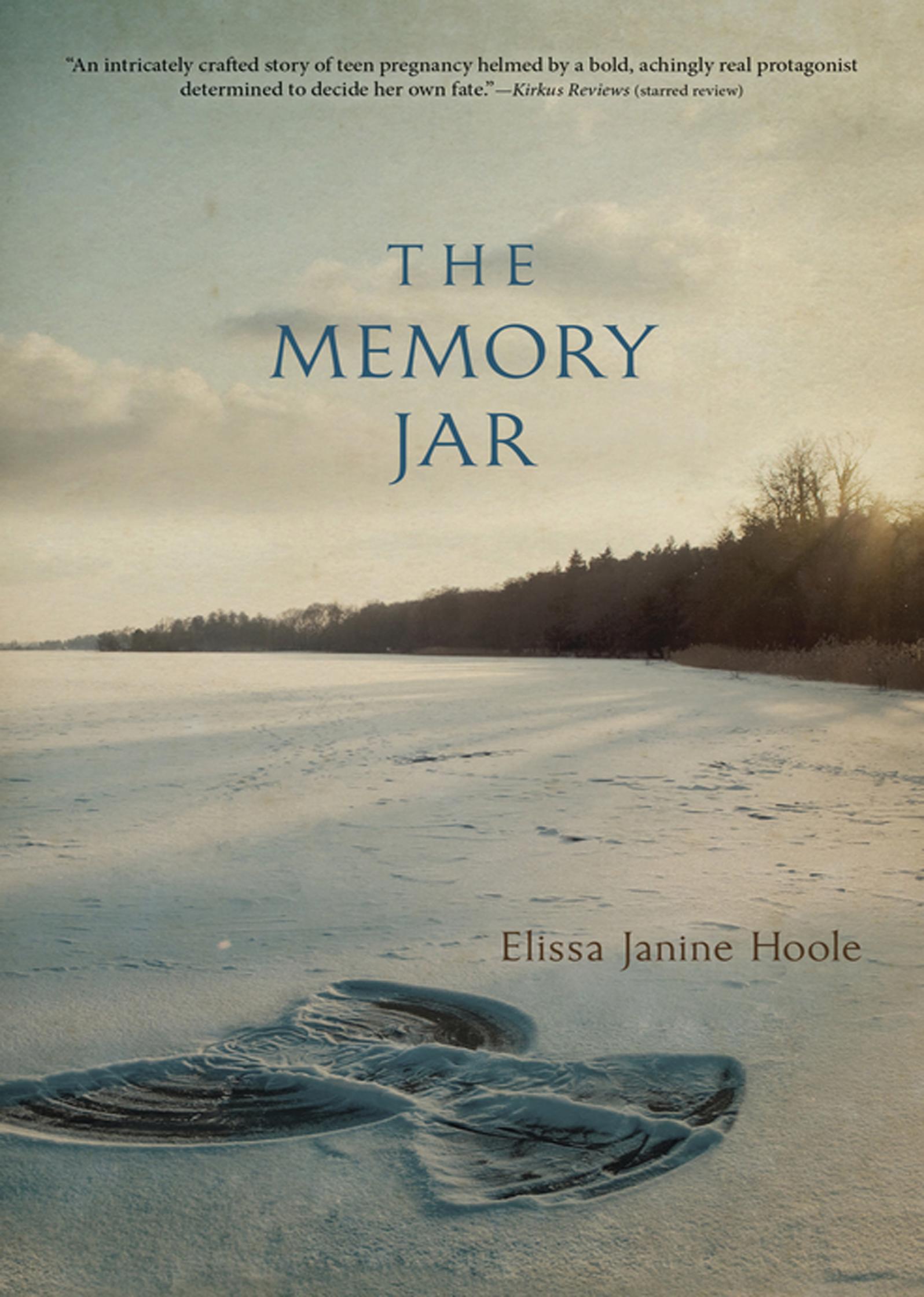


"An intricately crafted story of teen pregnancy helmed by a bold, achingly real protagonist determined to decide her own fate."—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

# THE MEMORY JAR

Elissa Janine Hoole



# Now

Nobody blames me for what happened. They murmur these words like a lullaby chorus, their fingers gripping my shoulders, their breath in my hair. Scott's parents, his sister, our friends. Even the service dog in the waiting room gives me those sad eyes when I walk past and thumps his tail, twice, telling me it's okay. Nobody blames me.

But they should.

"You can't keep it," says Joey, glaring at me over the body of his brother draped in plastic tubing and medical tape. "You know that, right?"

I fold my hands into fists and wonder. Which secret does he know?

"It's not your decision," I say, and it doesn't matter. I'd give the same answer for both.

## THEN

I was late. I didn't tell him because, hello? That shit is embarrassing. And besides, it was probably nothing. Stress, weight loss, whatever. And what was I going to tell him—what is there to say until you know? The test said you could find out with like 98 percent accuracy when you're only three days late, and I was five days, so I knocked the box off the drugstore shelf into my gigantic shoulder bag and then, you know. I peed on a stick.

It said three minutes. Three minutes is a long time, an eternity. My stomach hovered like a half inch above its normal position, the queasiness riding the buzz of my nerves. My phone counted down the seconds and then spit out this little chirp that made me jump, even though I was watching the numbers. What if everything changed? What if this was that one stupid thing, the one that screwed up my life? It would be a relief, maybe, to find out which of the world's evils would get me at last. My mom would be pleased to find out it wasn't meth or Internet creepers but ordinary sex that got me.

Not that the sex was ordinary. I mean, not that I had a lot to compare, god. Don't judge me. The overhead light in the public bathroom hummed for three minutes, and then I poked the plastic stick out from under the chunk of toilet paper I'd stuck on top of it to keep me from peeking and saw two thick lines in the pee stick, vivid. Pregnant. Vividly pregnant. My stomach lurched down from its perch, and I clapped my hand over my mouth.

# Now

I won't leave his room, but I hide in the little bathroom that marks Scott's progress from a bed in the ICU to an actual hospital room. I sit on the flimsy plastic lid of the toilet for twenty minutes at a stretch. I stare in the mirror and remember to breathe and type things that barely make sense into my phone. The psychologist I talked to after the regular doctors were done with me suggested that I "start the healing process" by writing down whatever comes to my mind, but all I can write about is Scott and the crash. I tell myself that if I can get it down, put it into words, I can make sense of this.

I finally muster the courage to go back out there, sit beside his bed and look at his face, but I can't stop thinking, *I was about to break up with you*. His chest moves with a rhythm so regular—like he's never had an emotion. What if he's different? What if he doesn't wake up? My hands burrow into the pocket of my hoodie.

Scott's sister brings me ginger ale, in a cup with ice. She brings me soda crackers as if she knows. Does she know? Joey glares and glares, and I twist my hands in my pocket, staring at Scott. Wondering about his head. The crunch of the impact still sticks like a song on repeat, and then the thought, again, *I was about to break up with you*.

"... come with?"

I blink, turning to look at Scott's sister, Emily, who stands in the doorway. I have no idea what she just said.

"Come on, Taylor." She reaches out to me like she's a mom and I'm a little kid, and I find myself reaching for her, too, and she squeezes my hand. My fingers squish together and I think about the ring, snug against my belly in the pocket of my sweatshirt, hidden from sight. Nobody knows, except maybe Joey, I don't know. Joey's a loose end.

Joey's staying put, crouched on the footstool, refusing to abandon his post.

"I can't," I say, but I let Emily pull me, even though I don't want Joey to win. It occurs to me that he might want to talk to his brother in private. But shouldn't it occur to him that I might want to talk to my boyfriend in private? To my ex-boyfriend? To my fiancé? I can't decide whether the ring should be

on my finger when he wakes up or not. If he wakes up. Will he remember? If he doesn't, will I tell him?

“Order anything you want, sweetheart, except you have to get the decaf.” Emily squeezes my hand again, and she must know, with a comment like that. She must. Did Scott tell his whole freaking family or what?

“You need to get some sleep,” she says. “It’s been hours and hours.”

Sleep! Of course, she’s talking about sleep. I exhale my relief and follow her out the door, to an elevator that drops three floors and makes my head spin so that I have to clutch the metal bar, and then I think about all the sick people who have clutched that bar and I feel kind of vulnerable. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt like this before. I even follow Emily’s directions and order a decaf.

There’s a beat, a moment of actual silence. Emily and I pick at our raspberry scones and sip our coffee and breathe. For the first time in eighteen hours, I can nearly escape the constant refrain in my head. *I was about to break up with you.*

“They’re going to start taking him off the coma medication,” says Emily, still staring at her plate. “The swelling has slowed down.” She looks up for a second, and our eyes collide. “He’s going to be okay,” she says.

I nod, but I can’t swallow my food, and even though I know it’s ridiculous, I swear I can feel my stomach swell out until it fills my sweatshirt, until the ring in the pocket is clearly outlined in the fabric and everyone can plainly see both of my secrets. What do I do with this knowledge—that my first slip of thought when she said that he would be okay was the hope that he wouldn’t? No. Not a thought, even, not that solid. It’s not even a feeling. It’s a reflex, like when the doctor whacks that little rubber mallet against the soft spot beneath your knee cap. A jerk of a response, the instant I wanted Scott to die. *No, god. Not to die. To forget, maybe.*

“That’s awesome,” I manage to croak out. “That’s amazing.” It really is. We hit the snow ridge so hard—they say we both flew over the top, but I was lucky and landed in a snow drift. Scott hit the ice headfirst. The snow was packed into my ears, but I heard a crunch.

I lurch toward the restroom, abandoning Emily at the table.

## THEN

I tossed it in the trash. It's not like it was the first time I'd ever thought about having Scott's baby. I mean, we've been together since I was fifteen and he was seventeen, which was, like, prime time in terms of daydreaming about the perfect future with my perfect husband in our perfect mansion (according to the game of chance Dani and I played in our notebooks), with our four children of above-average intelligence (according to the lines on my palm and the cryptic answers of Dani's Magic 8-Ball).

Exiting that bathroom, squinting my eyes a little against the glare of the lights and the scrubby people tugging their kids around by the arms, I didn't really feel any different. It was real, but it wasn't, and I didn't know what direction to walk so that people would stop noticing me. "There she goes, that pregnant girl," I was sure they were saying. "She was going to be a writer, or maybe a doctor, but now ..." There was so much to regret.

"She got knocked up in the passenger seat of her boyfriend's truck," said the next guy, glancing over from a display of cheap watches.

His wife followed his gaze, her eyes sliding over mine. "And do you know what she was thinking about when it happened?" she said, in my head.

"Whether her ACT scores were going to be in the mail," answered her husband, and both of them shook their heads sadly. Such a tragedy.

I shook my own head. *Jesus, Taylor. Get a grip. Wish for a happy ending.*

# Now

This is not a story like that, not a clever story about the girl who gets the boy and they share a magical kiss and become high school sweethearts and go off to college together and live long, happy lives. This isn't a story about a boy and a girl who have an accidental pregnancy and make the best of this wonderful gift by raising their child and fighting cancer and witnessing miracles and writing a best-selling memoir or something.

In this story, the girl is a monster and the boy is brain dead. Well, not exactly brain dead. Maybe that would be better, actually, you know? More picturesque and tragic, like a sad poem or a love story for women to weep over. Instead I have Scott, who lies here in some strange middle between alive and dead, and I have Joey, his eyes filled with hurt. I have Understanding Emily, who maybe doesn't know. I have a little bathroom hideaway. I have an engagement ring and a break-up song. I have an empty space in my memory, followed by a crunch. I have one ugly laceration that starts at the peak of my forehead and slices its rude path down the bridge of my nose, across my bottom lip and ends on my chin, where I have one neat black stitch, hidden by a small bandage. And I have this creature swimming around in its little prison—a tiny cellular bundle right beneath my heart, which pumps it full of adrenaline and confusion and regret.

They paralyze you so you don't fight the ventilator. They've had him all doped up, in a medical coma. He hasn't been conscious at all except for that one second, his eyes opening wide and his mouth, like he was going to speak, and then nothing. I'm lulled by the sound of the machines, and Scott's mom clears her throat because she'd like us to leave.

"Just for a bit, let me sit with him," she says. They're bringing him back, fishing him out of that murky deep, or at least they're going to try. She pushes his hair back on his forehead like he's a little boy, but the bruising is darker now and it's hard to look. The surgeons shaved a patch on the side of his head in case they had to remove part of his skull. They haven't had to, which is, as Emily says, "a very good sign." If his brain stops swelling, recovery is more likely.

And I want Scott to get better, *obviously*, but there's a part of me—a miniscule part, I swear—that wanted to see what was inside his head. I can hear myself, whenever he would get too quiet, asking that stupid question: *What are you thinking?* Let me in, damn it.

I'm sleep-deprived, don't listen to me. I'm in shock. I'm pregnant. Whatever.

## THEN

It wasn't easy, having my boyfriend leave for college. Oh *poor me*, I know, I'll roll my eyes along with you. And no, I wasn't messing around on him. I think that's what he thought, at first. "We were careful," he said. Yeah, no shit. Scott was *always* careful. He was the kind of guy who wore safety glasses to open the microwave and still worried. In fact, it's one of the things I remember most about Joey—the way he was always teasing Scott about being cautious, always thinking about consequences. Joey was the impulsive one, the reckless one. The one who ended up in some kind of treatment program for hurting himself or whatever. Joey should have been the one to end up with a pregnant girlfriend or a head injury.

Yeah, we were careful. Condoms, kid, that's what that means, because when you live in little Sterling Creek, Minnesota, so far north that even people from Duluth think you're in Canada, when your mom works in an office down the hall from the only Planned Parenthood in town and makes jokes about watching the "slutty girls" carrying their pee from the restroom, you don't necessarily get on birth control. Not unless you're into having uncomfortable discussions about what you're doing in your boyfriend's truck, which would be a disastrous conversation to have with my mother at least eighty-five percent of the time.

We established how careful we had been. "I mean, *really careful*, Taylor," he said, frowning. "Like I pulled out, even with the condom."

"I know, Scott. I know." Like he had the condom on before he left his house, basically. I should have kept the test, I guess, as proof or something, because apparently Scott was going to require some additional convincing that his child-thing was implanted in the wall of my uterus, right that very instant leeching the nutrients out of my bones. Secreting hormones that were making me feel half-crazy and one hundred percent queasy. "But you know. Still."

He didn't freak out. This isn't a sad story about an irresponsible boy who ran away from his knocked-up girlfriend, leaving her to turn to prostitution and smuggling drugs across the border (of Minnesota?) in her dirty infant carrier. It also isn't a thriller about a boy who flew into a rage when his

girlfriend ended up pregnant and planned an elaborate murder-suicide scene in the woods behind his parents' garage but at the last minute chickened out of the suicide part and had to flee across the wilderness and ate slugs to stay alive, while police dogs followed, hot on his trail. This is a story about a careful boy who carefully purchased a moderately priced engagement ring and asked me if I wanted to take a ride on his brother's snowmobile across the lake to the island. He said he would make me cocoa. That's not as weird as it sounds, you know. The island was sort of our place.

"I know you can't drink or anything, so I didn't get any wine," he said, and I put on my jacket. It was cold out, enough so that your breath would freeze a little in the time between exhaling and the air actually leaving your mouth or your nose. I put on a red hat, with a little tuft of yarn on the top. When I bent down to grab the back of my boots, to sink my heels into the hollows I'd been trudging down all winter, it felt strange, like something was already changing the way my body moved, the way I stooped.

"I'll get an abortion," I said. It was the first time I had said those words out loud.

"It'll be okay," he said, and he ushered me toward the garage. "You'll see, Taylor. I promise."

# Now

Joey pushes his way past the foot of the bed, running into my shoulder as he goes by. My phone almost drops to the floor. “Joey,” I say to his retreating back. “I don’t know what you want.”

He shakes his stupid hair out of his eyes. He’s so tough, so full of bravado, this kid, and any girl can see the fragile center of him playing around with the idea of getting broken, just because. He’s like a cold deep lake, sharp rock bottom visible. Scott was the kind of lake that has sturdy docks and patches of lily pads, a pleasant place to swim where you probably wouldn’t drown. He was only nineteen, but inside he was at least forty, all safe and sensible. *Is. Scott is.*

“My brother didn’t drive like that” is all Joey will say, and he gives his hair another shake and stalks off, toward the vending machines or some other place where he wants to be alone. His brother didn’t drive like that. *Like that* meaning fast, reckless even. Out of control.

I sigh. I would like something from the vending machine, maybe. I can’t tell if I should eat every couple of minutes or if I should never eat again. The nausea. I slide my phone back into my pocket and follow him.

“Joey, listen.” His shoulders are narrow beneath his black jacket, some kind of skinny canvas thing like a mechanic would wear, faded patches, ragged edges. He wears skinny jeans, too, and the kid is like nothing but a nervous wiry mess. He punches the letters and numbers and waits, metal coiling slowly, for his dill pickle chips to fall into the bottom of the machine.

“Can we—can we talk about it?” It occurs to me then that I have nothing to say, no plan for what to tell him. I have no excuse.

Joey is forcing himself to stay put, keeping himself from running away from me. He wants to fight me but he doesn’t want to win. His fingers fumble with the top of the shiny bag.

“You’re going to end up with chips everywhere.” I take it from him and pull the top open carefully. “Have you ever done that?” I try to smile. “I have. My mom always buys the big box with the two bags. They make them so hard to open.”

“My mom gets the grocery store brand,” he says, and of course I know this. I’ve spent hours on his family’s couch sharing chips and sour cream dip. With Joey at times, in fact. He takes a deep breath. “Scott didn’t want to marry you,” he says.

I breathe, too, and he twists the bag around toward me, the pickle smell wafting out of the wide mouth—the greasy invitation that, for the first time in weeks, makes me feel honestly hungry, with no hesitant swirl along for the ride. I reach for one, and I take several.

“It’s okay.” I crunch down on a potato chip, talking with my mouth full. “I didn’t want to marry him either.”

But I didn’t mean to almost kill him. I mean, I’m almost certain.

## THEN

The first time we went to the island, it's funny to think of it, really. It was summer, and it was hot, and I didn't know how to swim. That's stupid, right? I live in the land of 10,000 lakes or whatever, and I didn't know how to swim. It was Mary Ellen's fault, really. She was my counselor when I was a kid and I got chosen to go to this science camp for girls on Arrowhead Lake, an abandoned mine-turned-

swimming beach. Mary Ellen knew all the really scary stories about that old mine pit, like have you heard the one about the ghost of Otto Jarvi and the Hanging Shack? All the girls held hands around the fire and giggle-screamed while Mary Ellen told us about the ghost of his ill-fated daughter, Petra Jarvi, who grabbed hold of the ankles of girls if they jumped off the end of the dock.

Mary Ellen said that Petra Jarvi took one eleven-year-old girl every eleven years to keep for her own in the depths of the old iron mine, and this was the year.

I was eleven. I refused to put one toe in the water after that.

So Scott had this little canoe, which is not as romantic as a little rowboat, and I told him so. It was our first date, and he sat behind me to paddle and steer. "If this were a rowboat you could face me, with your hands on two oars, and you could row me all the way around the lake while singing sweetly," I said. I could be so brave, since I couldn't see his face. I pretended to sit all prim in the bow of his canoe, wearing the stiff life preserver he insisted I wear, and to be truthful I was so glad he did because like I said, I couldn't swim. The canoe wobbled beneath us and I put my hands down on the sides. "Islands are overrated," I said, but he insisted.

He had some kind of alcohol, I can't remember what it was, some stupid bottle he'd stolen from his aunt or his grandma or something, but I remember he gave me this plastic cup, and he was really protective of how much I drank, like he rationed it out so I wouldn't get very drunk. He seemed so harmless.

*Harmless.* That's just what he was. *Is.*

So the snowmobile ride to the island was not completely unexpected, though it pretty much made it impossible to go through with my plans for the evening, which had been to break up with him. I hadn't quite decided on what to do about the other thing, but it seemed clear all of a sudden that this was something I wanted some space to figure out, on my own.

He drove us out to the island and I rode on the back, my arms loosely around the waist of his puffy down parka. We didn't wear helmets, which is something that people would later point out with a sad sort of pursed-lip pity, but it was the one safety measure Scott didn't believe in. It was because of some cousin of his who got into a motorcycle crash and the doctor told him that if he'd had a helmet on, he would have died. I don't know how many doctors are going around telling people that, but from the looks of the traumatic brain injury ward in Scott's hospital alone, doctors *should* be telling people to walk around wearing a helmet at all times, night and day. Anyway, he drove slowly, and we made it out there without incident, though Scott pointed out several dangers along the way, including the ridges made by people driving out here with plows on their trucks or ATVs. "You hit one of those going fast enough and your machine will crunch up like a pop can," he said. I remember that.

# Now

My face is pretty badass, even in the weird yellow light of the hospital bathroom. The toilet is close to the little sink, and I have to sit sort of tilted to one side to keep out of the way of the stainless steel stability bar. On the wall beneath the toilet paper hangs a little chain with a red plastic disc on the end. *Pull for nurse assistance.* My fingers idly flip the little disc, spin it. I wonder how the nurse would assist me, if I pulled. Me here, with my pants around my ankles and my split lip and my guilt.

I stand and flush, even though I can't remember if I peed or not. My head is foggy, and my face is terrible, and the water that runs from the tap is icy cold. I pool a little in my palms and think about splashing it onto my face, but it seems like too much work and I let it go, down the drain. Like my life. Oh, the melodrama, right? I stare again at my wrecked face and try to remember what happened, right before the crunch.

"The ice ridge." My voice is husky, and I wonder what would happen if I stayed in this bathroom all night talking to myself. It sounds like I smoke a pack a day, but I haven't had a cigarette since last Tuesday, when Dani made me stop. Scott would be so happy, since he always hated the smoking thing, and I wonder if that's why I did it. It was Joey who got me started, actually—the realization makes me a little uncomfortable. I squint at myself in the mirror, baring my teeth in a grimace. Do they look whiter? Do I look pregnant?

I read an article once about how if you look into a mirror in dim light and stare at yourself for some crazy amount of time, you'll start to hallucinate. Your face will turn into something else entirely, a demon or something. It happens to everyone, I guess, everyone who tries it. I tried it once, in my mom's bathroom, at midnight just to make it creepier. I guess I overestimated my tolerance for creepy shit, though, because after a couple of minutes something strange and taffy-like happened to my chin and then my forehead, and they kind of stretched out for a second like I was some kind of weird science experiment, and I freaked out. I was all alone, my mom out of town, and I didn't want to be a monster. I couldn't get my heart to stop racing for the longest time.

The light is plenty bright in this sterile little closet, but I don't have to look long before my own image repulses me.

## THEN

Dani. I told her first, of course, way back when I peed on the stick and the little line said MOMMY despite all Scott's precautions. I don't know what I'd do without Dani, but that's the thing, right? That's the best friend thing. I mean, it used to be we were this little trio: Taylor-and-Dani-and-Evelyn. But Evie got too cool for us and joined the girls who decided Sterling Creek needed a lacrosse team and a Wannabe Ivy League Club or some stupid thing like that, and then it was just me and Dani, the Trashy League Club or something equally stupid like that. We weren't really trashy, but you know. My mom is a receptionist for a therapist who works with troubled teens in the foster care system, and my dad skipped town while I was hovering somewhere between the zygote and embryo stage. Dani's moms own a sleepy little yarn store just off Sterling Creek's thriving Main Street shopping district. Neither one of us will be going to Harvard when we graduate without some kind of miracle. Not this particular kind of miracle, in case that's not clear.

She didn't speak, not right away. For all her perky looks and loud cheerleader yells—her pink nail polish and shiny black ponytail like a perfect pendulum—Dani knows how to be quiet. We were cocooned in her little handmade loft bed, painted by her mom Janie to look like an old gnarled tree, with a green cloth canopy of leaves hand-sewn by Fran. Heaped behind Dani was a pile of plush spiders she's collected since she was two years old and arrived in Sterling Creek from an orphanage in Nepal, clinging to Neep—the oldest, rattiest spider of the bunch.

“Options,” she said at last. “Do you want to hear them?” She held out her arms and I collapsed into her embrace, crying in complete silence for longer than I thought possible.

“My mom,” I gasped, in between sobs, “will kill me.”

Dani held me impossibly tight. “Let her even try,” she said.

# Now

Sitting in this hospital, waiting in uncertainty, makes time go all funny. It rewinds and fast-forwards at the whim of something unseen. So you want to hear something weird?

I can see him sometimes, and he's always a boy, always with those wide, impossibly sweet blue eyes. Just like Scott. He's beautiful, but his face has that needy baby look. Hungry, like he would devour me whole.

And what if he did? That's stupid. But seriously, that's what babies do to people. What if I have this baby and it devours everything I am, all I could be or could have been? Am I a mother? That seems so abstract. And then there are the things that really scare me, the little phrases that fall out of my mouth, the tiny cruelties that remind me of the kind of mother I could become.

I'm getting an abortion. It's the right thing to do, especially now. I was about to break up with him. But the weird thing, you know, the weird thing is this other part, this other scene in the fast forward. I can imagine myself holding him out in offering, a blanket-wrapped bundle, all soft and blinking and needy and alive. This weird part of me wants to give this baby to them—to Understanding Emily and Angry Joey and to Scott's mom and dad with their wounded eyes and their fluttery hands. A consolation prize. Here is a part of your son I didn't ruin. Here is a part to help you move on.

## THEN

He wasn't my first choice, not in the beginning. And I wasn't his. After school most days in the winter, Dani and I would go skating. Even on the coldest days, we walked there and back together, our cheap vinyl skates tied by their laces and looped over our shoulders. We wore long floppy mittens with ice chunks clinging to them from when we fell, or pretended to fall, giggling and helpless into the snow banks that surrounded the "girls' rink" adjacent to the hockey rink, where the boys who were the reason for us being there in the first place circled fast, snapping their sticks against the ice like weapons.

Dani could whistle with her fingers between her teeth, and she could skate fast right up to the edge and stop with a spray of snow against our side of the wooden boards that contained the boys. The shrill call would cut through the sound of their skates scraping across the ice and the pucks clanging off the metal pipes that surrounded the net. Sometimes, not often, they would whistle back, and once the whole group of boys skated over and leaned against the edge and talked to us, but they were mostly juniors and seniors, and we were still ninth graders stuck in the dregs of junior high, even though every other school in the world put the freshmen in the high school. Basically, all we did was a lot of giggling. Dani said it was hard to be sexy when we were wearing so much clothing, so after that we started sneaking out of our houses without our snow pants on, our skinny jeans clinging to our skinny legs. Still, the boys barely looked. They circled the rink like sharks and flipped their wrist shots over and over, even though we waited for hours, hoping they would head into the warming shack for a break. All our plans for seduction seemed to revolve around the warming shack.

I had my eye on this redhead we called Ron Weasley, even though his real name was Kenny or Denny or something like that. There was no particular reason why I settled on him to be the object of my high school hockey player fantasies, other than I liked the way his hair curled up when he was sweaty, and he almost never spit on the ice—a habit I found disgusting. He was a senior and obviously safe because he was completely unavailable.

Scott wasn't looking for me—one of those annoying, skinny-legged freshman girls hanging around the warming shack all winter long—but he did

have a blister starting on one foot, and he knew immediately from the feel of it that if he did not venture into the shack and change something about the way his sock was bunched up against his heel, he would end up with a blister that would keep him off the ice for a week or more. Dani and I chased him in, asking his name, telling him he had ugly feet. “Oh my god!” squealed Dani, jumping up on her toe-picks, sticking them into the black rubber mats on the floor. “Your toes are hairy!”

“Like a hobbit,” I said, and that’s when he looked at me for the first time.

He used to snuggle up to me sometimes, like when we went to a movie or sat around the fire on the island, and I would think he was leaning in to say something incredibly sweet in my ear—he did that, too, sometimes. Anyway, he would lean in and then he would whisper in my ear, he’d go “Hobbit toes!”, and that unstoppable kind of laughter would steal over me until I collapsed against him, tears trapped in my eyelashes, warm and content.

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