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Desi

DESI woke from a jarring nightmare and sat up.

Beside her, Peter's side of the bed was still intact, the sheets crisp and untouched. She smoothed a hand over the duvet, conjuring her nightmare.

In it, she'd been chasing Jules and Peter. Peter had stepped onto their frozen pool. A spiderweb crack formed under his boot, then fanned across the entire surface. Before anyone could move, his right foot broke through. One moment, he was smiling. The next, he was gone. The other details faded before she could dissect the dream's possible meaning.

She pulled on her robe and brushed her teeth. Her reflection mocked her. She assessed the sharp bones of her face, the cups of her eye sockets, the violent tips of her clavicle, the sunken ball and socket of her pointy hips. Where she was once soft, bright, and healthy, she now appeared to have been hollowed with a spoon. She knew it was from stress—the stress of being away from the office for three months, stress from her flailing marriage, stress about her child leaving for college, stress from . . .

No.

She spit into the sink and tidied the counter. Peter's toilet-tries sat, unused. He must have slept in the guest room again. Though they had agreed to spend the entire summer here to make one last-ditch effort to save their marriage, so far Peter was showing little interest.

He blamed the distance on staying up late, on working on the shelter in the forest, but she knew he craved space. He wouldn't dare come out and say it, or disrespect her in front of Jules, but his continuous silence tormented her. The way he'd sit across from her, chewing the food she'd prepared and not offer a word. The way he'd purposefully let her fall asleep alone in their bed and wake up just the same. The way his eyes burned into her, as if he *knew*.

She stashed away that thought and glanced out the bathroom window. The morning glittered under the protective cover of pines. It had only been a month ago that they'd arrived for their summer vacation at The Black House, which stretched like an ink stain on the crest of a bulbous mountaintop, blotting out almost an acre of land.

It was Desi's greatest professional accomplishment—a giant ebony compound that had been flattened and resurrected with endless panes of heavy floor-to-ceiling glass; solar panels; a cavernous, vaulted ceiling; massive bedrooms with steam showers; a sauna, gym, and other modern, high-tech touches. Acres of sugar maple, American beech, eastern hemlock, and Virginia pine cut them off from the rest of the world thousands of feet below, casting The Black House in shadow.

Now, Desi padded down the hall, releasing the viselike grip on her foolish beliefs that a house could save her marriage or keep her daughter from growing up. She grabbed a cup of coffee from the freshly brewed pot and eased outside by the pool, where Jules and Peter were already swimming. It was

still early, but she wasn't surprised. Peter and Jules had always been such early risers.

Peter splashed and tossed a football to Jules. Her daughter jumped straight out of the water, the spray gliding off her athletic body. She palmed the ball and crashed back into the deep end. Peter hoisted his hands in victory and Jules threw it back with ease. How odd to see her glistening, confident husband, when she'd just seen his feet crack through the ice and disappear in her dream. She buried the image and told them both good morning.

"Coming in?" Jules asked. She wrung out her hair and waded to the edge of the pool.

Desi laughed. "Priorities first." She hoisted her favorite mug in the air.

"That stuff will kill you," Jules commented before diving underneath the water and swimming end to end without breaking for air.

Desi rolled her eyes and admired her daughter's smooth strokes. When she surfaced, Desi hesitated. Finally, she asked: "Why did you quit swim team again?"

First it had been cross country, then swimming. Jules had given them up on a whim, when she could have received college scholarships for both. Instead, she'd chosen Columbia due to her deep interest in art. After some gentle prodding at Desi's insistence, she'd now be studying biomedical science in the fall. Jules floated to her back, turned, flipped underwater, and expertly eased off the wall.

Jules was one of those rare breeds who was good at everything: she was artistic, kind, self-sufficient, smart. She could have easily trained to be an Olympic swimmer, a track star, or even a model, but she wore her disinterest for those natural abilities like a badge. While she was insanely talented, she often started

and stopped things or seemed to pivot just when she could really make something of herself. Perhaps it was her age, or maybe that's just who she was.

But Jules maintained other interests that never seemed to fade. She was a total survivalist. Peter, an ex-Marine, taught Jules environmental navigation, how to handle a Kukri long-blade knife, how to collect rainwater, how to spear and clean a fish, how to start a fire, how to sew wounds, how to fend off an attack, how to assemble and disassemble weapons, and how to put someone to sleep using only a lapel. She thrived on building her survivalist skills, though Desi often joked that she'd need a different set of skills to survive New York.

In just a few months, Jules would move to the city and begin an entirely new chapter without them. Desi wasn't ready for her to move out, but was thrilled with her choice of school and the bright future that awaited.

When Jules finally stopped swimming, she addressed her mother's question, never one to leave someone hanging. "I outgrew it," she said, pulling her lithe body out of the pool.

This summer had changed her daughter. She'd met a boy the very first week in River Falls, for starters—Will. Jules worked so hard *not* to be a stereotypical teenager, avoiding anything that screamed teenage girl. And yet, here she was, involved in her own whirlwind summer romance.

Desi adjusted her sunglasses and took a sip of the medium roast. She could practically chew the coffee, it was so thick. Peter always made the best coffee. She sighed and tipped her head back. She liked to think it was a peace offering of sorts. *Sorry our marriage sucks! Have some amazing coffee!*

Funny how a marriage could sway like that. The good days used to carry her for weeks, those rare moments when they'd share a laugh, physically reconnect, or just let go of logistics

and meet each other as equals. However, those moments were flanked more frequently by bitter, silent ones. By the time she'd scaled her own interior design business, managed to pay all four years of Jules's private high school tuition, sustained a thriving city life and social circle, and built The Black House for her family, her marriage seemed too far gone, the last lonely item on a very long list of priorities.

"Great coffee," she offered. Peter adjusted his goggles and dropped into an effortless freestyle. She wasn't sure if he was ignoring her or if he just hadn't heard. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. She closed her eyes again, forced her thoughts to settle. The slap of Peter's palms and his steady breathing gashed the surface of the pool. Jules dove in to join him, a tandem duo perfectly in sync.

Rattled by her family's utter disinterest in carrying on a conversation, Desi scooped her coffee from the table and went back inside. She needed to go for a run and clear her head.

She refilled her coffee and stood at the entrance to the living room, leaning against the mantel. When they'd first visited the land that would become their summer escape, they'd all been overcome by the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains. She and Jules had studied their origin on a map, snaking their fingers from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to Maryland, Virginia, and here, to this tiny town at the tip of North Carolina.

She turned her attention back to the living room. It was large but cozy with two oversized leather couches, a glass coffee table, twin Ansley armchairs, and the updated fireplace, which was the focal point of the entire room. The back was nothing but sweeping glass. The twenty-foot ceiling was capped by ornate wooden beams she'd salvaged from the original farmhouse.

The living room bled into the dining room, then the separate

kitchen behind her with its Sub-Zero fridge, her professional gas range, the island, and the covered patio. Down the hallway, three guest bedrooms, along with the master, branched off the back, away from the heart of the home.

God, I'm lonely.

She ignored the gloomy thought and took her coffee down the hall to the master suite. She peeked into Jules's room, which was simple and open, the oversized windows capturing the robust acreage just beyond the glass. The silence hummed in her ears. Here, there were no Chicago buses, ambulances, or fire trucks to muddy her thoughts.

She kept walking to their bedroom at the rear of the house. The understated king took up the center of the room with built-in nightstands and lamps. Her spa bathroom with the immense soaking tub and dressing area sat behind a set of antique French doors.

She opened the drapes and stepped onto the balcony that overlooked a spray of reedy trees and the glittering infinity pool off the back patio. The sun pricked the water and turned the surface to diamonds. A few leaves bobbed at the deep end, and she eyed them distractedly. Jules and Peter were still splashing and talking.

Peter made a joke then dunked Jules, who took his back and sunk in a rear naked choke she'd learned in jiu-jitsu. Peter tapped, and they went at it again, always turning quality time into some sort of tactical training.

Desi missed the days when Jules was small and life was less complicated. She could so easily conjure the little girl who used to sprint around their kitchen with panties on her head. The child who always refused to wear dresses, who made her stuffed animals cardboard beds, and adored reptiles. The daughter

who'd fold into her side and beg to be tickled, carried upside down, or to snuggle any available second of the day.

Her heart ached just thinking about it, because so often, Desi *hadn't* snuggled or tickled Jules. She'd been so busy, she'd distractedly say, "Sure, honey, in just a sec," and then after so many minutes of hopeful waiting, Jules would retreat from the room, dejected. Now, it was too late to snuggle. It was too late to carry her in the very arms that had created her. She'd missed the only precious thing a mother was supposed to witness.

She was out of time.

She changed into running clothes, slipped on her shoes by the front door, and clipped a bell to her shorts to keep bears away. She contemplated grabbing her AirPods but decided against music today. She stepped outside to check her phone before her run, as the reception inside was practically nonexistent. The wind had stalled, and the sun rose higher overhead. She saw that she had one unread text.

She swiped it open and paused. It was from Carter.

Where are you? We need to talk. Please.

Her stomach clenched and she searched the trees, feeling as if there were eyes somewhere beyond them.

After a few uncertain moments, she deleted the text and replaced her phone inside.

She stretched her quadriceps and calves. Her feet scurried through freshly laid gravel, dusting her shoes white. Taking a momentary detour, she walked the perimeter of the property and pushed through thickets of trees to find the mountain's edge. She moved east until the trees abruptly ended and opened to a clear, cobalt sky. She wrapped her hand around a sappy trunk and stared into the vast wilderness. Her brown hair whipped across her face and her eyes roamed the land. Hillside cottages

dotted various peaks. Downtown was a small rectangle at the mountain's base—a few blocks at best.

Desi stood like that for minutes, taking in the stillness she never got in Chicago. Finally, she eased back through the branches, a few scraping her cheeks. The earthy scent of pine mixed with the pungent aroma of dirt. The magic of this place had already seeped into her bones and settled.

Desi took off toward the back of the house, where they'd carved a three-mile trail through their land. Back home, she ran on the lakefront, dodging cyclists and other runners every few steps. Here, she had her own personal path.

She started off at a slower pace until her body loosened. The bell's jingle faded to the background as her mind wandered. Once again, her nightmare floated to the surface. She imagined Jules running ahead of her, panting, Peter calling after her in a low, playful growl.

Pursuit.

She sucked a breath and picked up the pace. Carter's text hammered her conscience and her mind lingered over his last word—*please*. That word gutted her for so many reasons. She could imagine that one simple word rolling off his lips, and everything in her had to keep from turning around and racing back to the house to call him.

Right before they'd come here for the summer, she'd thought about sitting Peter down and finally telling him the truth. If they were going to make their marriage better, then all the cards had to be on the table. But if she told him, would it only be to assuage her guilt? She hopped over a branch, her feet sturdy on the path.

Out of the corner of her eye, something darted through the trees, the quick spray of leaves evident beneath some creature's



feet. She kept going and glanced behind her to make sure it wasn't a bear.

She rose up an incline, her thighs burning, and looped to the right. She quickened into a sprint, the soles of her Nikes slapping fresh wood chips, which provided a spongy floor beneath her feet. She watched for spare rocks or branches, so she didn't accidentally roll an ankle.

She concentrated on her breath, lost herself to the rhythm of the bell. When she felt her lungs would burst, she slowed, suddenly parched. She rested her hands on her thighs and sucked air. Birds flapped from tree to tree, and she kept her eyes peeled for predators. She stood upright, her left hip sore. She kneaded the palm of her hand into it when a blast of hot breath tickled the back of her neck.

She whipped around. "Hello?" She looked left and right, the shaggy trees casting her in shadow. Sweat beaded down her temple. Her fingers traced the back of her neck. Thoughts clashed for space in her brain. She stood there, breathing and thinking.

She turned and began running again, faster, as if she were being chased. Wasn't she though? Her past was chasing her, the truth was chasing her . . . *He* was chasing her. She blocked out the worry and completed the three-mile loop in just twenty minutes and emerged from the mouth of the trail, gasping. Her muscles throbbed. She raised her hands over her head and paced the gravel drive.

She hadn't pushed herself like that in so long. She closed her eyes until her heart rate slowed, but she could still feel the breath on her neck, a firm hand around her wrist, his voice in her ear.

She opened her eyes and walked back inside. She removed her shoes and found Jules and Peter at the dining room table.

“Did you guys eat yet?” Desi cleared her throat and waited for Jules to look up from her book long enough to acknowledge the question. Peter busied himself packing some sort of kit.

“We did.” He zipped the bag. “Sorry.” He offered her a smile.

He wasn't sorry.

Desi ignored him and gripped the back of the dining room chair. “I was thinking we could go into town today.”

Peter tightened a strap on his pack. “We’re going exploring.”

“Right now?”

“Yep.”

“Can I come?” The words wobbled unsteadily from her lips. Desi watched the disappointment cloud Peter’s face, then just as quickly disappear.

Jules rested her paperback on the table and gauged her mother. “You seriously want to come? Like, to build with us?”

Desi bit her tongue, then forced a laugh. “Is that so hard to believe?” She wanted to remind them that *she* built this house they were sitting so comfortably in—and it was much more complex than a shelter in the woods.

Jules and Peter looked at each other. “Yes.”

Peter shoved his black hair back with a rough palm. His crow’s feet deepened around a set of stormy eyes. “You sure?”

She hiked a shoulder, dropped it, heard something crack. All this recent tension had coiled the muscles she tried so hard to stretch. “Just let me change.”

Jules and Peter exchanged another look—always ganging up on her, even with their silence. She jutted her jaw, turned on her heel, and strode to her phone instead. “You know what? Never mind. Have fun.”

“Des.”

“Mom, come on.”

Desi lifted a hand, swiped her phone from the entryway table,

and walked back outside in the same futile attempt to get reception. It's the one damn thing she couldn't seem to pay for here. Many people would say that was the point, but not when her livelihood depended on it. *Their* livelihood.

Peter made a good living since he'd retired from the military, but she could tell he was tired of training urbanites in tactical self-defense. He came alive in River Falls the same way Jules did. She'd heard their whispered plans about creating an outdoor survivalist course for locals. The only problem was their plan had nothing to do with her.

Whenever she pressed him on it, Peter would say it was just a way to expand his business someday. But she knew better. He had that look in his eye, and she didn't want to be the one to talk him out of it. However, her career was wrapped up in the city. As much as she loved having a second home, she was tethered to Chicago, and that would always be the dividing line between them.

She finally connected to her assistant, James, and asked for an update. She didn't need to call him, but she was antsy and needed something to do. They'd already survived six weeks of her three-month absence. But she was growing restless without work.

After a few minutes of updates, she hung up and gazed at her masterpiece, remembering the old one in its place. The gleaming compound welcomed her with its silver solar panels and painted black brick. No one would ever know how much work it had taken to construct this house in the middle of nowhere, tucked up here in the clouds.

The original 1964 farmhouse had been in irreparable condition. When she'd first stepped inside the property that would become their summer home, she'd wondered if she could salvage it. But after crunching over dead june bugs and fisting

thick clumps of cobwebs, she knew it would be a teardown. Inside was nothing more than one open, dusty room with sturdy beams and weed-choked windows that overlooked acres of burnt grass and towering trees.

However, as she'd walked from left to right, she could feel the history and love in those walls, could sense it from the tiny scoop of a kitchen, with its well-seasoned cast-iron pots and pans hanging from a fishhook, the grease-laden stove, the retro beaded curtains, plaid furniture, and wrinkled, dog-eared paperbacks stuffed in a woven basket among skeins of vibrant yarn and knitting needles. Who had lived here, and why had they left? She'd spun in a circle, her toes scattering bug shells, and imagined what she could create. After endless renovations that spanned exactly fifteen months, The Black House was finally ready.

Desi checked the time. She wanted to go to town to get a few things. She walked around the side of the house to the garden. Peter and Jules had helped till soil and plant all their summer favorites: squash, lettuce, kale, corn, tomatoes. She squatted down, grabbed the shears in a nearby pot, and snipped some lavender. She'd toss it in her bath later.

She circled back to the front, still rattled by what had happened on her run. The dark black of her hidden truth gnawed at her conscience, but she knocked it away and let herself back inside.

"What's the verdict?" Peter asked.

Desi lifted the lavender to her nose. "You guys go. It's fine."

"Are you sure?" Peter looked relieved.

"I'm going into town," she said instead. "Okay if I take the car?"

"Do what you want," he offered and motioned for Jules to join him. She closed her book and grabbed her own pack.

“Have fun.” Desi forced her lips into a smile.

She walked the long hall back to her master bedroom, showered, dressed, and adjusted her blouse in the mirror. She slicked a finger under her bottom lip and blotted her Chanel lipstick, Merry Rose. She tried not to locate the insecurity behind her eyes, all of the untold truths and buried secrets that threatened to erupt.

In the dining room, the remnants of her family’s mess remained: paper, sketches, charcoal pencils, breakfast plates, crumbs, books, a carabiner. She sighed, swept the random objects into a heap, and hurriedly did the dishes. She checked the time, pulled on a sweater, and circled the grounds, keys in hand. To her surprise, her phone dinged again. She jumped to life, charged by the possibility that there might be one modicum of land she hadn’t discovered that got cell reception.

She froze when she saw Carter’s name again.

Please, Des. I need you.

Her heart hammered wickedly. She glanced behind her to make sure she was alone and before thinking too much about it, she responded.

We’re away for the summer. Maybe we can speak when I get back?

She sent it, knowing what an empty promise that was. They hadn’t spoken in years—not until they’d bumped into each other recently at the farmer’s market, and she’d startled as though she’d seen a ghost. They’d shared pleasantries, and he’d asked for her card. She could have lied and said she didn’t have one, but deep down, she wanted him to have her number. He’d rubbed his thumb over the embossed gold lettering and smiled.

“I always knew you’d do big things.” He’d kissed her cheek and disappeared as suddenly as he’d arrived. It’s all she’d been thinking about since.

She stared dumbly at her phone, practically willing a response. The text bubbles began, then disappeared. She held her breath until his text came through:

Can I come to you?

She laughed out loud. She could just imagine Carter showing up on her doorstep. What that would mean for her family. What that would mean for her.

She shoved the phone in her pocket, unsure of how to respond. She started toward the car, but suddenly, she didn't want to be alone. Peter and Jules would already be on the trail. She called their names anyway, the syllables echoing through the forest.

She walked closer to the edge of the trees and clenched her sweater from the sudden chill. The wind cried. Should she go into town as planned or should she join her family?

Carter's text bounced through her mind again. *Can I come to you?*

She closed her eyes and willed away the panic. Though she'd kept her secret safe for all these years, she'd opened the door of communication when she shouldn't have. Sooner or later, she was going to have to find a way to deal with all of this. They all were. She calmed her mind, told herself to stay calm.

Carefully, she pushed her way inside the trees.