

SHORTBREAD

Arran Maclean leaned over Riley's crib. She lay beneath a mobile of dangling wild animals. His right hand held her bottle, but his left was squeezed into a fist. She had his blue eyes and her mother's auburn hair, and she was screaming.

Sleepless nights had stubbled Arran's face, and his hair — black and thick like his father's — had grown slick and flat over his ears. But most noticeable were his eyes: sky blue, muddied and red from crying, something his father had taught him never to do.

Riley's eyes darted between the narrow crib bars like she was searching for a way out, to soar around the room, find an open window, and disappear into the sky.

Ropes of knotted muscle tightened around Arran's neck, wrapped across his shoulders, stretched through his waist, and coiled into his legs. His fist whitened with each cry while his right hand waved the bottle back and forth.

Riley took a breath. The bottle struck; she screamed.

Arran recoiled, eyes wide open and mouth closed. He waited. Slowly, he rose back over the crib, watching. Riley cried; the bottle waded. She took another breath. This time, she had no chance. The bottle sank deep. Her eyes bulged. He tightened his grip. Her hands flailed. He squeezed. Her nail caught his left eye. He winced, then pressed her into the mattress. Her eyes widened, her pupils swelled, and she stopped blinking.

Stop, Kara said, yanking Arran's arm.

She pulled Riley to her chest. Then she turned and looked up at Arran. Her eyes were narrow, hardened pupils exploding with shards of emerald fragmented with brown and yellow and hallowed by soft green sea glass. Arran buried his fists into his pockets and slid back, his left eye wincing.

Kara took Riley to the rocking chair in the room's far corner. Arran retreated to the window.

The fog had reduced the sun to a circle of cold light and turned the windows into mirrors. Arran faced his paned reflection on display between the open yellow curtains.

A car passed, breaking the spell. It stopped at the intersection. Arran checked his watch. The black leather band was creased with years and flecked with white paint. The worn notch used by his father was empty. The second hand shuddered from mark to mark.

Be the faster train. How many times had Arran been told? His father had timed everything — they had never been late. The funeral was the first time Arran saw his father's wrist without the watch.

The light turned green, and the car entered the intersection. A white pickup appeared, blasting through the red light. Arran flexed. Strands of blue lights ran under the frame, the windows were tinted black, and the chassis floated on oversized tires like a galactic starship

skipping through time. Then, it vanished behind a flash of light swallowed by a black hole left in the fog. An air horn echoed back across the empty intersection.

The car jolted to a stop, bouncing hood to trunk and back again. It sat at the edge of the intersection, half turned, the blinker flashing and the brake lights burning. Arran moved away from the window and turned to Kara.

It had been six years since he had asked her. He had actually gotten down on one knee right there in the restaurant. What else could she have said with all those people turning and listening? She didn't even know about his father, know what he might become.

I don't know why you said yes. He looked down at her with his open eye, his head slumped, his arms at his side, and his legs coiled, making his body limbless. She looked up at him, her eyes darting left and right with Riley tucked under her arms. Arran slid back, head down, until he reached the stairs.

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Downstairs, Nana sat on the couch in the living room. She had fallen asleep. A half-eaten square of shortbread sat on a napkin on the side table next to a cold cup of milky tea. She had her green and yellow plaid blanket draped over her lap. Arran and Kara had emptied the back room after Nana fell at the grocery store. She had refused at first, but then Kara made it clear: You took me in after Mom; now it's my turn.

In the light of the open refrigerator, Arran found the milk and turned to the sink. The kitchen window looked onto their backyard. Arran blinked at the pain in his left eye. The trees scratched a fog-gray sky.

The daffodils were still closed, but soon, they would color the yard — magic gardens requiring nothing more than to be left alone. Saturdays, when he was in high school, Arran

would circle their mower around the flowers, leaving tiny islands of long grass protecting clusters of yellow-blossomed flutes. His mother would defend the work. It's only for a few weeks, she would protest. His father would shake his head, mumble, and return to whatever he was fixing in the garage.

Arran found a tall glass from the cabinet. Three glasses a day, big and strong, his father would say. He had never heard his father ask anyone a question. Arran pushed the glass to the side and emptied the carton down the drain.

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Back upstairs, Arran filled the frame of the open door to Riley's room.

I'm going to the store.

Kara looked up. Why?

We need milk.

Really?

I won't be long.

Be careful.

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Arran slipped outside. The ground was hard and cold, and the air was warm and thick. His truck sat in the driveway: a white, single cab with a bench, crank windows, factory tires, and a solid back window. The side doors and the tailgate were blank — word of mouth kept him busy enough. The cap — secondhand from Johnson's Automotive — was black and without windows.

Upstairs, Kara hovered at the window, holding Riley and looking at the sky. Nana had taught her to wish on the first star. After the cancer, when she went to live with Nana, they would perch on the fire escape and watch the night sky. Kara always made the same impossible wish.

Arran wound across the driveway. A tear ran from his swollen left eye. He looked across the street and then to the side yards. Curtains of fog had fallen around him, reducing his world to a small stage of stunted grass surrounding a lone scrub pine ringed with mulch. The trunk was thin and twisted, green needles spiked the top branches, and the roots arched through the mulch like miniature sea monsters. The air was thick with low tide — broken shells, overturned horseshoe crabs with legs gnarled by gulls, and tide pools filled with fiddler crabs. Arran took a deep breath.

Kara whispered into Riley's ear and drew back, letting the curtains fall. The sun burned a hole through the fog, and white shafts of burning sunlight ignited the house. Orange and red colors licked at the wood-framed panes of glass.

Aaran turned, squinting his open eye. Their house was burning with the last light of day. He turned away and crawled into the cab.

He anchored himself to the bench seat, and the key found the ignition. Then he stretched his neck and squinted into the rearview mirror, dimpling the thick elbow scar from his father. Something was cutting at his left eye, something sharp and broken, something he could not find, something hiding from the light. He could not stop the tears. Arran exhaled and backed out of the driveway.

At the intersection, the light changed to yellow. The truck rolled to the stop line. Arran checked his watch, counting the second hand. The light turned green, and staring straight ahead, he drove through the reflective wall of beam-lit fog.

Reflected in the rearview mirror, Kara stood holding Riley in the front yard. Nana watched from the open front door.

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The fog stretched across the tops of the trees like a circus tent, leaving the road clear, but as Arran drove and the sun dropped below the trees, the canopy collapsed, and the fog entangled everything. The headlights pushed at the gray cloud, opening pocket after pocket of road, but with no view of what might be around the bend. Arran left the surface streets and merged onto the highway (known to the locals as suicide alley), two opposing lanes meandering for twenty miles, dividing lives by a thin line of yellow paint.

When the highway dipped between cranberry bogs, the fog thickened into sauce. Arran checked his left eye in the rearview; his hands steadied the steering wheel.

The road bent right, but the truck did not. Light flooded the windshield, and a horn blasted. Arran tried to find the brake, but his feet tangled, and the gas pedal hit the floor. The front tires tripped over a ditch, and the truck corkscrewed into the woods.

Tree limbs snapped, plastic cracked, and metal ripped. The windshield exploded. Tiny shards of rainbow-colored glass floated through the cab. Arran's head exploded the side window, and the overturned truck plowed into the hill. The tires spun against the sky. Dirt, roots, and leaves filled the cab. Then, a tree fell like a thick wooden lid closing over the undercarriage.

Arran hung from his seatbelt. It was dark. Dirt had caved in from all sides, burying Arran from the head up. He shook himself free and spit dirt from his mouth. The cab was hot with his own body heat, and severed roots reached at him from every direction. The air was mixed with the sting of gasoline and the sweet decay of plowed earth.

Their basement had always smelled like something had died. The furnace made the room hot in winter, and the walls were always damp. The cement room was where his father had taught him how to take a hit.

The cab had collapsed, pinning Arran on all sides. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his mouth was closed tight to keep out the dirt; it looked like it had been sown shut. He had always clenched his teeth when his father's eyes had changed just before impact. There was always a glint just before the elbow or the shoulder or the knee struck. Then, there would be the smell of his breath and the weight of his body as they hit the floor. His mother always believed the stories: a bike accident, falling from a tree in the backyard, or a tough tackle at practice. She never asked a question.

A ringing started to fill the cab. At first, it was soft, even soothing, with the engine's hum and the whirring of the tires. But then the tone shifted, sharpened, like something soft had crawled into his ear, looking for a place to nest, but lost its way, panicked, grew claws, and was cutting at the back of his swollen eye. Arran covered his ears, but the sound was coming from inside his head.

The night of his last game was the first time the ringing became too loud. He had heard it before, many times, followed by the narrowing vision and the flipping of his stomach. But that night was the first time he could not stand up, the first time outside of their basement that he was not able to take the hit. They had strapped him to a board and taped down his helmet. Someone kept asking him questions he could not understand. He had raised his hand into the lights; the crowd's roar had clashed with the ringing and a dark hole had closed over him.

Arran wrestled with the seat belt, shaking the cab back and forth. He stared at the wall of dirt outside the missing windshield. Something had found him. Something was digging from the

other side. The wall began to crumble. The digging quickened. Arran reached around the cab, feeling for anything to use when it broke through.

Dad.

A head covered in auburn hair poked into the cab, eyes darting left and right.

Kara? Arran squinted.

No Dad. Riley pulled back her hair, revealing blue eyes. It's Riley. Mom and Nana sent me. I'm grown up.

Riley?

Her arms fluttered at the dirt.

I know. Don't worry. Mom said we don't have much time.

Her arms spread into wings. She reached over his dangling arms, stretched around his chest, and locked her fingers.

She pulled. At first, Arran's head banged against the dashboard, then the skin opened across his forehead, and he began to slide out. Riley tugged left and right, wriggling Arran between the seatbelt and bench seat until something snapped, and he was floating outside the truck.

Behind him, his body lay flat along the ceiling of the cab, stretched and empty. His torso draped over the dashboard, hanging open and ragged like a bag that had broken from the weight of carrying too much.

Riley released him and spun in the air. The world was upside down. She extended her left leg. Grab my ankle. Arran closed his right hand around her ankle, and they swooped down to the sky.

There was an explosion. A blast of heat pushed them down through the treetops. Hold on, Riley called, looking back at her father and the ball of fire mushrooming from the land above. Riley dropped her head, reached deep into the air, and pulled. The world closed around them like a knot pulled tight, and something snapped. Then, they were flying with the dry flats of the Bay overhead and a water-filled sky below.

The land had tipped upside down, spilling water everywhere. Treetops tapered like stalactites, and the houses along the shore clung to their foundations. The roots of everything were exposed and stretched to breaking with the weight of the land hanging over the sky.

Hold on, Dad. Don't let go.

They flew under the land. The sky was calm and horizon-bound, like a bowl of still water. The fog had dropped from the land and settled like a soft gray blanket over the dry flats. They looked up, searching for their house.

Kara waved in the distance. She hung from their scrub pine, her ankles locked around a branch and her arms dangling down towards the watery sky, like an acrobat from a trapeze with nothing beneath to break her fall. Her eyes fixed on Arran. Her hands were wide open and ballooned to five times their normal size.

Okay, Dad. When I get to three, you let go of me and reach up with both hands closed. Mom will catch your wrists, and then you grab hers.

What?

Just reach up with both hands closed. Mom will catch you.

One. Two. Three. Riley kicked Arran's hand free.

He raised his fists and started falling into the sky. Then his body jolted, like his parachute had opened, and he rocketed up to Kara.

Kara locked onto his wrists. Grab on! Kara's grip tightened. Arran looked down at the sky, kicked up, and closed his hands around Kara's wrists. They swung connected, right-side up in a world turned upside down.

Riley grabbed the top of their scrub pine and climbed up to the mulched ring, where she clung to the exposed roots while the world turned right-side up. Her knee touched the ground first, then her side. Grounded, she let go of the roots and rolled until she was sitting with the sky overhead. Her clothes had puddled around her like she had melted. Her arms were pudgy, and her hands were small. She looked up, eyes stretched wide, mouth open, and fingers wiggling.

Kara bent down and lifted Riley to her chest. Arran spread his arms, Kara tucked into his body, and he embraced them both. Nana stood holding open the front door. Her eyes darted left and right, seeing her family nested under the scrub pine. Moonlight had turned the storm door into a mirror. Arran looked up. The glass held his reflection, standing behind Nana, watching her wave goodbye, but standing in front of her, he could see she was waving hello.

The first time he saw the worlds together, Arran was ten, sitting in a barber chair, looking into a mirror reflecting the mirror behind him. He had reached his hand towards the glass. There was a snap, and he was floating in front of the mirror; his body sat behind him in the chair. The mirror was wet — perfectly still water. He stepped through, and that's when he first saw them — every moment happening simultaneously outside of time.

He had remembered that day like a dream until he met Nana, and it happened again. But this time, she took him by the hand and explained everything. He still had not learned how to control it, choose between moments, see everything at once — present, past, and future scattered like a deck of cards, turning life into a game of fifty-two card pickup. But he knew the game was real. He knew Kara was a player.

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Upstairs, Kara set Riley down in the crib and switched on the mobile. The giraffe, elephant, monkey, and bear dangled from their strings, circling like tiny stuffed planes holding for traffic control while listening to a lullaby over their radios.

Kara crossed the hall to the bedroom.

Arran sat on the edge of their bed, his hands in his lap, both eyes open and waiting. Kara stepped into the room and sat next to him.

I could feel you were in trouble, she said. I had been waiting for it to happen, like when you feel you have been in a place before, but the opposite. I had seen it so many times, but always foggy and disorganized like a dream. This time, it felt real.

I could see you clearly, upside down and buried. I could even smell the gas. I knew you needed somebody strong. I knew she was the only one. I told her to be brave and promised she would remember the way and be strong and grown once she reached you. I held her over my head; she opened her arms like she always does, something snapped, and then she was gone.

I thought it was you, all that red hair. She grows up to look just like you.

She has your eyes, said Kara.

And Nana's temperament, Arran smiled. You should have seen her—so strong and determined. I couldn't even move. I would be burning right now if you hadn't sent her.

She won't remember tonight, Kara said.

Not until she gets old enough and it happens again. Then we will tell her. Then she will be ready to know.

Like Nana told you about the shortbread?

Arran smiled.

Remember, the first time you met Nana, you brought her shortbread. I had never told you it was her favorite. You just knew. You already knew without knowing how. And Nana could see you were ready to know.

Kara leaned against Arran.

Do you want to know why I say yes?

I do.

You stand in your blue shirt. I wear the earrings you give me for my birthday, and Nana sits with her blanket over her lap, reaching into the green box you hand her. She fumbles with the yellow ribbon, seeing you and pretending she doesn't already know what's wrapped inside.

That's when I recognize you, know you are the one I send Riley to save.

You bring Nana shortbread. Riley has your eyes. That's why I say yes.

The End