



ROOM 568

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Callie comes to me dragging her own fears behind her. What she can't possibly understand is that my own anxieties, long dormant under a layer of medication and therapy and yoga, have risen to the surface like some rotting carp, sickening me with their foul putrescence. Long-abandoned insecurities and self-doubt cripple me with their resurrection. Debt collectors shame me into payments I can't afford, my colleagues whisper about me, my migraines sap my ability to function.

I cannot sleep.

Still, I must rise too early to get to the high school, to make what little money I can to rescue myself and my daughter from this apocalypse. My own world is crumbling, and yet I am somehow trying to keep myself together and shore Callie up too. It is a bulwark, a defense against razors and scars, bitches and rumors, tests and homework and expectations.

In spite of my own misery, I like it when Callie skips her class and hides in my classroom. It is my planning period, and I am supposed to be grading. Instead, we talk as her delicate hands rip to shreds my ever-decreasing pile of used file folders, "sticking it to the Man," as she likes to call it. They have lost their authority and organization and meaning. We've created quite a box of dun-colored confetti, but it's no matter. She wants to dip them in paint and make a mosaic, or maybe press it into handmade paper. That would be the tran-

scendental thing to do, she tells me. We like to squish the shreds in our hands. Torn to bits, they are soft and vulnerable, and their hard edges no longer leave paper cuts on our fingers. Callie tells me she has an almost irresistible urge to toss the bits into the air and watch them fall, spinning their way down to the dirty institutional carpeting below. It would be a brief moment of freedom. We would still have to clean them up, and the four walls would still press in on us, the fluorescent lights above mocking our endeavors with their stark hard glare.

My hands are shaking.

Callie hides behind my desk as I teach, hiding from her schedule and counselor and teachers and parents and so-called friends, not reading or writing but curving and looping her way through her own artistic graffiti, swirls and dots and flowers with names and pictures and messages coded cleverly in the maze.

I am lost in that maze, too, despairing of ever finding either of us a way out.

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It gets worse, of course. I am the first to crumple completely into dissolution, declaring bankruptcy, losing my house, my belongings, and, some days, my mind. I have to ask my nine-year old daughter, Abby, to decide what toys she wants to keep and which she is willing to sell. I cannot bear to do this. Broken and wounded, I call Callie, asking her to come over to help me with this heinous task. She comes to my home and gently steers my little girl upstairs to help her sort through Barbies and art supplies and stuffed animals. I busy myself in other areas of the house, staying out of my daughter's room, tears rolling down my face no matter what I try to do to pack up in preparation for our uncertain future. By the end of the day, Callie hugs me, but no words pass between us. There is really nothing to say. I am shattered, in pieces, the life I have known completely stripped away, and I cannot offer anything to any-

one. I have lost eighteen pounds. My flesh has been flayed completely from my body.

I am raw.

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Callie is next to fall, whatever strength and determination and comfort she brought that day only a mask of innate kindness shining through a heroin haze. Immersed in my own pain, I could not *see*. Her arms, already marked by years of self-mutilation, easily hid needle tracks. Her face-picking was just another manifestation of that ever-present anxiety we shared. When she dropped down the rabbit hole yet again, disappeared for weeks, months, at a time, I called it depression, believing she was still struggling with finding the right medication. I made excuses, I blamed her friends, I blamed her anxiety, I blamed her parents, I blamed her poverty, I blamed it all when it was right there in front of me, and I could not *see*. No longer a defender but an enabler, I swallowed her lies greedily when she would reemerge from the rabbit hole, so happy was I to see her. Callie had spent some time in the county jail for shoplifting, she told me, but knowing her desperate circumstances I excused it, believed that the Great Recession was driving even the finest of us into once unthinkable situations, doing what we could to survive.

Now I blamed myself. I had been blind.

The flurry of text messages on a frigid Friday in December was devastating. Even now the story of what happened to her is too much to share. I promised Callie. It was a promise I would keep for months to come, a promise that I keep today. I went to the psych ward, I went to the detox center, I went to rehab, I went to halfway houses where her room was a cluttered shoebox. I bought her chicken finger pitas, walked up and down Main Street in Ann Arbor with her, clapping for the street entertainers. We drove to the thrift store, Macklemore cranked up in my car. We may not have had \$20 in our pockets but we popped some tags anyway. In the middle of a sweltering August day with big thunderclouds overhead, Callie

bought herself an enormous granny sweater, incredibly pleased with her purchase. Another winter would come, but this time, she would be prepared.

We are not whole, but we are no longer broken.