

prologue

I gasp and stagger backward. My hand goes to my mouth, bearing down.

My brain screams at me to run. *Run.*

I can't at first. Shock and fear hold me captive. They keep me from moving, like a ship that's dropped anchor. I'm moored to this spot, my eyes gaping in disbelief. My breath quickens and I feel the flailing of my heartbeat in my neck, my throat and in my ears.

Run, my brain screams at me. Go. Fucking run.

There is movement on the ground before me. The sound that comes with it is something heathen and raging, and some part of me knows that if I don't go now, I may never leave this place alive.

I turn away. It's instantaneous. One minute I'm unmoving and the next I'm moving so fast that the world comes at me in vague shapes and colors, streaks of brown and blue and green. I barely feel the movement of my legs and my feet as I run. I don't feel the impact of my shoes colliding with the earth, moving quickly across it. I don't look back, though I want more than

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anything to steal a look to know that I'm alone. That I'm not being followed. But I don't look. It's too risky. Looking back would cost precious seconds that I don't know that I have. If I do, those seconds could be my last.

Sounds come, but I'm so disoriented that I don't know where they come from. Is it only my pulse, the rush of blood in my ears?

Or is someone there?

I feel something tangible against my hair and then my spine. My back arches. I jerk away, pitching forward, landing hard on my hands and knees.

The world stops moving.

I have only two thoughts in that moment: staying alive, and that this isn't the way it was supposed to happen.

CHRISTIAN

Lily is sitting on the leather chair in the family room when I come in. Her back is to me. I see her from behind, just her long brown hair spilling down the back of the chair. She stares toward the TV on the opposite wall, but the TV is off. It's just a black box, and in it, I see a murky reflection of Lily on the screen, though I can't tell if her eyes are open or shut.

"Hey," I say, coming in through the garage door, closing it quietly and stepping out of my shoes. I set my phone and keys on the counter, and then ask, "How was your day?"

It's getting dark in the house. Out the window, the sun is about to set. Lily hasn't bothered with the lights, and so the inside of the house is colorless and gray. We face east. Any pretty sunset is the other way. You can't see it from here, if there even is one to see.

Lily says nothing back. She must have fallen asleep, sitting upright in the chair. It wouldn't be the first time. She's been extremely tired lately. The pregnancy is getting the best of her, not to mention that she's on her feet teaching all day. These two

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things in combination exhaust her. It used to be that Lily would be in the kitchen, cooking dinner when I got home, but these last few weeks, she comes home from work ready to drop. I don't mind that she's not cooking. I've never been the kind of person to need a home-cooked meal after work, but that's the way Lily was raised. Her mother did it for her father, and so she thinks she should do it for me. She's been apologetic that she hasn't had it in her to cook dinner, but she's been queasy, too, and the last thing she needs to be doing is cooking for me. I called from the car and ordered takeout already; it will be here any minute.

I step quietly into the family room. I come around to the other side of Lily to face her. Lily isn't asleep like I thought. Her eyes are open but her expression is blank. Her skin looks gray, washed-out like the room, and I blame the poor lighting.

Lily's head turns. She looks up at me as if in slow motion.

"Hey," I say again, gently, smiling. "You okay? Did I wake you?"

I flip on a side table light, and she winces from the brightness of it, her eyes taking time to adjust. I apologize for it, realizing that her pale face had nothing to do with the lack of light.

In the warmth of the lamp's glow, I see that Lily's hair is wet. She wears maroon-colored joggers and a sweatshirt. She's showered and changed since coming home, which is more than she usually does. Usually she falls flat on the couch and doesn't leave until it's time to go to bed.

I drop to my knees in front of her. I reach forward and run a hand the length of her hair. "You look exhausted, babe. Do you want to just go to bed? I can help you up. Takeout should be here soon. I'll bring it up to the room for you when it gets here."

Lily blinks three times, as if to clear the fog. She finds her voice. It's husky at first, dry, like after a day of shouting at a football game, which is not that different than a day of teaching rowdy high school kids math. "No," she says, shaking her head, "I'm fine. Just tired. It was a long day."

JUST THE NICEST COUPLE

“You sure? I wouldn’t mind dinner in bed myself.” I had a long day too, but it doesn’t seem right to compare them when only one of us has another human growing inside of them.

“That sounds messy,” she says.

“I promise I’ll be neat.”

Lily smiles and my heart melts. I love it when she smiles at me. “When are you ever neat?”

“Never,” I say, feeling better if she can still poke fun at me. I’ve done my research on pregnancy and childbirth. I’ve read that the fatigue women feel during the first trimester is maybe the most tired they’ll feel in their whole lives. Growing a human is exhausting. Caring for one is too, but we’re not there yet.

“You need anything?” I ask, and she shakes her head.

Takeout comes. I convince Lily to come sit on the couch with me, where we both fit. We watch TV and, as we do, I ask her about her day and she asks me about mine. She’s quieter than usual tonight. I do most of the talking. I’m a market research analyst, while Lily teaches high school algebra. We met in college over our shared love of math. When we tell people that, it makes them laugh. We’re math nerds.

When it’s time for bed, Lily goes up to the room before me. From downstairs, I hear the sink run as she washes up. I clean up from dinner. I throw the takeout containers in the trash. There is a package waiting on the front porch. I step outside to get it, where the night is dark, though the sky is clear. It must be a new moon.

Lily is standing at the top of the stairs when I come back in. She’s there in the upstairs hall, standing in the dark, backlit by the bedroom light. Gone are the maroon sweats she wore earlier. She has on my flannel shirt now. Her legs are bare, one foot balanced on the other. Her hair is pulled back, her face still wet from washing it.

“Don’t forget to lock the door,” she says down over the railing, patting her face dry with a towel.

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I wouldn't have forgotten to lock the door. I never do. It's not like Lily to remind me. I turn away from her, making sure the storm door is shut and locked, and then I push the front door closed and lock the dead bolt too.

Our house sits on a large lot. It's old on the outside, but has a completely revamped, modern interior. It boasts things like a wraparound porch, beamed ceilings, a brick fireplace—which Lily fell in love with the first time she laid eyes on the house, and so I knew I couldn't say no despite the price—as well as the more modern amenities of a subzero fridge, stainless steel appliances, heated floors and a large soaker tub that I was more enthusiastic about. The house is aesthetically pleasing to say the least, with an enormous amount of curb appeal. It practically broke the bank to buy, but felt worth it at the time, even if it meant being poor for a while.

In the backyard, the river runs along the far edge of the property, bound by a public hiking and biking trail. We were worried about a lack of privacy when we first moved in, because of the trail. The trail brought pedestrians to us. Strangers. People just passing by. For most of the year, it's not a problem. The leaves on the trees provide plenty of privacy. It's only when they fall that we're more exposed, but the views of the river are worth it for that small sacrifice.

"Done," I tell her about the locks, and she asks then if I set the alarm. We've lived here years and hardly ever set the alarm. I'm taken aback that she would ask.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

Lily says, "Yes, fine." She says that we have an alarm. We pay for it. We might as well use it. She isn't wrong—it's just that she's never wanted to before.

I set the alarm. I make my way around the first floor, turning off lights. It takes a minute. When I'm done, I climb the stairs for the bedroom. Lily has the lights off in the room now. She stands at the window in the dark, with her back to the door.

JUST THE NICEST COUPLE

She's splitting the blinds apart with her fingers and is looking out into the dark night.

I come quietly into the room. I sidle up behind Lily, setting my hand on the small of her back and asking, "What are you looking at?" as I lean forward to set my chin on her shoulder, to see what she sees.

Suddenly Lily reels back, away from the window. She drops the blinds. They clamor shut. I've scared her. Instinctively, her hands rise up in self-defense, as if to strike me.

I pull back, ducking before I get hit. "Whoa there, Rocky," I say, reaching for her arms.

Lily's hands and arms remain motionless, suspended in air.

"Shit, sorry," she says, knowing how close she came to impact. The realization startles us both.

"What was that?" I ask as I gently lower Lily's arms. Lily isn't usually so jumpy. I've never seen that kind of reaction from her.

She says, "I didn't know it was you."

"Who did you think it was?" I ask, as a joke. She and I are the only ones here.

Lily doesn't answer directly. Instead she says, "I didn't hear you come up the stairs. I thought you were still downstairs."

That doesn't explain it.

"What are you looking at?" I ask again, gazing past her for the window.

"I thought I heard something outside," she says.

"Like what?"

She says that she doesn't know. Just something. We stand, quiet, listening. It's silent at first, but then I hear the voices of kids rising up from somewhere outside. They're laughing, and I know there are teenagers clowning around on the trail again. It wouldn't be the first time. They never do anything too bad, though we've found cigarette butts and empty bottles of booze. I don't get mad about it. I was a stupid teenager once. I did worse.

I go to the bed. I pull the blankets back. "It's just dumb kids,

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Lily. There's nothing to be afraid of. Come to bed," I say, but, even as she turns away from the window and slips under the sheets with me, I sense Lily's hesitation. She's not so sure.