said. 'I hold the lien on this rathole.' He leaned closer. For the first time in my life, I did not think my father invincible. 'Because I am a generous

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man, a magnanimous man, I will give you till the end of the week. But if you don't come up with the money, well, I can't say what might happen.' He lifted his cane, sliding it between his hands like a weapon. 'There have been so many . . . misfortunes lately.'

'It's why there are so few customers,' I said, my voice small. 'People won't come to market because they fear the animal that's out there.'

Baruch Beiler turned, as if noticing for the first time that I was even present. His eyes raked over me, from my dark hair in its single braid to the leather boots on my feet, whose holes had been repaired with thick patches of flannel. His gaze made me shiver, not in the same way that I felt when Damian, the captain of the guard, watched me walk away in the village square – as if I were cream and he was the cat. No, this was more mercenary. It felt like Baruch Beiler was trying to figure out what I might be worth.

He reached over my shoulder to the wire rack where the most recent batch of loaves was cooling, plucked one heart-shaped boule from its shelf, and tucked it beneath his arm. 'Collateral,' he pronounced, and he walked out of the cottage, leaving the door wide open simply because he could.

My father watched him go, and then shrugged. He grabbed another handful of dough and began to mold it. 'Ignore him. He is a little man who casts a big shadow. One day, I will dance a jig on his grave.' Then he turned to me, a smile softening his face. 'Which reminds me, Ania. At my funeral, I want a procession. First the children, throwing rose petals. Then the finest ladies, with parasols painted to look like hothouse flowers. Then of course my hearse, drawn by four – no – five snowy horses. And finally, I'd like Baruch Beiler to be at the end of the parade, cleaning up the dung.' He threw back his

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head and laughed. 'Unless, of course, he dies first. Preferably sooner rather than later.'

My father trusted me with the details of his death . . . but in the end, I was too late.

Part One



It is impossible to believe anything in a world that has ceased to regard man as man, that repeatedly proves that one is no longer a man.

– Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*

Sage

On the second Thursday of the month, Mrs. Dombrowski brings her dead husband to our therapy group.

It's just past 3:00 p.m., and most of us are still filling our paper cups with bad coffee. I've brought a plate of baked goods – last week, Stuart told me that the reason he keeps coming to Helping Hands isn't the grief counseling but my butter-scotch pecan muffins – and just as I am setting them down, Mrs. Dombrowski shyly nods toward the urn she is holding. 'This,' she tells me, 'is Herb. Herbie, meet Sage. She's the one I told you about, the baker.'

I stand frozen, ducking my head so that my hair covers the left side of my face, like I usually do. I'm sure there's a protocol for meeting a spouse who's been cremated, but I'm pretty much at a loss. Am I supposed to say hello? Shake his handle?

'Wow,' I finally say, because although there are few rules to this group, the ones we have are steadfast: be a good listener, don't judge, and don't put boundaries on someone else's grief. I know this better than anyone. After all, I've been coming for nearly three years now.

'What did you bring?' Mrs. Dombrowski asks, and I realize why she's toting her husband's urn. At our last meeting, our facilitator – Marge – had suggested that we share a memory of whatever it was we had lost. I see that Shayla is clutching

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a pair of knit pink booties so tightly her knuckles are white. Ethel is holding a television remote control. Stuart has – again – brought in the bronze death mask of his first wife’s face. It has made an appearance a few times at our group, and it was the creepiest thing I’d ever seen – until now, when Mrs. Dombrowski has brought along Herb.

Before I have to stammer my answer, Marge calls our little group to order. We each pull a folding chair into the circle, close enough to pat someone on the shoulder or reach out a hand in support. In the center sits the box of tissues Marge brings to every session, just in case.

Often Marge starts out with a global question – *Where were you when 9/11 happened?* It gets people talking about a communal tragedy, and that sometimes makes it easier to talk about a personal one. Even so, there are always people who don’t speak. Sometimes months go by before I even know what a new participant’s voice sounds like.

Today, though, Marge asks right away about the mementos we’ve brought. Ethel raises her hand. ‘This was Bernard’s,’ she says, rubbing the television remote with her thumb. ‘I didn’t want it to be – God knows I tried to take it away from him a thousand times. I don’t even have the TV this works with, anymore. But I can’t seem to throw it out.’

Ethel’s husband is still alive, but he has Alzheimer’s and has no idea who she is anymore. There are all sorts of losses people suffer – from the small to the large. You can lose your keys, your glasses, your virginity. You can lose your head, you can lose your heart, you can lose your mind. You can relinquish your home to move into assisted living, or have a child move overseas, or see a spouse vanish into dementia. Loss is more than just death, and grief is the gray shape-shifter of emotion.

‘My husband hogs the remote,’ Shayla says. ‘He says it’s because women control everything else.’

‘Actually, it’s instinct,’ Stuart says. ‘The part of the brain that’s territorial is bigger in men than it is in women. I heard it on John Tesh.’

‘So that makes it an inviolable truth?’ Jocelyn rolls her eyes. Like me, she is in her twenties. Unlike me, she has no patience for anyone over the age of forty.

‘Thanks for sharing your memento,’ Marge says, quickly interceding. ‘Sage, what did you bring today?’

I feel my cheeks burn as all eyes turn to me. Even though I know everyone in the group, even though we have formed a circle of trust, it is still painful for me to open myself up to their scrutiny. The skin of my scar, a starfish puckered across my left eyelid and cheek, grows even tighter than usual.

I shake my long bangs over my eye and from beneath my tank top, pull out the chain I wear with my mother’s wedding ring.

Of course, I know why – three years after my mom’s death – it still feels like a sword has been run through my ribs every time I think of her. It’s the same reason I am the only person from my original grief group still here. While most people come for therapy, I came for punishment.

Jocelyn raises her hand. ‘I have a real problem with that.’

I blush even deeper, assuming she’s talking about me, but then I realize that she’s staring at the urn in Mrs. Dombrowski’s lap.

‘It’s disgusting!’ Jocelyn says. ‘We weren’t supposed to bring something dead. We were supposed to bring a memory.’

‘He’s not a *something*, he’s a *someone*,’ Mrs. Dombrowski says.

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‘I don’t want to be cremated,’ Stuart muses. ‘I have nightmares about dying in a fire.’

‘News flash: you’re already *dead* when you’re put into the fire,’ Jocelyn says, and Mrs. Dombrowski bursts into tears.

I reach for the box of tissues, and pass it toward her. While Marge reminds Jocelyn about the rules of this group, kindly but firmly, I head for the bathroom down the hall.

I grew up thinking of loss as a positive outcome. My mother used to say it was the reason she met the love of her life. She’d left her purse at a restaurant and a sous-chef found it and tracked her down. When he called her, she wasn’t home and her roommate took the message. A woman answered when my mom called back, and put my father on the phone. When they met so that he could give my mother back her purse, she realized he was everything she’d ever wanted . . . but she also knew, from her initial phone call, that he lived with a woman.

Who just happened to be his sister.

My dad died of a heart attack when I was nineteen, and the only way I can even make sense of losing my mother three years later is by telling myself now she’s with him again.

In the bathroom, I pull my hair back from my face.

The scar is silver now, ruched, rippling my cheek and my brow like the neck of a silk purse. Except for the fact that my eyelid droops, skin pulled too tight, you might not realize at first glance that there’s something wrong with me – at least that’s what my friend Mary says. But people notice. They’re just too polite to say something, unless they are under the age of four and still brutally honest, pointing and asking their moms what’s wrong with that lady’s face.

Even though the injury has faded, I still see it the way it was right after the accident: raw and red, a jagged lightning

bolt splitting the symmetry of my face. In this, I suppose I'm like a girl with an eating disorder, who weighs ninety-eight pounds but sees a fat person staring back at her from the mirror. It isn't even a scar to me, really. It's a map of where my life went wrong.

As I leave the bathroom, I nearly mow down an old man. I am tall enough to see the pink of his scalp through the hurricane whorl of his white hair. 'I am late again,' he says, his English accented. 'I was lost.'

We all are, I suppose. It's why we come here: to stay tethered to what's missing.

This man is a new member of the grief group; he's only been coming for two weeks. He has yet to say a single word during a session. Yet the first time I saw him, I recognized him; I just couldn't remember why.

Now, I do. The bakery. He comes in often with his dog, a little dachshund, and he orders a fresh roll with butter and a black coffee. He spends hours writing in a little black notebook, while his dog sleeps at his feet.

As we enter the room, Jocelyn is sharing her memento: something that looks like a mangled, twisted femur. 'This was Lola's,' she says, gently turning the rawhide bone over in her hands. 'I found it under the couch after we put her down.'

'Why are you even here?' Stuart says. 'It was just a damn dog!'

Jocelyn narrows her eyes. 'At least I didn't *bronze* her.'

They start arguing as the old man and I get settled in the circle. Marge uses this as a distraction. 'Mr. Weber,' she says, 'welcome. Jocelyn was just telling us how much her pet meant to her. Have you ever had a pet you loved?'

I think of the little dog he brings to the bakery. He shares the roll with her, fifty-fifty.

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But the man is silent. He bows his head, as if he is being pressed down in his seat. I recognize that stance, that wish to disappear.

‘You can love a pet more than you love some people,’ I say suddenly, surprising even myself. Everyone turns, because unlike the others, I hardly ever draw attention to myself by volunteering information. ‘It doesn’t matter what it is that leaves a hole inside you. It just matters that it’s there.’

The old man slowly glances up. I can feel the heat of his gaze through the curtain of my hair.

‘Mr. Weber,’ Marge says, noticing. ‘Maybe you brought a memento to share with us today . . .?’

He shakes his head, his blue eyes flat and without expression.

Marge lets his silence stand; an offering on a pedestal. I know this is because some people come here to talk, while others come to just listen. But the lack of sound pounds like a heartbeat. It’s deafening.

That’s the paradox of loss: How can something that’s gone weigh us down so much?

At the end of the hour, Marge thanks us for participating and we fold up the chairs and recycle our paper plates and napkins. I pack up the remaining muffins and give them to Stuart. Bringing them back to the bakery would be like carting a bucket of water to Niagara Falls. Then I walk outside to head back to work.

If you’ve lived in New Hampshire your whole life, like I have, you can smell the change in the weather. It’s oppressively hot, but there’s a thunderstorm written across the sky in invisible ink.

‘Excuse me.’

I turn at the sound of Mr. Weber’s voice. He stands with his back to the Episcopal church where we hold our

meetings. Although it's at least eighty-five degrees out, he is wearing a long-sleeved shirt that is buttoned to the throat, with a narrow tie.

'That was a nice thing you did, sticking up for that girl.'

The way he pronounces the word *thing*, it sounds like *think*.

I look away. 'Thanks.'

'You are Sage?'

Well, isn't that the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question? Yes, it's my name, but the double entendre – that I'm full of wisdom – has never really applied. There have been too many moments in my life when I've nearly gone off the rails, more overwhelmed by emotion than tempered by reason.

'Yes,' I say.

The awkward silence grows between us like yeasted dough. 'This group. You have been coming a long time.'

I don't know whether I should be defensive. 'Yes.'

'So you find it helpful?'

If it were helpful, I wouldn't still be coming. 'They're all nice people, really. They each just sometimes think their grief is bigger than anyone else's.'

'You don't say much,' Mr. Weber muses. 'But when you *do* . . . you are a poet.'

I shake my head. 'I'm a baker.'

'Can a person not be two things at once?' he asks, and slowly, he walks away.

I run into the bakery, breathless and flushed, to find my boss hanging from the ceiling. 'Sorry I'm late,' I say. 'The shrine is packed and some moron in an Escalade took my spot.'

Mary's rigged up a Michelangelo-style dolly so that she can lie on her back and paint the ceiling of the bakery. 'That moron would be the bishop,' she replies. 'He stopped in on his way

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up the hill. Said your olive loaf is heavenly, which is pretty high praise, coming from him.’

In her previous life, Mary DeAngelis was Sister Mary Robert. She had a green thumb and was well known for maintaining the gardens in her Maryland cloister. One Easter, when she heard the priest say *He is risen*, she found herself standing up from the pew and walking out the cathedral door. She left the order, dyed her hair pink, and hiked the Appalachian Trail. It was somewhere on the Presidential Range that Jesus appeared to her in a vision, and told her there were many souls to feed.

Six months later, Mary opened Our Daily Bread at the foothills of the Our Lady of Mercy Shrine in Westerbrook, New Hampshire. The shrine covers sixteen acres with a meditation grotto, a peace angel, Stations of the Cross, and holy stairs. There is also a store filled with crosses, crucifixes, books on Catholicism and theology, Christian music CDs, saints’ medals, and Fontanini crèche sets. But visitors usually come to see the 750-foot rosary made of New Hampshire granite boulders, linked together with chains.

It was a fair-weather shrine; business dropped off dramatically during New England winters. Which was Mary’s selling point: What could be more secular than freshly baked bread? Why not boost the revenue of the shrine by adding a bakery that would attract believers and nonbelievers alike?

The only catch was that she had no idea how to bake.

That’s where I come in.

I started baking when I was nineteen years old and my father died unexpectedly. I was at college, and went home for the funeral, only to return and find nothing the same. I stared at the words in textbooks as if they had been written in a language I could not read. I couldn’t get myself out of bed to go to classes.

I missed one exam, then another. I stopped turning in papers. Then one night I woke up in my dorm room and smelled flour – so much flour I felt as if I'd been rolling in it. I took a shower but couldn't get rid of the smell. It reminded me of Sunday mornings as a kid, when I would awaken to the scent of fresh bagels and bialys, crafted by my father.

He'd always tried to teach my sisters and me, but mostly we were too busy with school and field hockey and boys to listen. Or so I thought, until I started to sneak into the residential college dining hall kitchen and bake bread every night.

I left the loaves like abandoned babies on the thresholds of the offices of professors I admired, of the dorm rooms of boys with smiles so beautiful that they stunned me into awkward silence. I left a final row of sourdough rolls on a lectern podium and slipped a boule into the oversize purse of the cafeteria lady who pressed plates of pancakes and bacon at me, telling me I was too skinny. On the day my academic adviser told me that I was failing three of my four classes, I had nothing to say in my defense, but I gave her a honey baguette seeded with anise, the bitter and the sweet.

My mother arrived unexpectedly one day. She took up residence in my dorm room and micromanaged my life, from making sure I was fed to walking me to class and quizzing me on my homework readings. 'If I don't get to give up,' she told me, 'then neither do you.'

I wound up being on the five-year plan, but I did graduate. My mother stood up and whistled through her teeth when I crossed the stage to get my diploma. And then everything went to hell.

I've thought a lot about it: how you can ricochet from a moment where you are on top of the world to one where you are crawling at rock bottom. I've thought about all the things

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I could have done differently, and if it would have led to another outcome. But thinking doesn't change anything, does it? And so afterward, with my eye still bloodshot and the Frankenstein monster stitches curving around my temple and cheek like the seam of a baseball, I gave my mother the same advice she had given me. *If I don't get to give up, then neither do you.*

She didn't, at first. It took almost six months, one bodily system shutting down after another. I sat by her side in the hospital every day, and at night went home to rest. Except, I didn't. Instead, I started once again to bake – my go-to therapy. I brought artisan loaves to her doctors. I made pretzels for the nurses. For my mother, I baked her favorite – cinnamon rolls, thick with icing. I made them daily, but she never managed a bite.

It was Marge, the facilitator of the grief group, who suggested I get a job to help me forge some kind of routine. Fake it until you make it, she said. But I couldn't stand the thought of working in broad daylight, where everyone would be staring at my face. I had been shy before; now I was reclusive.

Mary says it's divine intervention that she ran into me. (She calls herself a recovering nun, but in reality, she gave up her habit, not her faith.) Me, I don't believe in God; I think it was pure luck that the first classifieds section I read after Marge made her suggestion included an ad for a master baker – one who would work nights, alone, and leave when customers began to trickle into the store. At the interview Mary didn't comment on the fact that I had no experience, no significant summer jobs, no references. But most important, she took one look at my scar and said, 'I'm guessing when you want to tell me about that, you will.' And that was that. Later, as I got to know her, I'd realize that when she gardens, she never sees

the seed. She is already picturing the plant it will become. I imagine she thought the same, meeting me.

The only saving grace about working at Our Daily Bread (no pun intended) was that my mother was not alive to see it. She and my father had both been Jewish. My sisters, Pepper and Saffron, were both bat mitzvahed. Although we sold bagels and challah as well as hot cross buns; although the coffee bar attached to the bakery was called HeBrews – I knew my mother would have said: *All the bakeries in the world, what made you decide to work for a shiksa?*

But my mother also would have been the first to tell me that good people are good people; religion has nothing to do with it. I think my mom knows, wherever she is now, how many times Mary found me in the kitchen in tears, and delayed the opening of the bakery until she helped me pull myself together. I think she knows that on the anniversary of my mother's death, Mary donates all the money raised at the bakery to Hadassah. And that Mary is the only person I don't actively try to hide my scar from. She isn't just my employer but also my best friend, and I like to believe that would matter more to my mother than where Mary chose to worship.

A splat of purple paint drops on the floor beside my foot, making me look up. Mary's painting another one of her visions. She has them with staggering regularity – at least three a year – and they usually lead to some change in the composition of our shop or our menu. The coffee bar was one of Mary's visions. So was the greenhouse window, with the rows of delicate orchids, their flowers draped like a string of pearls over the rich green foliage. One winter she introduced a knitting circle at Our Daily Bread; another year, it was a yoga class. Hunger, she often tells me, has nothing to do with the

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belly and everything to do with the mind. What Mary really runs isn't a bakery, but a community.

Some of Mary's aphorisms are painted on the walls: *Seek and ye shall find. All who wander are not lost. It's not the years in your life that count, but the life in your years.* I sometimes wonder if Mary really dreams up these platitudes or if she just memorizes the catchy phrases on *Life Is Good* T-shirts. I guess it doesn't much matter, though, since our customers seem to enjoy reading them.

Today, Mary is painting her latest mantra. *All you knead is love*, I read.

'What do you think?' she asks.

'That Yoko Ono is going to sue you for copyright infringement,' I reply.

Rocco, our barista, is wiping down the counter. 'Lennon was brilliant,' he says. 'If he were alive today / Can you *Imagine*?'

Rocco is twenty-nine years old, has prematurely gray dreadlocks, and speaks only in Haiku. It's his *thing*, he told Mary, when he applied for his job. She was willing to overlook that little verbal tic because of his prodigious talent creating foam art – the patterned swirls on top of lattes and mochaccinos. He can make ferns, hearts, unicorns, Lady Gaga, spiderwebs, and once, on Mary's birthday, Pope Benedict XVI. Me, I like him because of one of Rocco's other *things*: he doesn't look people in the eye. He says that's how someone can steal your soul.

Amen to that.

'Ran out of baguettes,' Rocco tells me. 'Gave angry folks free coffee.' He pauses, counting syllables mentally. 'Tonight make extra.'

Mary begins to lower herself from her rigging. 'How was your meeting?'

‘The usual. Has it been this quiet all day?’

She hits the ground with a soft thud. ‘No, we had the preschool drop-off rush and a good lunch.’ Getting to her feet, she wipes her hands on her jeans and follows me into the kitchen. ‘By the way, Satan called,’ she says.

‘Let me guess. He wants a special-order birthday cake for Joseph Kony?’

‘By Satan,’ Mary says, as if I haven’t spoken, ‘I mean Adam.’

Adam is my boyfriend. Except not, because he’s already someone else’s husband. ‘Adam’s not *that* bad.’

‘He’s hot, Sage, and he’s emotionally destructive. If the shoe fits . . .’ Mary shrugs. ‘I’m leaving Rocco to man the cannons while I head up to the shrine to do a little weeding.’ Although she’s not employed there, no one seems to mind if the former nun with the green thumb keeps the flowers and plants in good form. Gardening – sweaty, machete-hacking, root-digging, bush-dragging gardening – is Mary’s relaxation. Sometimes I think she doesn’t sleep at all, she just photosynthesizes like her beloved plants. She seems to function with more energy and speed than the rest of us ordinary mortals; she makes Tinker Bell look like a sloth. ‘The hostas have been staging a coup.’

‘Have fun,’ I say, tying the strings of my apron, and focusing on the night’s work.

At the bakery, I have a gigantic spiral mixer, because I make multiple loaves at a time. I have pre-ferments in various temperatures stored in carefully marked canisters. I use an Excel spreadsheet to figure out the baker’s percentage, a crazy math that always adds up to more than 100 percent. But my favorite kind of baking is just a bowl, a wooden spoon, and four elements: flour, water, yeast, salt. Then, all you need is time.

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Making bread is an athletic event. Not only does it require dashing around to several stations of the bakery as you check rising loaves or mix ingredients or haul the mixing bowl out of its cradle – but it also takes muscle power to activate the gluten in the dough. Even people who wouldn't be able to tell a poolish from a biga know that to make bread, you have to knead it. Push and roll, push and fold, a rhythmic workout on your floured countertop. Do it right, and you'll release a protein called gluten – strands that let uneven pockets of carbon dioxide form in the loaves. After seven or eight minutes – long enough for your mind to have made a to-do list of chores around the house, or for you to replay the last conversation you had with your significant other and what he really meant – the consistency of the dough will transform. Smooth, supple, cohesive.

That's the point where you have to leave the dough alone. It's silly to anthropomorphize bread, but I love the fact that it needs to sit quietly, to retreat from touch and noise and drama, in order to evolve.

I have to admit, I often feel that way myself.

Bakers' hours can do strange things to a brain. When your workday begins at 5:00 p.m. and lasts through dawn, you hear each click of the minute hand on the clock over the stove, you see movements in the shadows. You do not recognize the echo of your own voice; you begin to think you are the only person left alive on earth. I'm convinced there's a reason most murders happen at night. The world just feels different for those of us who come alive after dark. It's more fragile and unreal, a replica of the one everyone else inhabits.

I've been living in reverse for so long now that it's not a hardship to go to bed when the sun is rising, and to wake

when it's low in the sky. Most days this means I get about six hours of sleep before I return to Our Daily Bread to start all over again, but being a baker means accepting a fringe existence, one I welcome wholeheartedly. The people I see are convenience store clerks, Dunkin' Donuts drive-through cashiers, nurses switching shifts. And Mary and Rocco, of course, who close up the bakery shortly after I arrive. They lock me in, like the queen in Rumpelstiltskin, not to count grain but to transform it before morning into the quick breads and yeasted loaves that fill the shelves and glass counters.

I was never a people person, but now I actively prefer to be alone. This setup suits me best: I get to work by myself; Mary is the front man responsible for chatting up the customers and making them want to return for another visit. I hide.

Baking, for me, is a form of meditation. I get pleasure out of slicing up the voluminous mass of dough, eyeballing it to just the right amount of kilos on a scale for a perfect artisan loaf. I love how the snake of a baguette quivers beneath my palm as I roll it out. I love the sigh that a risen loaf makes when I first punch it down. I like curling my toes inside my clogs and stretching my neck from side to side to work out the kinks. I like knowing there will be no phone calls, no interruptions.

I am already well into making the one hundred pounds of product I make every night by the time I hear Mary return from her gardening stint up the hill and start to close up shop. Rinsing my hands in the industrial sink, I pull off the cap I wear to cover my hair while I'm working and walk to the front of the shop. Rocco is zipping up his motorcycle jacket. Through the plate-glass windows, I see heat lightning arc across the bruise of the sky.

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‘See you tomorrow,’ Rocco says. ‘Unless we die in our sleep. / What a way to go.’

I hear a bark, and realize that the bakery isn’t empty. The one lone customer is Mr. Weber, from my grief group, and his tiny dog. Mary sits with him, a cup of tea in her hands.

He struggles to get to his feet when he sees me and does an awkward little bow. ‘Hello again.’

‘You know Josef?’ Mary asks.

Grief group is like AA – you don’t ‘out’ someone unless you have his permission. ‘We’ve met,’ I reply, shaking my hair forward to screen my face.

His dachshund comes closer on her leash to lick at a spot of flour on my pants. ‘Eva,’ he scolds. ‘Manners!’

‘It’s okay,’ I tell him, crouching down with relief to pat the dog. Animals never stare.

Mr. Weber slips the loop of the leash over his wrist and stands. ‘I am keeping you from going home,’ he says apologetically to Mary.

‘Not at all. I enjoy the company.’ She glances down at the old man’s mug, which is still three-quarters full.

I don’t know what makes me say what I say. After all, I have plenty to do. But it has started to pour now, a torrential sheet of rain. The only vehicles in the lot are Mary’s Harley and Rocco’s Prius, which means Mr. Weber is either walking home or waiting for the bus. ‘You can stay until Advanced Transit shows up,’ I tell him.

‘Oh, no,’ Mr. Weber says. ‘This will be an imposition.’

‘I insist,’ Mary seconds.

He nods in gratitude and sits down again. As he cups his hands around the coffee mug, Eva stretches out over his left foot and closes her eyes.

‘Have a nice night,’ Mary says to me. ‘Bake your little heart out.’

But instead of staying with Mr. Weber, I follow Mary into the back room, where she keeps her biker rain gear. 'I'm not cleaning up after him.'

'Okay,' Mary says, pausing in the middle of pulling on her chaps.

'I don't *do* customers.' In fact when I stumble out of the bakery at 7:00 a.m. and see the shop filled with businessmen buying bagels and housewives slipping wheat loaves into their recycled grocery bags, I am always a little surprised to remember there is a world outside my industrial kitchen. I imagine it's the way a patient who's flatlined must feel when he is shocked back into a heartbeat and thrown into the fuss and bustle of life – too much information and sensory overload.

'*You* invited him to stay,' Mary reminds me.

'I don't know anything about him. What if he tries to rob us? Or worse?'

'Sage, he's over ninety. Do you think he's going to cut your throat with his dentures?' Mary shakes her head. 'Josef Weber is as close as you can get to being canonized while you're still alive. Everyone in Westerbrook knows him – he used to coach kids' baseball; he organized the cleanup of Riverhead Park; he taught German at the high school for a zillion years. He's everyone's adoptive, cuddly grandfather. I don't think he's going to sneak into the kitchen and stab you with a bread knife while your back is turned.'

'I've never heard of him,' I murmur.

'That's because you live under a rock,' Mary says.

'Or in a kitchen.' When you sleep all day and work all night, you don't have time for things like newspapers or television. It was three days before I heard that Osama bin Laden had been killed.

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‘Good night.’ She gives me a quick hug. ‘Josef’s harmless. Really. The worst he could do is talk you to death.’

I watch her open the rear door of the bakery. She ducks at the onslaught of driving rain and waves without looking back. I close the door behind her and lock it.

By the time I return to the bakery’s dining room, Mr. Weber’s mug is empty and the dog is on his lap. ‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘Work stuff.’

‘You don’t have to entertain me. I know you have much to do.’

I have a hundred loaves to shape, bagels to boil, bialys to fill. Yes, you could say I’m busy. But to my surprise I hear myself say, ‘It can wait a few minutes.’

Mr. Weber gestures to the chair Mary had occupied. ‘Then please. Sit.’

I do, but I check my watch. My timer will go off in three minutes, then I will have to go back into the kitchen. ‘So,’ I say. ‘I guess we’re in for some weather.’

‘We are always in for some weather,’ Mr. Weber replies. His words sound as if he is biting them off a string; precise, clipped. ‘Tonight however we are in for some *bad* weather.’ He glances up at me. ‘What brought you to the grief group?’

My gaze locks on his. There is a rule that, at group, we are not pressed to share if we’re not ready. Certainly Mr. Weber hasn’t been ready; it seems rude that he’d ask someone else to do what he himself isn’t willing to do. But then again, we aren’t at group.

‘My mother,’ I say, and tell him what I’ve told everyone else there. ‘Cancer.’

He nods in sympathy. ‘I am sorry for your loss,’ he says stiffly.

‘And you?’ I ask.

He shakes his head. ‘Too many to count.’

I don't even know how to respond to that. My grandma is always talking about how at her age, her friends are dropping like flies. I imagine for Mr. Weber, the same is true.

'You have been a baker long?'

'A few years,' I answer.

'It is an odd profession for a young woman. Not very social. Has he *seen* what I look like? 'It suits me.'

'You are very good at what you do.'

'Anyone can bake bread,' I say.

'But not everyone can do it well.'

From the kitchen comes the sound of the timer buzzing; it wakes up Eva, who begins to bark. Almost simultaneously there is a sweep of approaching lights through the glass windows of the bakery as the Advanced Transit bus slows at its corner stop. 'Thank you for letting me stay a bit,' he says.

'No problem, Mr. Weber.'

His face softens. 'Please. Call me Josef.'

I watch him tuck Eva into his coat and open his umbrella. 'Come back soon,' I say, because I know Mary would want me to.

'Tomorrow,' he announces, as if we have set a date. As he walks out of the bakery he squints into the bright beams of the bus.

In spite of what I have told Mary, I go to collect his dirty mug and plate, only to notice that Mr. Weber – Josef – has left behind the little black book he is always writing in when he sits here. It is banded with elastic.

I grab it and run into the storm. I step right into a gigantic puddle, which soaks my clog. 'Josef,' I call out, my hair plastered to my head. He turns, Eva's beady little eyes poking out from between the folds of his raincoat. 'You left this.'

I hold up the black book and walk toward him. 'Thank you,'

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he says, safely slipping it into his pocket. 'I don't know what I would have done without it.' He tips his umbrella, so that it shelters me as well.

'Your Great American Novel?' I guess. Ever since Mary installed free WiFi at Our Daily Bread, the place has been crawling with people who intend to be published.

He looks startled. 'Oh, no. This is just a place to keep all my thoughts. They get away from me, otherwise. If I don't write down that I like your kaiser rolls, for example, I won't remember to order them the next time I come.'

'I think most people could use a book like that.'

The driver of the Advanced Transit bus honks twice. We both turn in the direction of the noise. I wince as the beams of the headlights flash across my face.

Josef pats his pocket. 'It's important to remember,' he says.

One of the first things Adam told me was that I was pretty, which should have been my first clue that he was a liar.

I met him on the worst day of my life, the day my mother died. He was the funeral director my sister Pepper contacted. I have a vague recollection of him explaining the process to us, and showing us the different kinds of caskets. But the first time I really noticed him was when I made a scene at my mother's service.

My sisters and I all knew my mother's favorite song had been 'Somewhere over the Rainbow.' Pepper and Saffron had wanted to hire a professional to sing it, but I had other plans. It wasn't just the *song* my mother had loved, it was one particular rendition of it. And I'd promised my mother that Judy Garland would sing at her funeral.

'News flash, Sage,' said Pepper. 'Judy Garland isn't taking bookings these days, unless you're a medium.'

In the end, my sisters went along with what I wanted – mostly because I framed this as one of Mom’s dying wishes. It was my job to give the CD to the funeral director – to Adam. I downloaded the song from the *Wizard of Oz* soundtrack on iTunes. As the service began, he played it over the speaker system.

Unfortunately it wasn’t ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow.’ It was the Munchkins, performing ‘Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead.’

Pepper burst into tears. Saffron had to leave the service, she was so upset.

Me, I started to giggle.

I don’t know why. It just spurted out of me, like a shower of sparks. And suddenly every single person in that room was staring at me, with the angry red lines bisecting my face and the inappropriate laughter fizzing out of my mouth.

‘Oh my God, Sage,’ Pepper hissed. ‘How *could* you?’

Feeling panicked, cornered, I stood up from the front pew, took two steps, and passed out.

I came to in Adam’s office. He was kneeling next to the couch and he had a damp washcloth in his hand, which he was pressing right against my scar. Immediately, I curled away from him, covering the left side of my face with my hand. ‘You know,’ he said, as if we were in the middle of a conversation, ‘in my line of work, there aren’t any secrets. I know who’s had plastic surgery, and who’s survived a mastectomy. I know who had their appendix out and who had surgery for a double hernia. The person may have a scar, but it also means they have a story. And besides,’ he said, ‘that wasn’t what I noticed when I first saw you.’

‘Yeah, right.’

He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘I noticed,’ he said, ‘that you were pretty.’

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He had sandy hair and honey-brown eyes. His palm was warm against my skin. I had never been beautiful, not before everything happened, and certainly not after. I shook my head, clearing it. ‘I didn’t eat anything this morning . . .’ I said. ‘I have to get back out there—’

‘Relax. I suggested that we take a fifteen-minute break before we start up again.’ Adam hesitated. ‘Maybe you’d like to borrow a playlist from my iPod instead.’

‘I could have sworn I downloaded the right song. My sisters hate me.’

‘I’ve seen worse,’ Adam replied.

‘I doubt it.’

‘I once watched a drunk mistress climb into a coffin with the deceased, until the wife dragged her away and knocked her out cold.’

My eyes widened. ‘For real?’

‘Yeah. So this . . .?’ He shrugged. ‘Small potatoes.’

‘But I *laughed*.’

‘Lots of people laugh at funerals,’ Adam said. ‘It’s because we’re uncomfortable with death, and that’s a reflex. Besides, I bet your mother would much rather know you were celebrating her life with a laugh than know she had you in tears.’

‘My mother would have thought it was funny,’ I whispered.

‘There you go.’ Adam handed me the CD in its sleeve.

I shook my head. ‘You can keep it. In case Naomi Campbell becomes a client.’

Adam grinned. ‘I bet your mom would have thought that was funny, too,’ he said.

A week after the funeral, he called me to see how I was doing. I thought this was strange on two counts – because I’d never heard of that kind of customer service from a funeral home, and because Pepper had been the one to hire him,

not me. I was so touched by his concern that I baked him a quick babka and took it to the funeral home one day on my way home from work. I'd hoped to drop it off without running into him, but as it turned out, he was there.

He asked me if I had time for coffee.

You should know that even that day, he was wearing his wedding ring. In other words, I knew what I was getting into. My only defense is that I never expected to be adored by a man, not after what had happened to me, and yet here was Adam – attractive and successful – doing just that. Every fiber of morality in me that said Adam belonged to someone else was being countermanded by the quiet whisper in my head: *Beggars can't be choosers; take what you can get; who else would ever love someone like you?*

I knew it was wrong to get involved with a married man, but that didn't stop me from falling in love with him, or wishing he would fall in love with me. I had resigned myself to living alone, working alone, being alone for the rest of my life. Even if I had found someone who professed not to care about the weird puckering on the left side of my face, how would I ever know if he loved me, or pitied me? They looked so similar, and I had never been very good at reading people. The relationship between Adam and me was secretive, kept behind closed doors. In other words, it was squarely in my comfort zone.

Before you go and say it's creepy to let someone who's been embalming people touch you, let me tell you how wrong you are. Anyone who's died – my mother included – would be lucky to have that last touch be as gentle as Adam's. I sometimes think that because he spends so much time with the dead, he is the only person who really appreciates the marvel of a living body. When we make love, he lingers over the pulse

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of my carotid, at my wrist, behind my knees – the spots where my blood beats.

On the days when Adam comes to my place, I sacrifice an hour or two of sleep in order to be with him. He can pretty much sneak away anytime, thanks to the nature of his business, which requires him to be on call 24/7. It's also why his wife hasn't found it suspicious when he disappears.

'I think Shannon knows,' Adam says today, when I am lying in his arms.

'Really?' I try to ignore how this makes me feel, as if I am at the top of the roller coaster hill, and I can no longer see the oncoming track.

'There was a new bumper sticker on my car this morning. It says I ♥ MY WIFE.'

'How do you know she put it there?'

'Because *I* didn't,' Adam says.

I consider this for a moment. 'The bumper sticker might not be sarcastic. It could just be blissfully ignorant.'

Adam married his high school girlfriend, whom he'd dated through college. The funeral home where he works is his wife's family business and has been for fifty years. At least twice a week he tells me he is going to leave Shannon, but I know this isn't true. First, he'd be walking away from his career. Second, it is not just Shannon he'd be leaving, but also Grace and Bryan, his twins. When he talks about them, his voice sounds different. It sounds the way I hope it sounds when he talks about me.

He probably *doesn't* talk about me, though. I mean, who would he tell that he's having an affair? The only person *I've* told is Mary, and in spite of the fact that we are both at fault for getting involved, she acts as if he was the one to seduce me.

‘Let’s go away this weekend,’ I suggest.

On Sundays, I don’t work; the bakery is closed on Mondays. We could disappear for twenty-four glorious hours, instead of hiding in my bedroom with the shades drawn against the sunlight and his car – with its new bumper sticker – parked around the corner at a Chinese restaurant.

Once Shannon came into the bakery. I saw her through the open window between the kitchen and the shop. I knew it was her, because I’ve seen pictures on Adam’s Facebook page. I was certain she had come to ream me out, but she just bought some pumpernickel rolls and left. Afterward, Mary found me sitting on the floor of the kitchen, weak with relief. When I told her about Adam, she asked me one question: *Do you love him?*

Yes, I told her.

No you don’t, Mary said. *You love that he needs to hide as much as you do.*

Adam’s fingers graze my scar. Even after all this time, although it’s not medically possible, the skin tingles. ‘You want to go away,’ he repeats. ‘You want to walk down the street in broad daylight with me, so everyone can see us together.’

When he puts it like that, I realize it’s not what I want at all. I want to squirrel away with him behind the closed doors of a luxury hotel in the White Mountains, or in a cottage in Montana. But I don’t want him to be right, so I say, ‘Maybe I do.’

‘Okay,’ Adam says, twisting my curls around his fingers. ‘The Maldives.’

I come up on an elbow. ‘I’m being serious.’

Adam looks at me. ‘Sage,’ he says, ‘you won’t even look in a mirror.’

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‘I Googled Southwest flights. For forty-nine dollars we could get to Kansas City.’

Adam strokes his finger down the xylophone of my rib cage. ‘Why would we want to go to Kansas City?’

I push his hand away. ‘Stop distracting me,’ I say. ‘Because it’s not *here*.’

He rolls on top of me. ‘Book the flights.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘What if you’re paged?’ I ask.

‘They’re not going to get any deader if they have to wait,’ Adam points out.

My heart starts to beat erratically. It’s tantalizing, this thought of going public. If I walk around holding the hand of a handsome man who obviously wants to be with me, does that make me normal, by association? ‘What are you going to tell Shannon?’

‘That I’m crazy about you.’

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I’d met Adam when I was younger. We went to the same high school, but ten years apart. We both wound up back in our hometown. We work alone, at odd hours, doing jobs most ordinary people would never consider for a career.

‘That I can’t stop thinking about you,’ Adam adds, his teeth raking my earlobe. ‘That I’m hopelessly in love.’

I have to say, the thing I adore most about Adam is exactly what’s keeping him from being with me all the time: that when he loves you, he loves you unerringly, completely, overwhelmingly. It’s how he feels about his twins, which is why he is home every night to hear how the biology test went for Grace or to see Bryan score the first home run of the baseball season.

‘Do you know Josef Weber?’ I ask, suddenly remembering what Mary said.

Adam rolls onto his back. ‘*I’m hopelessly in love,*’ he repeats. ‘*Do you know Josef Weber?* Yeah, that’s a normal response . . .’

‘I think he worked at the high school? He taught German.’

‘The twins take French . . .’ Suddenly he snaps his fingers. ‘He was a Little League umpire. I think Bryan was six or seven at the time. I remember thinking that the guy must have been pushing ninety even back then, and that the rec department was off its rocker, but it turned out he was pretty damn spry.’

‘What do you know about him?’ I ask, turning on my side.

Adam folds his arms around me. ‘Weber? He was a nice guy. He knew the game backward and forward and he never made a bad call. That’s all I remember. Why?’

A smile plays over my face. ‘I’m leaving you for him.’

He kisses me, slow and lovely. ‘Is there anything I can do to change your mind?’

‘I’m sure you’ll think of something,’ I say, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

In a town the size of Westerbrook, which was derived of Yankee *Mayflower* stock, being Jewish made my sisters and me anomalies, as different from our classmates as if our skin happened to be bright blue. ‘Rounding out the bell curve,’ my father used to say, when I asked him why we had to stop eating bread for a week roughly the same time everyone else in my school was bringing hard-boiled Easter eggs in their lunch boxes. I wasn’t picked on – to the contrary, when our elementary school teachers taught holiday alternatives to Christmas, I became a virtual celebrity, along with Julius, the only African-American kid in my school, whose grandmother celebrated Kwanzaa. I went to Hebrew school because my sisters did,

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but when the time came to be bat mitzvahed, I begged to drop out. When I wasn't allowed, I went on a hunger strike. It was enough that my family didn't match other families; I had no desire to call attention to myself any more than I had to.

My parents were Jews, but they didn't keep kosher or go to services (except for the years prior to Pepper's and Saffron's bat mitzvahs, when it was mandatory. I used to sit at Friday night services listening to the cantor sing in Hebrew and wonder why Jewish music was full of minor chords. For Chosen People, the songwriters sure didn't seem very happy). My parents did, however, fast on Yom Kippur and refused to have a Christmas tree.

To me, it seemed they were following an abridged version of Judaism, so who were they to tell me how and what to believe? I said this to my parents when I was lobbying to not have a bat mitzvah. My father got very quiet. *The reason it's important to believe in something*, he said, *is because you can*. Then he sent me to my room without supper, which was truly shocking because in our household, we were encouraged to state our opinions, no matter how controversial. It was my mother who sneaked upstairs with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for me. 'Your father may not be a rabbi,' she said, 'but he believes in tradition. That's what parents pass down to their children.'

'Okay,' I argued. 'I promise to do my back-to-school shopping in July; and I'll always make sweet-potato-marshmallow casserole for Thanksgiving. I don't have a problem with tradition, Mom. I have a problem going to Hebrew school. Religion isn't in your DNA. You don't believe just because your parents believe.'

'Grandma Minka wears sweaters,' my mother said. 'All the time.'

This was a seemingly random observation. My father's mother lived in an assisted living community. She had been

born in Poland and still had an accent that made it sound like she was always singing. And yes, Grandma Minka wore sweaters, even when it was ninety degrees out, but she also wore too much blush and leopard prints.

‘A lot of survivors had their tattoos surgically removed, but she said seeing it every morning reminds her that she won.’

It took me a moment to realize what my mother was telling me. My father’s mother had been in a concentration camp? How had I made it to age twelve without knowing this? Why would my parents have hidden this information from me?

‘She doesn’t like to talk about it,’ my mother said simply. ‘And she doesn’t like her arm to show in public.’

We had studied the Holocaust in social studies class. It was hard to imagine the textbook pictures of living skeletons matching the plump woman who always smelled like lilacs, who never missed her weekly hair appointment, who kept brightly colored canes in every room of her condo so that she always had easy access to one. She was not part of history. She was just my grandma.

‘She doesn’t go to temple,’ my mother said. ‘I guess after all that, you’d have a pretty complicated relationship with God. But your father, he started going. I think it was his way of processing what happened to her.’

Here I was, trying desperately to shed my religion so I could blend in, and it turned out being Jewish was truly in my blood, that I was the descendant of a Holocaust survivor. Frustrated, angry, and selfish, I threw myself backward against my pillows. ‘That’s Dad’s issue. It has nothing to do with me.’

My mother hesitated. ‘If she hadn’t lived, Sage, neither would you.’

That was the one and only time we ever discussed Grandma

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Minka's past, although when we brought her to our house for Chanukah that year, I found myself scrutinizing her to see some shadow of the truth on her face. But she was the same as always, picking the skin off the roasted chicken to eat when my mother wasn't looking, emptying her purse of perfume and makeup samples she'd collected for my sisters, discussing the characters on *All My Children* as if they were friends she visited for coffee. If she had been in a concentration camp during World War II, she must have been a completely different person at the time.

The night my mother told me about my grandmother's history, I dreamed of a moment I hadn't remembered, from when I was very tiny. I was sitting on Grandma Minka's lap while she turned the pages of a book and read me the story. I realize now that it wasn't the right story at all. The picture book was of Cinderella, but she must have been thinking of something else, because her tale was about a dark forest and monsters, a trail of oats and grain.

I also recall that I wasn't paying much attention, because I was mesmerized by the gold bangle bracelet on my grandmother's wrist. I kept reaching for it, pulling at her sweater. At one point, the wool rode up just far enough for me to be distracted by the faded blue numbers on her inner forearm. *What's that?*

My telephone number.

I had memorized my telephone number the previous year in preschool, so that if I got lost, the police could call home.

What if you move? I asked.

Oh, Sage, she laughed. I'm here to stay.

The next day, Mary comes into the kitchen while I'm baking. 'I had a dream last night,' she says. 'You were making

baguettes with Adam. You told him to put the loaves in the oven, but instead, he stuck your arm inside. I screamed and tried to pull you out of the fire but I wasn't fast enough. When you stepped away, you didn't have a right hand. Just an arm made out of bread dough. *It's fine*, Adam said, and he took a knife and hacked your wrist. He sliced off your thumb and your pinkie and each finger, and each one was soaked with blood.'

'Well,' I say. 'Good afternoon to you, too.' Then I open the refrigerator and take out a tray of buns.

'That's it? You don't even want to speculate on what it meant?'

'That you had coffee before you went to bed,' I suggest. 'Remember when you dreamed that Rocco refused to take off his shoes because he had chicken feet?' I face her. 'Have you even ever *met* Adam? Do you know what he looks like?'

'Even the most beautiful things can be toxic. Monkshood, lily of the valley – they're both in the Monet garden you like so much at the top of the Holy Stairs, but I wouldn't go near them if I weren't wearing gloves.'

'Isn't that a liability for the shrine?'

She shakes her head. 'Most of the visitors refrain from eating the scenery. But that's not the point, Sage. The point is that this dream was a sign.'

'Here we go,' I mutter.

'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' Mary preaches. 'You can't get any more clear than that directive. And if you do, bad things happen. You get stoned by your neighbors. You become an outcast.'

'Your hands become edible,' I say. 'Look, Mary, don't go full-frontal nun on me. What I do with my free time is my own business. And you know I don't believe in God.'

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She moves, blocking my path. ‘That doesn’t mean He doesn’t believe in you,’ she says.

My scar tingles. My left eye starts to tear, the way it did for months after the surgery. Back then it was as if I were sobbing for everything I would be losing in the future, even though I didn’t know it at the time. Maybe it is archaic and – ironically – biblical to believe that ugly is as ugly does, that a scar or a birthmark is the outward sign of an inner deficiency, but in my case, it also happens to be true. I did something awful; every time I catch a glance of my reflection I am reminded of it. Is it wrong for most women to sleep with a married man? Of course, but I am not most women. Maybe that’s why, even though the old me would never have fallen for Adam, the new me did just that. It’s not that I feel entitled, or that I deserve to be with someone else’s husband. It’s that I don’t believe I deserve anything better.

I’m not a sociopath. I’m not proud of my relationship. But most of the time, I can make excuses for it. The fact that Mary has gotten under my skin today means that I am tired, or more vulnerable than I thought, or both.

‘What about that poor woman, Sage?’

That poor woman is Adam’s wife. That poor woman has a man I love, and two wonderful kids, and a face that is smooth and scar-free. That poor woman has had everything she wants handed to her on a silver platter.

I reach for a sharp knife and begin slicing the tops of the hot cross buns. ‘If you want to feel sorry for yourself,’ Mary continues, ‘then do it in a way that isn’t going to destroy other people’s lives.’

I point the tip of the knife at my scar. ‘Do you think I *wanted* this?’ I ask. ‘Do you think I don’t wish every day of my life that I could have the same things everyone else does – a job that’s

nine-to-five, and a stroll down the street without kids staring, and a man who thinks I'm beautiful?'

'You could have all those things,' Mary says, folding me into her arms. 'You're the only one saying you can't. You're not a bad person, Sage.'

I want to believe her. I want to believe her, so much. 'Then I guess sometimes good people do bad things,' I say, and I pull away from her.

In the bakery shop, I hear Josef Weber's clipped accent, asking for me. I wipe my eyes on the hem of my apron and grab a loaf I've set aside and a small package; I leave Mary standing in the kitchen without me.

'Hello!' I say brightly. Too brightly. Josef looks startled by my false good cheer. I thrust the small bag of homemade dog biscuits for Eva into his hands, as well as the loaf of bread. Rocco, who is not used to me fraternizing with the customers, pauses in the act of restacking clean mugs. 'Wonders never cease / From the deepest, darkest bowels / The recluse arrives,' he says.

'*Bowels* is two syllables,' I snap, and I motion Josef toward an empty table. Any lingering hesitation I had about being the one to instigate a conversation with Josef has become a lesser of two evils: I'd much rather be here than be interrogated by Mary. 'I saved you the best loaf of the night.'

'A *bâtard*,' Josef says.

I am impressed; most people don't know the French term for that shape. 'Do you know why it's called that?' I say, as I cut a few slices, trying hard not to think of Mary and her dream. 'Because it's not a *boule*, and it's not a *baguette*. Literally, it's a bastard.'

'Who knew that even in the world of baking, there is a class structure?' Josef muses.

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I know it's a good loaf. You can smell it, when an artisanal bread comes out of the oven: the earthy, dark scent, as if you are in the thick of the woods. I glance with pride at the variegated crumb. Josef closes his eyes in delight. 'I am lucky to know the baker personally.'

'Speaking of that . . . you umpired the Little League game of a friend's son. Bryan Lancaster?'

He frowns, shaking his head. 'It was years ago. I did not know all their names.'

We chat – about the weather, about Eva, about my favorite recipes. We chat, as Mary closes up the bakery around us, after hugging me fiercely and telling me that not only does God love me but she does, too. We chat, even as I dart back and forth into the kitchen to answer the calls of various timers. This is extraordinary for me, because I don't chat. There are even moments during our conversation when I forget to disguise the pitted side of my face by ducking my head or letting my hair fall in front of it. But Josef, he is either too polite or too embarrassed to mention it. Or maybe, just maybe, there are other things about me he finds more interesting. This is what must have made him everyone's favorite teacher, umpire, adoptive grandfather – he acts as if there is nowhere else on earth he'd rather be than here, right now. And no one else on earth he'd rather be talking to. It is such a heady rush to be the object of someone's attention in a *good* way, not as a freak, that I keep forgetting to hide.

'How long have you lived here?' I ask, when we have been talking for over an hour.

'Twenty-two years,' Josef says. 'I used to live in Canada.'

'Well, if you were looking for a community where nothing ever happens, you hit the jackpot.'

Josef smiles. 'I think so.'

'Do you have family around here?'

His hand shakes as he reaches for his mug of coffee. 'I have no one,' Josef answers, and he starts to get to his feet. 'I must go.'

Immediately, my stomach turns over, because I've made him uncomfortable – and nobody knows better than I do what that feels like. 'I'm sorry,' I blurt out. 'I didn't mean to be rude. I don't talk to many people.' I offer him an unhemmed smile, and make amends the only way I know how: by revealing a piece of myself that I usually keep under lock and key, so that I am equally exposed. 'I also have no one,' I confess. 'I'm twenty-five, and both of my parents are dead. They won't see me get married. I won't get to cook them Thanksgiving dinner or visit them with grandkids. My sisters are totally different from me – they have minivans and soccer practices and careers with bonuses – and they hate me even though they say they don't.' The words are a flood rushing out of me; just speaking them, I am drowning. 'But mostly I have no one because of this.'

With a shaking hand, I pull my hair back from my face.

I know every detail he's seeing. The pocked drawstring of skin flapping the corner of my left eye. The silver hatch marks cutting through my eyebrow. The puzzle-piece patchwork of grafted skin that doesn't quite match and doesn't quite fit. The way my mouth tugs upward, because of how my cheekbone healed. The bald notch at my scalp that no longer grows hair, that my bangs are brushed to carefully cover. The face of a monster.

I cannot justify why I've picked Josef, a virtual stranger, to reveal myself to. Maybe because loneliness is a mirror, and recognizes itself. My hand falls away, letting the curtain of my hair cover my scars again. I just wish it were that easy to camouflage the ones inside me.

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To his credit, Josef does not gasp or recoil. Steadily, he meets my gaze. ‘Maybe now,’ he replies, ‘we will have each other.’

The next morning on my way home from work, I drive by Adam’s house. I park on the street, roll down my window, and stare at the soccer nets stretched across the front yard, at the welcome mat, at the lime-green bike tipped over and sunning itself in the driveway.

I imagine what it would be like to sit at the dining room table, to have Adam toss the salad as I serve the pasta. I wonder if the walls in the kitchen are yellow or white; if there is still a loaf of bread – probably store-bought, I think with mild judgment – sitting on the counter after someone has made French toast for breakfast.

When the door opens, I swear out loud and slink lower in my seat, even though there is no reason to believe that Shannon sees me. She comes out of the house still zipping her purse, hitting the remote control so that her car doors unlock. ‘Come on,’ she calls. ‘We’re going to be late for the appointment.’

A moment later Grace stumbles out, coughing violently.

‘Cover your mouth,’ her mother says.

I realize I am holding my breath. Grace looks like Shannon, in miniature – same golden hair, same delicate features, even the same bounce to their walk. ‘Do I have to miss camp?’ Grace asks miserably.

‘You do if you have bronchitis,’ Shannon says, and then they both get into the car and peel out of the driveway.

Adam hadn’t told me his daughter was sick.

Then again, why would he? I don’t hold claim to that part of his life.

As I pull away, I realize that I’m not going to book those airline tickets to Kansas City. I never will.

Instead of driving home, though, I find myself looking up Josef's address on my iPhone. He lives at the end of a small cul-de-sac, and I am parked at the curb trying to concoct a reason that I might be dropping by when he knocks on the window of my car. 'So it *is* you,' Josef says.

He is holding the end of Eva's leash. She dances around his feet in circles. 'What brings you to my neighborhood?' he asks.

I consider telling him that it is a coincidence, that I took a wrong turn. Or that I have a friend who lives nearby. But instead, I wind up speaking the truth. 'You,' I say.

A smile breaks across his face. 'Then you must stay for tea,' he insists.

His home is not decorated the way I would have expected. There are chintz couches with lace doilies on the backs, photographs on top of a dusty mantel, a collection of Hummel figurines on a shelf. The invisible fingerprints of a woman are everywhere. 'You're married,' I murmur.

'I was,' Josef says. 'To Marta. For fifty-one very good years and one not-so-good.'

This must have been the reason he started coming to grief group, I realize. 'I'm sorry.'

'I am, too,' he says heavily. He takes the tea bag from his mug and carefully wraps a noose around it on the bowl of the spoon. 'Every Wednesday night she would remind me to take the garbage can to the curb. In fifty years, I never once forgot, but she never gave me the benefit of the doubt. Drove me crazy. Now, I would give anything to hear her remind me again.'

'I almost flunked out of college,' I reply. 'My mother actually moved *into* my dorm room and dragged me out of bed and made me study with her. I felt like the biggest loser on earth. And now I realize how lucky I was.' I reach down and stroke Eva's silky head. 'Josef?' I ask. 'Do you ever feel like you're losing her?'

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Like you can't hear the exact pitch of her voice in your head anymore, or you can't remember what her perfume smelled like?'

He shakes his head. 'I have the opposite problem,' he says. 'I can't forget him.'

'Him?'

'Her,' Josef corrects. 'All this time, and I still mix up the German words with the English.'

My gaze lands on a chess set on a sideboard behind Josef. The pieces are all carefully carved: pawns shaped like tiny unicorns, rooks fashioned into centaurs, a pair of Pegasus knights. The queen's mermaid tail curls around its base; the head of the vampire king is tossed back, fangs bared. 'This is incredible,' I breathe, walking closer for a better look. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

Josef chuckles. 'That is because there is only one. It is a family heirloom.'

I stare with even more admiration at the chessboard, with its seamless inlay of cherry and maple squares; at the tiny jeweled eyes of the mermaid. 'It's beautiful.'

'Yes. My brother was very artistic,' Josef says softly.

'He *made* this?'

I pick up the vampire and run my finger over the smooth, slick skull of the creature. 'Do you play?' I ask.

'Not for years. Marta had no patience for the game.' He looks up. 'And you?'

'I'm not very good. You have to think five steps ahead.'

'It's all about strategy,' Josef says. 'And protecting your king.'

'What's with the mythical creatures?' I ask.

'My brother believed in all sorts of mythical creatures: pixies, dragons, werewolves, honest men.'

I find myself thinking of Adam; of his daughter, coughing

as a pediatrician listens to her lungs. ‘Maybe,’ I say, ‘you could teach me what you know.’

Josef becomes a regular at Our Daily Bread, showing up shortly before closing, so that we can spend a half hour chatting before he leaves for the night and I start my workday. When Josef shows up, Rocco yells to me in the kitchen, referring to him as ‘my boyfriend.’ Mary brings him a cutting from the shrine – a daylily – and tells him how to plant it in his backyard. She starts assuming that even after she locks up, I will make sure Josef gets home. The dog biscuits I bake for Eva become a new staple of our menu.

We talk about teachers that I had at the high school when Josef was still working there – Mr. Muchnick, whose toupee once went missing when he fell asleep proctoring an SAT test; Ms. Fiero, who would bring her toddler to school when her nanny got sick and would stick him in the computer lab to play Sesame Street games. We talk about a strudel recipe that his grandmother used to make. He tells me about Eva’s predecessor, a schnauzer named Willie, who used to mummify himself in toilet paper if you left the bathroom door open by accident. Josef admits that it is hard to fill all the hours he has, now that he isn’t working or volunteering regularly.

And me: I find myself talking about things that I have long packed up, like a spinster’s hope chest. I tell Josef about the time my mother and I went shopping together, and she got stuck in a sundress too small for her, and we had to buy it just so that we could rip it off. I tell him how, for years after that, even uttering the word *sundress* made us both collapse with laughter. I tell him how my father would read the Seder every year in a Donald Duck voice, not out of irreverence, but because it made his little girls laugh. I tell

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him how, on our birthdays, my mother let us eat our favorite dessert for breakfast and how she could touch your forehead if you were feverish and guess your temperature, within two-tenths of a degree. I tell him how, when I was little and convinced a monster lived in my closet, my father slept for a month sitting upright against the slatted pocket doors so that the beast couldn't break out in the middle of the night. I tell him how my mother taught me to make hospital corners on a bed; how my father taught me to spit a watermelon seed through my teeth. Each memory is like a paper flower stowed up a magician's sleeve: invisible one moment and then so substantial and florid the next I cannot imagine how it stayed hidden all this time. And like those paper flowers, once they've been let loose in the world, the memories are impossible to tuck away again.

I find myself canceling dates with Adam so that I can instead spend an hour at Josef's house, playing chess, before my eyelids droop and I have to drive back home and get some rest. He teaches me to control the center of the board. To not give up any pieces unless absolutely necessary, and how to assign arbitrary point values to each knight and bishop and rook and pawn so that I can make those decisions.

As we play, Josef asks me questions. Was my mother a redhead, like me? Did my father ever miss the restaurant industry, once he went into industrial sales? Did either of them ever get a chance to taste some of my recipes? Even the answers that are hardest to give – like the fact that I never baked for either of them – don't burn my tongue as badly as they would have a year or two ago. It turns out that sharing the past with someone is different from reliving it when you're alone. It feels less like a wound, more like a poultice.

Two weeks later, Josef and I carpool to our next grief

group meeting. We sit beside each other, and it is as if we have a subtle telepathy between us as the other group members speak. Sometimes he catches my gaze and hides a smile, sometimes I roll my eyes at him. We are suddenly partners in crime.

Today we are talking about what happens to us after we die. 'Do we stick around?' Marge asks. 'Watch over our loved ones?'

'I think so. I can still feel Sheila sometimes,' Stuart says. 'It's like the air gets more humid.'

'Well, I think it's pretty self-serving to think that souls hang around with the rest of us,' Shayla says immediately. 'They go to Heaven.'

'Everyone?'

'Everyone who's a believer,' she qualifies.

Shayla is born-again; this isn't a surprise. But it still makes me uncomfortable, as if she is specifically talking about my ineligibility.

'When my mother was in the hospital,' I say, 'her rabbi told her a story. In Heaven and Hell, people sit at banquet tables filled with amazing food, but no one can bend their elbows. In Hell, everyone starves because they can't feed themselves. In Heaven, everyone's stuffed, because they don't have to bend their arms to feed each other.'

I can feel Josef staring at me.

'Mr. Weber?' Marge prompts.

I assume Josef will ignore her question, or shake his head, like usual. But to my surprise, he speaks. 'When you die you die. And everything is over.'

His blunt words settle like a shroud over the rest of us. 'Excuse me,' he says, and he walks out of the meeting room.

I find him waiting in the hallway of the church. 'That story you told, about the banquet,' Josef says. 'Do you believe it?'

'I guess I'd like to,' I say. 'For my mother's sake.'

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‘But your rabbi—’

‘Not my rabbi. My mother’s.’ I start walking toward the door.

‘But you believe in an afterlife?’ Josef says, curious.

‘And you don’t.’

‘I believe in Hell . . . but it’s here on earth.’ He shakes his head. ‘Good people and bad people. As if it were this easy. Everyone is both of these at once.’

‘Don’t you think one outweighs the other?’

Josef stops walking. ‘You tell me,’ he says.

As if his words have heat behind them, my scar burns. ‘How come you’ve never asked me,’ I blurt out. ‘How it happened?’

‘How what happened?’

I make a circular gesture in front of my face.

‘Ach. Well. A long time ago, someone once told me that a story will tell itself, when it’s ready. I assumed that it wasn’t ready.’

It is a strange idea, that what happened to me isn’t my tale to tell, but something completely separate from me. I wonder if this has been my problem all along: not being able to dissect the two. ‘I was in a car accident,’ I say.

Josef nods, waiting.

‘I wasn’t the only one hurt,’ I manage, although the words choke me.

‘But you survived.’ Gently, he touches my shoulder. ‘Maybe that’s all that matters.’

I shake my head. ‘I wish I could believe that.’

Josef looks at me. ‘Don’t we all,’ he says.

The next day, Josef doesn’t come to the bakery. He doesn’t come the following day, either. I have reached the only viable conclusion: Josef is lying comatose in his bed. Or worse.

In all the years I’ve worked at Our Daily Bread, I’ve never left the bakery unattended overnight. My evenings are ordered

to military precision, with me working a mile a minute to divide dough and shape it into hundreds of loaves; to have them proofed and ready for baking when the oven is free. The bakery itself becomes a living, breathing thing; each station a new partner to dance with. Mess up on the timing, and you will find yourself standing alone while chaos whirls around you. I find myself compensating in a frenzy, trying to produce the same amount of product in less time. But I realize that I'm not going to be of any use until I go to Josef's house, and make sure he's still breathing.

I drive there, and see a light on in the kitchen. Immediately, Eva starts barking. Josef opens the front door. 'Sage,' he says, surprised. He sneezes violently and wipes his nose with a white cloth handkerchief. 'Is everything all right?'

'You have a cold,' I say, the obvious.

'Did you come all this way to tell me what I already know?'

'No. I thought – I mean, I wanted to check on you, since I hadn't seen you in a few days.'

'Ach. Well, as you can see, I am still standing.' He gestures. 'You will come in?'

'I can't,' I say. 'I have to get back to work.' But I make no move to leave. 'I was worried when you didn't show up at the bakery.'

He hesitates, his hand on the doorknob. 'So you came to make sure I was alive?'

'I came to check on a friend.'

'Friends,' Josef repeats, beaming. 'We are friends, now?'

A twenty-five-year-old disfigured girl and a nonagenarian? I suppose there have been stranger duos.

'I would like that very much,' Josef says formally. 'I will see you tomorrow, Sage. Now you must go back to work so that I can have a roll with my coffee.'

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Twenty minutes later, I am back in the kitchen, turning off a half dozen angry timers and assessing the damage caused by my hour AWOL. There are loaves that have proofed too much; the dough has lost its shape and sags to one side or the other. My output for the whole night will be affected; Mary will be devastated. Tomorrow's customers will leave empty-handed.

I burst into tears.

I'm not sure if I'm crying because of the disaster in the kitchen or because I didn't realize how upsetting it was to think that Josef might be taken away from me, when I've only just found him. I just don't know how much more I can stand to lose.

I wish I could bake for my mother: boules and pain au chocolat and brioche, piled high on her table in Heaven. I wish I could be the one to feed her. But I can't. It's like Josef said – no matter what we survivors like to tell ourselves about the afterlife, when someone dies, everything is over.

But *this*. I look around the bakery kitchen. This, I can reclaim, by working the dough very briefly and letting it rise again.

So I knead. I knead, I knead.

The next day, a miracle occurs.

Mary, who at first is tight-lipped and angry at my reduced nightly output, slices open a ciabatta. 'What am I supposed to do, Sage?' she sighs. 'Tell customers to just go down the street to Rudy's?'

Rudy's is our competition. 'You could give them a rain check.'

'Peanut butter and jelly tastes like crap on a rain check.'

When she asks what happened, I lie. I tell her that I got a migraine and fell asleep for two hours. 'It won't happen again.'

Mary purses her lips, which tells me that she hasn't forgiven me yet. Then she picks up a slice of the bread, ready to spread it with strawberry jam.

Except she doesn't.

'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,' she gasps, dropping the slice as if it's burned her fingers. She points to the crumb.

That's a fancy term for the holes inside bread. Artisanal bread is judged on its variegated crumb, other breads – like Wonder (which is barely even a bread, nutritionally) have uniform, tiny crumb.

'Do you see Him?'

If I squint, I can make out what looks like the shape of a face.

Then it becomes more clear: A beard. A thorny crown.

Apparently I've baked the face of God into my loaf.

The first visitors to our little miracle are the women who work in the shrine gift shop, who take a picture with the piece of bread between them. Then Father Dupree – the priest at the shrine – arrives. 'Fascinating,' he says, peering over the edge of his bifocals.

By now, the bread has grown stale. The half of the loaf that Mary hasn't cut yet, of course, has a matching picture of Jesus. It strikes me that the thinner you cut the slices, the more incarnations of Jesus you would have.

'The real question isn't that God appeared,' Father Dupree tells Mary. 'He's always here. It's why He chose to appear *now*.'

Rocco and I are watching this from a distance, leaning on the counter with our arms folded. 'Good Lord,' I murmur.

He snorts. 'Exactly. Looks like / You baked the Father, the Son / And the Holy Toast.'

The door flies open and a reporter with frizzy brown

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hair enters, trailed by a bear of a cameraman. 'Is this where the Jesus Loaf is?'

Mary steps forward. 'Yes, I'm Mary DeAngelis. I own the bakery.'

'Great,' the reporter says. 'I'm Harriet Yarrow from WMUR. We'd like to talk to you and your employees. Last year we did a human-interest piece on a logger who saw the Virgin Mary in a tree stump and chained himself to it to keep his company from stripping the rest of that forest. It was the most watched piece of 2012. Are we rolling? Yes? Great.'

While she interviews Mary and Father Dupree, I hide behind Rocco, who rings up three baguettes, a hot chocolate, and a semolina loaf. Then Harriet sticks her microphone in my face. 'Is this the baker?' she asks Mary.

The camera has a red light above its cyclopean eye, which blinks awake while filming. I stare at it, stricken by the thought of the whole state seeing me on the midday news. I drop my chin to my chest, obliterating my face, even as my cheeks burn with embarrassment. How much has he already filmed? Just a glimpse of my scar before I ducked my head? Or enough to make children drop their spoons in their soup bowls; for their mothers to turn off the television for fear of giving birth to nightmares? 'I have to go,' I mutter, and I bolt into the bakery office, and out the back door.

I take the Holy Stairs two at a time. Everyone comes to the shrine to see the giant rosary, but I like the little grotto at the top of the hill that Mary's planted to look like a Monet painting. It's an area nobody ever visits – which, of course, is exactly how I like it.

This is why I'm surprised when I hear footsteps. When Josef appears, leaning heavily on the railing, I rush over to

help him. 'What is going on down there? Is someone famous having coffee?'

'Sort of. Mary thinks she saw the face of Jesus in one of my loaves.'

I expect him to scoff, but instead Josef tilts his head, considering this. 'I suppose God tends to show up in places we would not expect.'

'You believe in God?' I say, truly surprised. After our conversation about Heaven and Hell, I had assumed that he was an atheist, too.

'Yes,' Josef replies. 'He judges us at the end. The Old Testament God. You must know about this, as a Jew.'

I feel that pang of isolation, of *difference*. 'I never said I was Jewish.'

Now Josef looks surprised. 'But your mother—'

'Is not me.'

Emotions chase over his features in quick succession, as if he is wrestling with a dilemma. 'The child of a Jewish mother is a Jew.'

'I suppose it depends on who you're asking. And I'm asking you why it matters.'

'I did not mean to offend,' he says stiffly. 'I came to ask a favor, and I just needed to be certain you were who I thought you were.' Josef takes a deep breath, and when he exhales, the words he speaks hang between us. 'I would like you to help me die.'

'What?' I say, truly shocked. '*Why?*'

He is having a senile moment, I think. But Josef's eyes are bright and focused. 'I know this is a surprising request . . .'

'Surprising? How about *insane*—'

'I have my reasons,' Josef says, stubborn. 'I ask you to trust me.'

I take a step backward. 'Maybe you should just go.'

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‘Please,’ Josef begs. ‘It is like you said about chess. I am thinking five steps ahead.’

His words make me pause. ‘Are you sick?’

‘My doctor says I have the constitution of a much younger man. This is God’s joke on me. He makes me so strong that I cannot die even when I want to. I have had cancer, twice. I survived a car crash and a broken hip. I have even, God forgive me, swallowed a bottle of pills. But I was found by a Jehovah’s Witness who happened to be passing out leaflets and saw me through the window, lying on the floor.’

‘Why would you try to kill yourself?’

‘Because I *should* be dead, Sage. It’s what I deserve. And you can help me.’ He hesitates. ‘You showed me *your* scars. I only ask you to let me show you *mine*.’

It strikes me that I know nothing about this man, except for what he has chosen to share with me. And now, apparently, he’s picked me to help him carry out his assisted suicide. ‘Look, Josef,’ I say gently. ‘You do need help, but not for the reason you think. I don’t go around committing murder.’

‘Perhaps not.’ He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small photograph, its edges scalloped. He presses it into my palm.

In the picture, I see a man, much younger than Josef – with the same widow’s peak, the same hooked nose, a ghosting of his features. He is dressed in the uniform of an SS guard, and he is smiling.

‘But I did,’ he says.