

Our Crumbling Entanglements

by

Jasmine Ferrufino

Submitted to the Department of Creative Writing  
School of Humanities  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

May 2021

Sponsor: Mehdi Tavana Okasi

Second Reader: Catherine Lewis

## Contents

Introductory Essay: Finding Culture Through Writing	i-v
Chapter 1: Martin	1-10
Chapter 2: Maggie	11-18
Chapter 3: Martin	19-31
Chapter 4: Maggie	32-37
Chapter 5: Martin	38-45
Chapter 6: Maggie	46-54

## Finding Culture Through Writing

My mother, a Mexican immigrant, was deported when I was only an infant for entering the United States illegally. I was left with my Mexican aunt and Italian-American uncle to take care of me. It took her two years to come back. I'm 24 now, but I can still feel the impact from those years. As a growing girl, it was that period that shaped me. I was developing and learning. When my mother came back, she saw her youngest daughter and tried to speak to her. But my mother only spoke Spanish. As for me, no one ever taught me anything other than English. I spent years trying to absorb as much as I could. But at times, I felt lonely because Spanish was something my brain couldn't comprehend as much as English. There was a time when I googled images to communicate with my mother so we could understand each other. It was frustrating. It was as if my mind couldn't take in the Spanish language like my whole family could—which is to say, easily. Eventually, of course, I learned it. But it didn't come without the consequences of this constant neglect and isolation that formed around me until I managed to communicate. This experience made me aware of the importance of communication and the power of language and words. I spent years writing in a notebook writing silly stories and poems about my youth. I felt understood through those pages and the notebooks in which I wrote. They cleared my head and made me imagine something more significant, a world where I would be understood.

When writing stories, the themes of culture and family would always find their way in; I believe this all comes from the strange relationship I had with my own. I never had this great family, and don't get me wrong, my life wasn't a great tragedy. I believe we were different in the way we perceived life and what we wanted from it. My beliefs never aligned with theirs, and I believe that comes from the career-driven atmosphere from America and the similar interest I had with my peers. I dreamed and had an interest in specific topics that seemed odd to them. I wanted to spend my time reading stories about mythical creatures while everyone else wanted to go to the *baile*. As much as I grew up around the Mexican culture, I denied it because it wasn't me.

I don't think I truly realized how much I was surrounded by Latino culture until I decided to move away. I lived in an incredibly diverse community and had surrounded myself with Latino friends. I didn't even notice I had done this, maybe because my community was heavily populated with Latinos. But once I explored my new environment, I felt out of place because something was missing. I realized that I took for granted the Latin Culture from home. I didn't realize it until I got to college, but some of that culture was a part of me, even if it was small. I lived in an extremely catholic house with pictures of the Lady of Guadalupe in every room and the Mexican flags hanging on our windows. I don't know how I didn't realize it. I was troubled by the idea that some people had no clue about half the things I talked about, most of which were holidays and food that I missed, but also the humor of inside jokes of Latin culture. Sometimes, people looked at me strangely because I was so close to my extended family, which I still sometimes can't understand. It was as if I was living in an alternate universe that only other Latinos understood. It was shocking to me to be told I was part of a culture when all my life I was told I was too Americanized.

I spent most of my time trying to capture this feeling of lost identity in my writing. Because at time times I don't think I'm either Mexican or American. I want to write this story eventually for the other young people for whom this feeling is familiar. I also wanted to talk about the complications of imperfect relationships. People can love one another despite the negative aspects of it. I learned this from my own relationship with my family or witnessed it with people I have encountered. A close family does not mean a perfect family. A romantic relationship is not all smiles, but challenges they are willing to face together. I chose to look into these topics more in my senior project.

I decided to write a story from two points of view entitled, *Our Crumbling Entanglements*. My story follows Martin, a white American man, and Maggie, a second generation Italian woman. At first, I thought I was writing a thriller, but the more I came to know my characters, it became clear my story was about the deterioration of a household and the relationship between families. In this story, we venture into the lives of a married couple, Maggie and Martin, as each character faces their own possible troubles such as representing a woman who kidnapped a child, longstanding family feuds, toxic family relationships, loss of faith and identity. Relationships aren't easy and that sometimes life throws people together and we this as Martin and Maggie struggle to communicate with each other about their feelings and emotions, which leads to their relationship falling apart. This story tells the truth about life's circumstances and the obstacles people are willing to take to seem happy and not face the truth.

Martin and Maggie both have their interpretation of family and values that cause tension in the story. Martin grew up watching his parents slowly getting a divorce that caused him to have a bad relationship with his mother since she cheated on his father and he accused her of his death. Martin wanted a perfect family because he never had one, but he never achieved it as

much as he tried. Life would always get in the way. He wasn't as involved as he imagined. Instead, Martin hid in his job. He had blamed the debt on the lack of quality time with his family, but it seems there were more problems within the relationship that he hadn't imagined or seen. Maggie is no longer the woman Martin imagined her to be. She was no longer the girl he met in his college years because she has grown since then. His daughter was no longer the infant he once knew but a growing identity. Martin might've loved his wife and child, but because he was too busy, he wasn't able to truly understand them. This idea leads to the downfall of this household.

Meanwhile, Maggie is a character from a primarily Italian family, inspired by the numerous years I spent learning Italian and hosting foreign exchange students in my home. Maggie is a character who is very close to her own family, the opposite of Martin. She grew up near most of her brothers and sisters, and at times it seems that they don't know boundaries. This comes from all the years they spent gossiping and hanging out near each other. This closeness is odd to Martin since he's never had anything similar to the relationship Maggie has with her family. Maggie was supposed to be this great achievement to her family as the first to graduate college. Still, before she does, she gets pregnant with her daughter, which derails her educational ambitions. Maggie's family always blamed Martin for this situation as though he was the sole reason for her new quaint life. Maggie also grew up catholic and relied on her faith to guide her in tough situations. She had asked God for his help and guidance in the challenging moment of her life, like when she thought about aborting her baby. Her family values never seemed like a problem at the beginning of Martin and Maggie's relationship because they didn't pay attention to them. But as Maggie begins to lose herself in her life, she begins to see the truth about their relationship and the minimal effort Martin has given to it, and how invasive her family is.

Martin and Maggie's relationship is based on the joining of two people from two different worlds. They try to manage their relationship as best as possible, but sometimes they cannot see each other's point of view straightforwardly. All the faults and issues that they thought they never had—or avoided—comes to the surface.

I decided to write about American and Italian culture instead of my own in this story. As much as I stand to represent my own culture, I still have this strange disconnect to it. At this moment, I don't feel like I'm the right person to represent Mexican culture or Latino culture. I also believe I need to venture outside those boundaries to find inspiration and yearning to move forward. Although I'm not speaking about Latino culture, I am still talking about matters that always seem important to me. I chose to write through Martin's view because, at times, it seems that people believe there is no culture in America. It is correct, that America has a mixture of the different cultures around them, but American has some values that are fed into them. Martin believes in these ideas that most Americans are given, like work being a priority or this American dream of a picket fence. He thinks he can work his way up and sometimes forgets the core values of family relationships. Meanwhile, Maggie's Italian background is supposed to contrast these ideas in a more undertone matter because her primary value is family religion. Religion, family relationships, and culture fall between these characters as they discover their identity as their relationship slowly deteriorates. These characters and their backgrounds become a crucial element of who they are and what they want to be. I believe my origin story has led me here just like theirs lead them to their own separate lives.

## Chapter 1: Martin

The musky smell of old paper and burnt coffee lingers in his small office, the very same one he's been working in since he started at The Schiffers Law Group, one of the few criminal defense firms in town, straight out of law school 11 years ago. It is March 10th, and Martin is leaning over his desk, ensuring that all his paperwork from his last case is in order, when Mr. Schiffer himself stumbles into his office. The years have been unkind to Mr. Schiffer, who, only recently, has acknowledged Martin as part of the firm. Mr. Schiffer is a stubborn older man who always wears a black tinted wool suit to work with a tie that presses onto his thin neck. The suits always rest onto his body as if someone crafted them for the mere purpose of being worn by him. Mr. Schiffer's tongue scrapes onto his teeth, making a coarse sound that causes Martin to flinch in irritation. Usually, Mr. Schiffer was sucking on a hard peppermint candy as if he had an endless supply of them hidden in his pockets.

"I heard you took on her case," says Mr. Schiffer, sitting down in the leather armchair across from Martin's desk. The smell of peppermint wafts in the air between them. "It's all over the news. They're saying she must be crazy to do such a thing." Mr. Schiffer's facial expression



doesn't change much. Stoic, as always. But Martin recognizes something else—a twinkle in his eyes, that cracks his stony expression, though it's barely noticeable. Could he be impressed?

“What's your read on her?”

Since joining the firm, Martin has been trying to impress Mr. Schiffer, hoping to make partner. Every year the partners sit down and discuss if Martin should be promoted, and every year someone votes no. No matter how many times Martin asked the other partners, they say it has to be unanimous. Out of all the five partners, Martin is sure it's Mr. Schiffer who keeps rejecting him.

"What she did was insane, but I don't believe she's crazy. There's compassion lingering in her, but of course, the press doesn't care about that." Martin sits up from his chair.

"The Press are idiots. They only follow the herd. You got to get out there and show them a different story. They'll follow you. You just got to prove it to them. If they keep calling her crazy, no jury will ever see her as anything else. Why do you think she did it?" Martin hears Mr. Schiffer suck on his mint as he speaks. The sound dares him to speak up.

Everyone was saying it was unforgivable—taking another woman's child. Abduction is what the press are calling it. Not kidnapping. Martin thought that was interesting.

"No one would wake up one day and decide to abduct a child. She raised that boy, gave him a home, and provided for him. Now, the boy is an adult himself. There has to be more reason than because she wanted to or because she is unstable like the press is saying. I don't know the real reason why, but I hope to find out.”

When he met with Angeline Mason yesterday at the jail where she's being held, she told him, without hesitation, he was her last hope. No one wanted her case, and the ones that were willing to take it on were going to charge her an amount she could never pay. Luckily for

Angeline Mason, Martin has yet to build a name for himself, and if he could prove her innocence, he would undoubtedly make partner. He knew what she did was wrong, but there was something in her he couldn't resist: the will to try.

"Well, it's going to be tricky," Mr. Schiffer says with a tone that doesn't seem hopeful, and yet, does Martin hear a twinge of respect in it? "Everyone will be looking at you. The people love to eat up stories about unhinged women—mothers especially. This is *the* case, Martin. But I'm sure you already know that." Martin swears he catches a smile emerging on Mr. Schiffer's face, a rare sight.

Once Mr. Schiffer leaves, Martin's body does a little wiggle dance because he is finally getting a twinge of approval from Mr. Schiffer. He picks up those documents he was sorting, and he gives them multiple pecks with his lips.

This is his moment, he thinks, a chance to get his name out there, make partner, and finally earn what he's worked so hard for. And to finally get out of debt. No one told him that he'd spend every second trying to prove his worth after getting his law degree. He'd mistakenly assumed the degree would earn him that. But here is his chance. Angeline Mason will become his savior.

Martin picks up the phone and dials his wife, Maggie. As the phone rings, he paces around his desk, a pep in each step, but the phone continues to ring, then goes to voicemail. "Maggie, you won't believe this, but I believe Mr. Schiffer is actually excited that I took the case. Call me back."

Martin rushes straight to his car after work, his fingers twinge with excitement as he steers out of the parking lot. He can't help it. He wants to celebrate even in the tiniest way. He

can see the small brick building in the plaza as he gets closer—the green lettering on the top reading Bakery Garden.

When he enters the shop, the familiar smell of buttercream and sugar tickles his nose. It reminds him instantly of the brighter moments of his childhood. The guilt hits him just as quickly. He knows he shouldn't have placed an order here. Maggie will definitely argue with him about it later. But what is the point of living if a man can't splurge every once in a while? When the cashier returns with a box in hand, displaying a beautiful three-layer fondant cake, he is sure he made the right choice, despite what Maggie will say.

Martin walks through his front door more content than he has been in years. He carries the white box with care, a month's worth of utility bills in flour, cream, and sugar.

Martin looks at his moderate house, the one Maggie chose when the unexpected turns of life hit them. For a brief moment, he wonders if they can have something more luxurious. They scraped every paycheck to rent this place when they first moved here 14 years ago, with Maggie only a few months pregnant. They were only in their early twenties; Martin was in his first year of law school, and Maggie was just starting her junior year at college. They both were scared back then, not knowing how to take care of a child when they still felt like children themselves. The only thing keeping them sane was their love. Back then, it was the only right choice in his head.

It was her parents' idea to move in together quickly and his and Maggie's responsibility to make it happen. It's still the home they live in now. The same thin walls they painted grey and the same scratched floors he thought would only be temporary. But sometimes life gives you unusual but beneficial challenges. He reminds himself that life gives you other things that are much more important.

Maggie is in the kitchen, washing dishes at the counter. She has her back to him and doesn't seem to hear him come in. She doesn't have the same curves that he worshipped when they were younger. She even developed love handles on the side of her hips and tiger-like stretch marks surfacing on them. Her legs were not as thin as they used to be, but they became a little meatier. But she still smells like coconuts.

Martin gently sets the cake on the kitchen table, then sneaks up behind Maggie, wrapping his hands around her waist to surprise her. Maggie looks unfazed, not even a flinch or gasp of surprise. Martin can only assume she is used to his shenanigans.

Maggie grabs his hands and tries to untangle herself from him, making Martin tighten his grip around her more. "Stop that," Maggie says as she wiggles out of his embrace. "You think you are so funny, don't you." It is this playful dynamic that had made him fall for her in college. They were always like this back then. Which ultimately led him to pursue her.

She turns to him. As usual, her oversized t-shirt is wet because she can't wash dishes correctly or at least without wetting the floor even after all this time.

"One of these days, you are going to jump, and I'm going to laugh," he jokes. But it saddens him that he can't seem to surprise her anymore.

Maggie eyes the cake box on the kitchen table. "Martin, you didn't." She pushes him out of the way and goes to the box to better read the Bakery Garden label. "I told you I'd already ordered a cake. You never listen, Martin." She opens the fridge and points at a supermarket sheet cake. "What are we going to do with two cakes?"

"Two is better than none," Martin says, hopeful of diffusing the tension by reaching for her hands. He holds them gently in his own. Maggie lets him hold her a short moment but then pulls away and sighs.

"I guess Julie will love it."

"Where is she, anyway?"

Maggie lowers her eyes. "She's in her room sulking because she thinks her grandmother isn't coming to her party."

"Your mother is not coming?"

"Of course, my mother is coming. I'm talking about your mom. Julie has been holed up in there since after school."

"How does she even know about her potentially coming?"

"Martin, kids can hear everything. She probably overheard us talking."

Martin can feel his face redden at the thought of his daughter's feelings being hurt. He doesn't want his mother to be the reason for her heartbreak.

"You know how much she adores the letters that come in the mail every year. They mean the world to her."

"Those letters that hardly say anything and filled with empty promises. Yeah, I know." Martin didn't mean to say it like that, but talking about his mother always made him feel like an angsty teen. He tries to shake it off and talk reasonably. "She hasn't even responded to our invitation. It's not like she lives down the street. She is a miles away in Michigan, and we are all the way here in New York."

"I know. That's why I think you should talk to her."

"Me?"

"Yes, this is your mother. She has to hear it from you."

"She going to be so disappointed, Maggie. I can't tell her."

"I know she is Martin. I am her mother, after all. I just think it will come out better from your mouth. You know how much she adores you."

Maggie looks back at the Bakery Garden cake. Martin can tell she's worrying about something by how she bites her lips. Martin wonders if it is about that day they don't talk about. She always bit her lips when she had to admit Julie sometimes preferred him, even though he never thought of it like that. But before Martin can say anything, Maggie speaks.

"How much did you pay for this?"

"You said you weren't going to get mad." Martin does things like this all the time, and luckily for him, Maggie always has the heart to hear him out. Although, this time, it looks like Maggie isn't as forgiving.

"So I went into our savings just a little. I thought we should splurge a bit. Things are starting to look brighter, especially with this Angeline Mason case. You should've seen how excited Mr. Schiffer was. If I win this case, my promotion to partner is a sure bet," Martin says. But it's pity he sees in his wife's expression, not pride. "Speaking of which, why didn't you return my phone call? Did you even listen to my voicemail?"

"It was cute, Martin. I enjoyed it. It's nice to hear that the law group is finally taking a special interest in you for this case. And I'm happy that Mr. Schiffer seemed excited. But Martin, you know how they are. You've been breaking your back for them for what, eleven years now? I just don't think it's a guarantee."

"I know, Maggie." He can feel the brightness in his soul dimming more as they speak. "I just want to be excited."

Maggie comes closer and wraps her arms around him.

"And I am excited for you, okay. But we need to be realistic. We have a budget. We just can't be splurging like this."

"I know," Martin admits.

Maggie plants a kiss on Martin's forehead, something she often does to reassure him that it's okay.

"Julie really will love it. We all will," Maggie says as she pulls away and turns back to the dishes she left in the sink.

\*\*\*

Julie is stretched out across her bed, on her laptop. Like her mother, she wears her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, her curls hard to tame. Everything else about her takes after Martin: her olive complexion, gigantic brown eyes, and that sharp nose. When Julie was born, Maggie teased him that he made a pact with God to make her look like him. But if he did, he was sure he would've told God to make her look more like Maggie.

"Hey, sweetie," Martin says, leaning to get a look at her screen. She's watching a soccer game. Renaldo is passing the ball to number sixteen.

Julie darts a look at him, then back to the screen.

"You sure do love your international players, don't you?"

"America's team sucks."

Martin laughs. "I guess they do." Over time his daughter has grown into a very outspoken child, a trait he loves about her. "Mom says you're upset."

Julie continues to stare at the screen, but tears well in her eyes, and her mouth quivers.

Martin leans over and gently rubs her back, hoping it will soothe her. "It's okay to be upset." He feels her body vibrate as she tries to hold back her tears.

"What's the point of turning thirteen if grandma won't be there?"

"Sweetie, you have to understand that sometimes things don't happen like we want them to."

Under the sniffles, Julie says, "Grandma always says she's going to come down every year in her letters, but she never does. "

"Sometimes people make promises they can't keep." Martin strokes her back in circular motions.

"I keep mine."

"Not everyone is as great as you. Plus, I bet she tries extra hard every year to come."

"I thought she would want to meet me. She hasn't even met me once."

"Grandma just lives so far away that it makes it hard to come to see you."

"Why doesn't she live closer to us so we can see her all the time?" Julie asks.

"Grandma likes it in Michigan. She has her own little family over there."

"With Grandpa?"

"No, remember my dad died when I was younger. No, she has someone else she sees as family."

Julie looks at him quietly, debating what to say next.

"She might live far away, but you know what she tells me every time I talk to her?"

Martin continuous.

"What?"

"That she loves you."

"Does she really?" Julie perks up at the thought.



"She does." This statement calms Julie's curiosity, and she goes back to looking at her laptop.

Martin walks out of the room knowing the truth. His heart shudders at the lie he just told. The chances of his mother actually coming are practically zilch, but he doesn't have the heart to tell her that. His mind goes in circles, despite keeping his mother out of their lives, she still has such a hold on his daughter.

## Chapter 2: Maggie

Maggie is a good mom. She says this to herself as her body jolts her awake. Her body does this all the time, especially when she's nervous or anxious. Today, she likes to believe it's excitement. After all, today is the big day, Julie's thirteenth birthday, and she is going to give her the best party she can, before she's too cool to hang with her parents.

She glances over at Martin, still sound asleep on his side of the bed. As she gets up, she can feel an ache coming from the back of her ankle. It's those damn sneakers she wears to work, the ones that are too small for her feet, the ones her mother gave her, in the wrong size. Her mother got them for her because she complained that her feet kept hurting from standing at her phlebotomist job at the hospital. Maggie keeps wearing them, though, unable to tell her mother they don't fit, the pain slowly becoming more tolerable.

Maggie shakes off the ache, knowing today will be a long day, with tables to set and balloons to inflate. Martin doesn't offer to help, although she wishes he would. Maggie heads to the living room where party supplies cover every inch. Julie's birthday always brought this need

in her to prove she made the right choice or maybe it's because her family would be there watching if she did it right.

*Voglio dire, tutto riguarda la famiglia, vero?* It's all about family. That's her mother's motto. Maggie takes a deep breath and repeats, *tutto riguarda la famiglia*, trying to calm her nerve, but she finds her teeth plunging onto her lips. *Tutto riguarda la famiglia. Tutto riguarda la famiglia.*

Maggie is not surprised when the first people to arrive are her older brother, Davide, and his wife, Julianna. They stride into the house an hour early, dressed in their best outfits, and an enormous gift in hand.

Before they even embrace, Maggie, noticing that her mother isn't with them, blurts out, "Where's mom? I thought you were bringing her."

"She couldn't come, sorella." Davide's voice softens. "Her knees aren't doing great today. It's better if she rests at home."

"Seriously?" She knows her mother's condition is getting worse from the growing collection of medicine in her cabinet and the more frequent doctor visits.

"Yeah, Sophia and Miguel offered to take her to the doctors if it got worse. Sorry, Maggie. I know you wanted her to be here."

She wants to pick up her phone and call her right now, but she knows that her mother will be even more upset if she does. She couldn't do that to her. Instead, Maggie begins to move around. She picks up objects and puts them in their place, unable to process what she heard. It was the only thing that made sense to her right now. Before she knows it, Davide and Julianna begin picking up objects, too, helping in any form they can.

Before long, everything is set up. Her mother's health still a small whisper lingering in her ear. As she looks at the room, a sigh exits her mouth.

Davide sits on the kitchen table's chair as Maggie puts the food in trays, the last thing on her list to do before the guest arrives. Julianna went into Julie's room to double-check if she is dressed for the party. As for Davide, he is drinking a cup of water with his legs stretched out on another chair.

"You sure know how to exhaust a man," he says. His body is relaxed and calm, suggesting otherwise.

"You hardly did anything."

"Well, I did more than others." Maggie didn't have to guess who he was targeting.

"Where is he anyway? I haven't seen him the whole time I was here." She wonders how Davide always did it, bringing Martin into every conversation. She thought he would give her a break, especially after her mom couldn't come, yet, Davide has other plans.

"He's in the office." Maggie manages to mutter out the words.

"You mean the garage."

"Yes, he's in the garage, okay."

"Don't you find that weird?"

"He has something to do." Maggie grabs another food tray and places the dinner rolls in it. The rolls harshly bang onto the metal tray, the sound echoing through the house. A bit of them almost fall on the floor, but Davide gets up to help her.

"Doesn't he always?" He sets the tray safely on the kitchen countertop. "I guess me and Julianna are not important to him."

"That's not true."

"Think about it, sorella. Has he ever put the effort to get to know us."

"He just busy with a case."

"Ah, yes, the new case," he pauses, debating to say something else. "And how do you feel about this one, Maggie?"

She knows what he's trying to do. He did it before when Martin defended what Davide called criminals. Yes, Maggie, at times, wasn't a big fan of Martin's cases, but she never let her opinions stop him.

"Do you like that he is defending a woman who should obviously be going to jail?"

Davide continues to question her.

She doesn't respond because she is sure he already knows the answer. It's the only reason why he is questioning her. Deep down, she knew this case made her more uncomfortable than the rest. Maybe it's because she keeps seeing the family who lost their child for years on the television, or maybe because she knew Davide was right, she deserved to be in jail.

"I don't want to talk about this." Maggie manages to say.

"You never do."

Maggie nudges Davide to be quiet as she notices Julianna walk in with Julie. Julie is wearing blue jeans with a soccer jersey. The one Julie never takes off. It is not the outfit she picked out for her. Maggie bought Julie a dress last week for today. She picked her out, a tulle dress in her favorite color and no sparkles, but somehow when she brought it home, Julie still screamed, angry that Maggie thought she would wear *that* dress. She spent a good sixty dollars on it, and now it's probably sitting in the back of Julie's closet. But this is what Julie wanted to wear. Maggie feels an ache. Possibly the blister on her foot.

"You look great," Maggie says because she is a good mom and always will be.

Julie goes in to hug her uncle, every ounce of love for her uncle shows. Maggie made sure to give her the wealth of family just like her mother did. "Hey Uncle Davi," Julie says with a smile. "Thank you for coming."

"We missed you last Sunday," Davide says to Julie while hugging her. "Grandma and I would've loved to see you."

Maggie knows he says this more to irritate her. Julie never goes with her to visit them on Sunday, and he knows it's because Martin feels uncomfortable about it. It feels like all of Davide's words seem like a ploy lately.

The backyard is currently full with her family, Maggie's co-workers, and Julie's soccer team. Yet Martin is still nowhere to be seen. The last time she checked on him, he was buried in paperwork and his eyes glued onto the computer. He said he would be right out, but that was a while ago. She hopes he will come out before Davide's stares kill her.

Every year, it is the same, their home is filled with friends and half of Maggie's family, and that's it. At the beginning of her relationship, Martin's college friends came over, but he's lost touch with most of them over the years. He never invites anyone from his firm, despite her constant suggestions.

She worries that his life has become only work. All he ever does is speak about work, and when it wasn't that, he was telling her stories of old cases. She sometimes tries to divert the conversation in other directions, but somehow he always manages to loop it around back to work.

As she trails around the backyard saying hellos to everyone who has arrived in the last couple of minutes, her eyes lock with a woman she hasn't seen in 13 years since Julie has been born. Maggie freezes at the sight of her. She walks in, her long wavy hair fluttering in the air.

The grass parts for her as she comes further in. Her features, almost the same as the last time she saw her, the sharp nose and the round face. Maggie spent the last couple of weeks trying to convince Martin to invite *her*. The *her* he hid from, his lovely mother.

The last time she saw her, she seemed more youthful, radiating even. Today, it seems to have dimmed down just a splurge. Her wild days probably passed her. Martin always referred to her as "reckless." Yet, she had to disagree with him right now.

Maggie stretches her hand out, greeting her with welcoming hellos hoping that she will come here more often. In Maggie's eyes, this was a miracle, the likeliness of mother in law appearing was close to zero, but here she stands in her backyard in blue jeans and a floral ruffle top.

"Maggie!" Martin's mother exclaims. She rejects the hands shake, and goes in for a hug that lingers longer than Maggie expects. "You look the same since the last time I saw you."

Behind Martin's mother, a man trails behind her, carrying a massive gift that is twice the size of Davide's. The man just catches up when Martin's mother releases Maggie from the hug. "This is my husband, Lucas." Her hands stretch out to the man lifting the large gift.

Maggie only heard his name a couple of times. Martin refused even to acknowledge his presence because she knew he deep down feared that the memory of his father would disappear. Every photo his mother sent of them both always ended up in the trash, with the words ridiculous mutter under his breath.

"Nice to see you, Mrs. Williams."

"I don't go by that last name no more. Call me Lauren," she waves it off like it's no big deal. Maggie couldn't believe this is the woman Martin refuses to acknowledge as family.

Maggie can't allow this woman become a distant memory when nothing Martin told her about his mother seemed true anymore.

Maggie, not taking another second, helps Lucas with the gift and leads them as quickly as possible to the gift table before it slips out of his hand.

She tries her best to make them feel at home, making sure to show them every second of the way that she wants them to be here. Maggie introduces them to a few people along the way, and everyone gives them a pleasant nod and asks them what Michigan is like.

From a distance, She can already see Davide's curiosity seeking through his stance from across the party. He's been waiting for this moment for years.

"Maggie, it was sweet of you to invite us." Her eyes search through the crowd as if trying to find something particular. Maggie can tell her patience is running low. No matter how much she tries to distract them by introducing them to her family and friends, nothing compares to seeing her own son.

"Where's Julie and my son?" Lauren asks as Maggie tries to find them a table, one of the many distractions.

Maggie takes a long sigh and then points out Julie first, "Well, Julie is the one running over there with the Ronaldo shirt." Maggie looks in the direction of the kids. Lauren's eyes trail each kid until she finally sees Julie. "She's so big. She looks exactly like Martin when he was that age." Her eyes widen, just like when a kitten's pupils grow when they are excited.

I've been told." The more she talks and watches Martin's mother, Maggie is sure that no trace of the woman Martin spoke about is here. "I'll be right back," Maggie tells Martin's mother as she jolts her way back into the house, hoping to get Martin to see it too.



She sees her husband in the kitchen, past the glass door, past the living room, and into the kitchen, looking out of the window into the front yard. His brown hair recently buzzed in the side, and his side part is almost reaching his ear. The silhouette of the man she fell for in her youth brings a warmth so subtle in her chest that Maggie can hardly feel it; it's so small, the comfort that comes from seeing him. He is alone, just like the night they met.

"Martin," she says, standing at the threshold, looking at him in the darkness. "She's here."

### Chapter 3: Martin

Maggie said the words he thought he would never hear today. Internally, he might've wanted his mother to come. If not, he wouldn't be staring out the window looking for a car that resembles the last one he saw her in before she picked up her things and moved away with her new boyfriend, now husband. Maggie's hand gently grasps onto his arm as he continues to think, the warmth of her touch seeping through his plaid shirt.

"Are you going to come out to talk to her? She asked about you." Maggie's tone is fragile, as if she is scared to break him.

He doesn't want to go outside. Before this, he sat in his office for hours looking at paperwork researching old cases similar to Angeline Mason's case, re-reading the same sentence, none of the words sticking. They left his mind instantly, with the thought of his mother haunting him. He couldn't keep hiding in the office, and now he couldn't keep hiding in the house. It's not like he could avoid her. His mother was just a couple of feet away from him now.

"I don't think I have a choice but to go outside," he says, almost reiterating his thoughts.

"I think you just made one."

He lets Maggie lead him out. The sun blinds him as they get closer outside. He can see it now as his eyes readjust. All the children are running around in cheap colored soccer vests, an

idea Maggie came up with, and the music from the speakers blaring, a pop song he doesn't know. He could only hear the muffled sounds from the office, but now he can see and hear it all, the lively energy his wife created.

Once Maggie opens the sliding doors, his mother's voice hits him in the face, sending anger throughout his body. The music and the children's playful screams don't cover it up. He knows it too well. Her voice carries through the yard. He scans it, searching for it, but he can't seem to find her.

Back then, her voice traveled too. It would go through the thick walls of Martin's childhood home. He could hear it all, all her protest, his father's words before he lost his mind entirely. Sometimes Martin believes his father died from sadness, his mother being the cause, her demands becoming too much for the man.

When he finally locates where the voice is coming from, he finds her in front of Julie. Julie's head leans back as she let out a cackle while they speak.

Before he knows it, his arms untangle from Maggie's, his feet moving towards them, his beige pants parting the grass as he rushes over. When he reaches them, Julie automatically closes her mouth, letting silence loom over them.

Martin doesn't want Julie's idea of her grandmother to fall apart, not like this, and not today. He wants her to stay in the bliss of youthful innocence. But as Julie covers her mouth, he knows that she is beginning to see the truth.

His daughter, his mother, look at him now, their similarities are undeniable.

"Son," she says as she spots him. The words feel foreign to Martin. After 13 years, she still looks like the carefree youthful mother he remembers from back then. If he didn't see the slight sagging of her skin, he is sure he would've thought she was stuck in the past.

"Dad," Julie says. "Grandma says you used to play soccer when you were my age. You never told me that." Julie's body jolts with excitement as she talks.

"I didn't think two weeks counted." Martin presses Julie's body against his, claiming Julie as his. His eyes send bullets towards his mother, warning her not to hurt his daughter. He didn't want his mother to make the same dark patches she made on his soul on Julie's.

"You seemed to like it when you were younger. Don't you remember how you practiced day and night? I had to practically drag you back into the house."

"Did you really, dad?" Julie intervened.

"No, but I do remember my mother forgetting me at practice because she was meeting some guy." The comment escaped Martin's mouth as if he has been holding it onto it this whole time. He can already sense he made the right choice not to let his mother become a constant in Julie's life. It looks like she hasn't even changed a bit.

Maggie steps into the small circle they created. She hits Martin in the back in a playful manner sending a striking up Martin's spine. "Isn't your father funny, Julie? As if that would happen." Maggie begins to laugh, and she waits for us all to join, eyeing him to play along.

"Of course, she wouldn't," Martin says, confirming Maggie's innocent lie.

"Why don't we all sit down, okay?" Maggie gestures to a table, where a man sits by himself. He knows him from the wedding photos his mother sent him while he was in college. It wasn't even two years after Martin's father passed when he received that card.

Martin watches Maggie whisper something into Julie's ears. Whatever Maggie says to her, she runs off immediately, joining her friends that are passing a ball back and forth.

Maggie then leans closer to him and whispers, "Play nice." He watches her strategically sit in a chair, leaving the seat next to his mother open for him. He sits in it, knowing he has no

other choice. Martin doesn't want to acknowledge his mother or her husband. He just wants to keep them away from as many people as possible.

But then he sees that familiar face walking towards them. He should've known if anyone will ruin his simple plan; it is Davide, Martin's "biggest fan."

Davide's button-down shirt is tucked into his pants. His beard is freshly trimmed, and his curly hair falls a little on his forehead. His wife, Juliana, is walking right beside him, inseparable as usual. Her outfit too extravagant for a backyard. As they get closer, he sees Luisa, Maggie's younger sister, many steps behind, trying to catch up. Luisa and Davide are replicas of Maggie with their crazy brown curls and height. Well, all her eight siblings are from the ones he's met since most of them lived in Italy, Caltagirone, their mother's hometown.

Davide wastes no time. When he reaches the table, the first thing that comes out is the question that is circling through his brain. "Who's this, Martin?"

"I'm Martin's mother, of course, and this is my husband, Lucas, Martin's mother responds, beating him to it, her face gleaming pride like she's been here for the last 13 years, and Davide was the one missing out.

His eyebrows rise in surprise. "So you are the wonderful mother we have heard about? I always wondered what Martin was like as a child."

In sync, Davide and Julianna pull out the empty chairs in front of them and gracefully sit down. Luisa hesitates for a second, not knowing what to do, but once Davide glances at her, she joins them at the table. The power of their families influences. Martin can't believe there was a time he wanted to be a part of them.

"You have to tell us about all the troublesome things that he did as a child he never wants to tell us," Davide continues, his devilish smile on full display.

Martin's mother, oblivious, responds, "I don't believe I have any crazy stories from when he was young. I guess maybe I was the crazy one." She laughs to herself.

He sees Davide slightly nudge Julianna. To anyone, it could be seen as him readjusting, but Martin is used to their tactics.

Martin searches for Maggie's hand from under the table, hoping to signal her to make her family calm down, but he can't find it. He looks over, and he sees that her hands are already crossed together in a neat ball on her lap.

"I guess there is this one time. He snuck out to meet up..." His mother begins to say.

Before Martin's mom can finish the sentence, Maggie interrupts her, "Did you hear that Martin got a new case," diffusing the tension a bit.

Davide's enthusiasm deflates immediately at the change of subject. He doesn't even try to hide it.

Julianna chimes in. "It's the one that's all over the news, right? The one who abducted a young boy who is grown now." Out of all people, he expected Davide to be the one to keep the conversation going, but he isn't surprised. He felt her sharp shark teeth glistening back at him, ready to bite when necessary—a perfect pair for Davide.

"It sounds like a serious case, and you were able to obtain it. That's amazing, Martin," his mother mentions. She glances at her husband with pride.

"Yes, it is, but Martin is representing the deranged woman. What that woman did is sinful. She has to go jail point-blank." Davide doesn't hesitate to take the chance.

"Okay, there's no reason to call her deranged," Martin exclaims.

Davide leans closer to the table, "Are you telling me that this woman deserves not to go to jail for abducting another person's child and raising it for years?"

"Yeah, I heard the media say she took that baby from a hospital, stuffed the baby in a purse, and took off. I'm sorry, but who is condoning that." Julianna adds.

"Martin took this case. There has to be a reason. It means he has something that is working for the case." Martin's mother says, but Martin didn't like the praise she gives him.

Martin defends himself, "I'm saying that there are other ways to look at this case. Angeline Mason must have wanted a child or something equivalent to have kidnapped a child. Not everything is as plain and simple. There are always layers and layers of complexity within a person."

"And you're telling me that if I were put into extreme measures, I would do the same. What do you think, Maggie? Would you?" Martin glances at Maggie, whose eyes wander to him and Davide.

"I don't know, honestly," Maggie stubbornly responds back, not taking any side.

"Haven't you and Julianna been trying to have a baby? Well, what if you kept trying and nothing works. It's been a good five years, and you have lost two babies already and nothing. She is getting to the age that she won't be able to. Hope is looking low. Maybe Julianna gets depressed and one day stumbles upon a daycare. She sees a child and thinks to herself, just a for a second, what if she took this child? She could raise it better than any mom. Before she knows it, she takes the baby. Is Julianna derange?"

Davide's face drops, and Martin was about to enjoy his victory when Julianna stands up and leaves the table. Davide following after her immediately.

"That was fucked up, Martin. You know how hard she has been trying to have a kid, and then you accuse her of being deranged." Maggie gets up from the table, utter disappointment on her face.

"I didn't say she was deranged," he tries to defend himself as he watches Maggie leave the table, trying to catch up to her brother.

Luisa, not knowing where to go, leaves seconds after following the herd.

Martin is upset for giving Davide exactly what he wanted, a show. Even if it went differently, then he thought. He is tired of this constant bickering between him and Maggie's family. For a brief moment, He wishes they could put their difference aside.

He glances at his mother, looking at his own family.

"It's okay, honey. Sometimes we say things we don't mean." Martin's mother leans forward, trying to brush one of his stray hairs behind his ear. Before she touches him, he grabs her hand.

"I guess you would know."

He gets up and leaves. The table now only containing his mother and her new husband.

He thinks about leaving the party a couple of times throughout the night, knowing that he upset everyone he knows, but Martin isn't sure where he would go. Maybe back to the office.

But then Julie heads over to him, her curly ponytail bouncing through the air. "Dad, can we part the cake?"

"You know you have to ask your mother, not me."

Julie shakes her body in exasperation. "She's going to say no."

"Kiddo, I'm sure that's not true." She purposely gives him the puppy dog eyes, the ones that work most of the time.

"Come on, let's ask mom," he says, although, he knows she would still be upset.



He finds Maggie in a small group of people drinking a wine cooler. As far away as possible from Martin. Martin walks into the group which, he presumes are people that she knew from when she was in college.

"Maggie, Julie wants to know if they can part the cake," Martin says with a demanding tone. Julie is standing behind Martin, but Martin nudges her till she is beside him. "Right, Julie?"

"Right."

"Of course," Maggie says bitterly. She drifts off into the house, leaving him without another word.

It was 20 minutes later, and they haven't cut the cake, and Martin didn't know what to do. The children are starting to get exasperated. He knows he should give Maggie some space like usual, but he has no other choice but to go into the house to see what's wrong.

He finds her on the kitchen floor with almost every drawer open, biting her lips.

"What's wrong?" Martin asks as he comes closer to her. Maggie slides over to an unopened cabinet. She opens it and begins rummaging through it. "Maggie, what's wrong?" He repeats himself, but she avoids him. Martin bends down on the floor with her. "Maggie, what are you looking for?" he asks louder this time.

Maggie glances at him. "I'm looking for the damn lighter, Martin. It was here earlier. I swear I double-checked." She slides over and goes to the next cabinet.

Maggie, the lighter is in my office. I used it earlier. I needed a smoke."

"You were *smoking*."

"Yeah, I needed something to calm me down earlier."

She gets up to the floor and brushes her dress. "You could've told me that."

"You didn't ask."

Aggravated, she brushes her hair out of her face. "Just go get the lighter, Martin."

Maggie is waiting for him on the kitchen island when he comes back. Her head is drooping onto the table from exhaustion. He places the lighter in front of her, resting it on the table. She snatches it immediately after.

She gets up, and just when she is about to start heading outside, she asks, "Why couldn't you just play along for one night?"

"I didn't mean to get them upset."

"I know, but you didn't even try. Now Julianna is all upset."

"I did try."

"No, you didn't. You never do, Martin. You could've been out here helping me trying to get to know them more. Maybe, even letting my family see what I have for years."

"That's not fair. I always tried in the beginning."

"Exactly, you stopped trying. I even got your mother to come to visit us all the way from Michigan, and instead of trying to make her part of our family, you push her away."

"Maggie, she doesn't need to be a part of this family. She's toxic."

"The woman out there has been nothing but respectful. I'm surprised she's been taking your shit all day."

He couldn't believe that Maggie is taking everyone's side but his right now. "I don't know what you're talking about. She is clearly still the same person, Maggie. Can't, you see it?"

"Well, tell that to your daughter who idolizes her. Martin, it's not right of you to keep depriving her of a relationship she clearly wants."

The door slides open, and it's Luisa who walks in. Martin and Maggie freeze. Luisa looks at them both, knowing she interrupted something. "Um... I was sent to tell you that everyone is still waiting for you to cut the cake."

"No worries, I found the lighter." Maggie walks outside lighter in hand as she yells, "Who is ready for cake?" Luisa trickling behind her. Martin follows them, hoping to resolve this matter with Maggie. But she ends up lighting the candles immediately.

All the kids lined up in front of the table, waiting to devour not one but two cakes.

The Bakery Garden cake stands out from the rest of the decorations and makes the other cake look invisible. The three-layer cake holds a fondant cartoon girl crossed-legged sitting on the soccer-shaped cake. Each layer has more fondant team members attempting to kick a ball.

Although this birthday wasn't perfect, Martin likes to believe that at least the cake came out perfect. Even for a second, this cake, will bring her joy. That is all he can ask for right now.

Julie blows the candles, the flames on the number thirteen slowly disappear, and he can see the image of him as a young boy almost replica to her, except she is more joyful than he ever was. His daughter is officially a teenager. He hopes no one will hurt her and makes her as damaged as he was at her age.

Three seconds later, two girls push Julie into the Bakery Garden cake, there was no time to scream no, and there wasn't any time to save it. The cake is plastered all over his daughter's face. He can hear the sharp sound of her laugh. Julie being the strong girl she is, scoops a bit of the cake and throws it right back at her friends. A full cake war unfolds, cake fully covering the grass. He tries to cover his shock. Maggie, on the other side of the table, couldn't even hide it if she wanted. He could see her picking every ounce of the cake off the floor. Instead, she brushes her hands on her dress, trying to keep her calm.

When everything blows over, and Maggie is done handing over the remaining cake to whoever is left, Martin walks up to her and tells her, "I'm sorry." She walks away immediately to join Davide, Julianna, and Luisa. He found himself with only one place to stand, and that was with his mother and stepfather.

Maggie spends the night avoiding him. She doesn't even acknowledge him when Julie begins to open her present later that night. He keeps hoping Maggie will say any word to him, but she doesn't.

She gave him a "I told you so" look when Julie opens his mother's gift since his mother got Julie a trampoline. But Martin didn't believe gifts were a great way to measure love. Although, he did like knowing that for once, someone from his side of the family one upped her family.

The following day, all evidence of yesterday's party was inside the white trash bags piled by the curb. Only the red and blue confetti remained, sprinkled across Martin and Maggie's backyard.

When Martin wakes up, Maggie is gone, already at Mass. They both passed out without another word. He wishes she woke him up to talk about all that happened and did not happen yesterday. Reluctantly, he gets out of bed and walks out into the hallway. Julie pops her head out of Julie's room, apparently already waiting for him to get up. Her eyes beam with excitement, ready to conquer the new day. Martin, on the other hand, is still tired from yesterday. It took all of his energy to slip his feet into his slippers. Julie is wearing her penguin pajamas that someone gifted her yesterday.

"Dad," Julie says innocently as Martin tries to find materials for coffee.

"Can we build the trampoline?"

Martin can see the anticipation running through her veins. He wonders how long she's been waiting for him to wake up. "You want to do it right now?"

She nods her head in agreement, "Or whenever you can."

"Okay, once I have my cup of coffee, we can," Martin says, unable to shut down her dreams.

As Martin waits for his coffee, Julie sits in the living room, looking at the trampoline box on the floor. He watches her get up every second or so, unable to hide her excitement.

"Grandma got it for me," Julie says out loud, enough for Martin to hear.

"Yeah, I was there.

"Do you know if she left yet?"

"I'm not sure. She told me yesterday night she was only here for the party."

"Will she come back next year?"

"I'm not sure, but hopefully, she does."

When Martin's coffee is ready, he practically swallows it whole because Julie keeps entering the kitchen every second to see if he's done.

As he heads over to the living room, she leaps off the couch, ready to begin building.

The trampoline takes longer than he expects. The tarp struggles to get to stretch to the other side, and he practically forces it into place. He didn't remember it being this hard when he was younger. But when he finishes, he lays on the grass, finally able to catch his breath.

Julie, not even a second after, climbs up and begins to jump. "Dad, it's so cool," She shouts. "You should get up here."

"I'm okay." Martin playfully screams back.

Julie suddenly stops jumping. Her excitement stripped away." Is it because grandma gave it to me?"

"No, I just don't want to."

"Is it because you don't get along with her?"

"Who told you that?"

"No one," she pauses. "You guys were weird yesterday."

"That's just how grandma and I are."

"Are you lying?"

"No," he says, lying to her once more.

For a second, she looks at him skeptically and says, "Okay," and begins jumping again like she was before—all of Julie's concerns disappearing into the air.

## Chapter 4: Maggie

She doesn't want to open the door, but she has to eventually. Maggie knows what's on the other side. Her mother sitting on the reclining chair, her brother on the sofa with Julianna, possibly her younger sister, and perhaps, even her cousin Sophia and Miguel helping to make coffee before heading to mass. They have probably been talking about how her sister caught them fighting yesterday in the kitchen. She debates about going back home and pretending something important came up. Instead, she grabs the handle, and walks into the room, ready to face her fear.

"Look who it is," says Davide from the second she walks into the apartment. They are all exactly where she expected them to be. She even got the location of Sophia and Miguel perfectly.

"Here comes trouble," says Sophia from the kitchen.

Before Maggie can get a word in, they all bombard her with questions.

The voice of her mother transcends them all. "Is it true his mother came?"

Of course, their fight came second to the news of Martin's mother being there. She should've known. A bit of relief strikes her, giving her the will to breathe again.

It is remarkable how well her mother looks after hearing what happened yesterday. Lately, her mother seemed to give Maggie little worries and scares at times.

Maggie gives a glare that directly targets Davide, who is only inches away from her mother. She knows he is the one who told her. They practically see each other all the time since he lives down the block.

"She did come. I don't know, I pictured her different."

"I know, I pictured more of a partier. But she didn't have one drink," Davide interrupts.

"What was she like?" her mother asks curiously.

Maggie finds a seat at her usual spot on the couch by Julianna. "She seemed like she finally settled down and now is enjoying her life." She pauses to collect her thoughts. "She was excited to meet Julie yesterday. You should've seen the two chatting away before Martin came out. I don't know. She was nothing like I imagined."

"What about Martin? How did he feel?"

"He practically told her to leave," Davide interrupts.

"That did not happen."

"Well, it felt like he did. Everyone could feel how odd the dynamic between the two was."

"He had a lot going on," Maggie responds back. "You know, with the case and all."

Davide glances over his shoulder to check if Julianna is okay. "Don't mention the case to me."

The room is silent. Maggie can see Sophie and Miguel from the chair, and they both are trying their best not to look their way.



"I just don't think everyone here should keep relying on the gossip between each other," Maggie exclaims.

"*Maggie, devi domare quel tuo personaggio.*" Her mother shifts in her chair. "No one is screaming at you. We are telling you to acknowledge that this man doesn't value family, and we mentioned this from the very beginning before you two were about to move in."

"Everyone here pressured us to practically do that," Maggie exclaims.

Her mother completely breezes over the comment. "We are just asking if you are happy with someone like that? He doesn't even make the effort to get to know us or attempt to join us to Sunday mass. And after yesterday, I'm not sure."

"You guys have to give him a chance. You know my daughter is thirteen, right. Meaning I've been with him for over 14 years. He means something to Julie and me."

"We are just concerned," Davide joins into the conversation.

"Aren't you always?"

"Davide just wants the best for you," Julianna mentions. "Well, we all do."

"Then give him a chance. Martin is a good guy," Maggie says.

Martin *is* a good guy. He is because why would Maggie fall for anything less. He is the one who would spend hours with her at the library, making sure her motivation didn't leave her. There is no way he isn't a good guy.

Maggie Mother goes up to Maggie and lets her hand rest on hers. "We just want to make sure you're happy, tesoro."

Maggie clings onto her hand, hoping it will calm her down.

\*\*\*

Maggie's family is possibly already on their way to mass. The words from her mother are troubling her. She thought her family and Martin would grow into each other, but they seemed to grow further apart as time went by. She couldn't go home like this with her family's words taking over her mind, and she couldn't stand anymore hours with her family.

Maggie always did the right thing. Even when she was younger, she watched her brother sneak out the fire escape in their apartment. He whispered to her to keep quiet for him, but weeks after, she would feel guilty and tell her mother.

So she picks up her keys and drives, passing the Pleasantville sign as she goes. She feels relief, all of her responsibilities miles away. She pushes her foot on the gas more, wanting to taste freedom a bit more. The air pushes her hair back, letting it go rabid.

When she is two hours away from home, she halts her car in a parking lot. She goes into a diner where she orders a burger with fries. She sees the grease leaking out of the patty, dripping onto the plate, cheese melting into the patty. Her mouth-watering immediately at the thought of devouring it. When her teeth sinks deep into it and she tastes all the juice from meat, she wonders why she hasn't had one in years. The only reason coming to mind is that Martin didn't like beef, but right now, that didn't seem like a big enough reason.

In this random place, she doesn't have worries and problems from home, all that she is left with her essence. She misses the happiness and joy that comes from independence, something that her old self thrived on. She can feel that old part of her right here, right now, and she wants to ask it to join her.

When the waiter comes back, she asks for another order of fries, although she doesn't know if she can even eat them all. She then proceeds to ask him if there's anywhere interesting to go around in the area.

The waiter takes a moment to respond, and for a moment, Maggie debates whether she picked the most boring town to process her thoughts. But then the waiter suggests an art museum a couple of blocks ahead with giant sculptures. After eating half of her second set of fries and feeling a little queasy from it, Maggie decides it's time to leave.

She places a few dollars on the table and heads out the door, still not ready to confront her feelings. So she hops into her car and drives till she begins to see the outdoor sculptures. She doesn't need to be standing in front of them to know that they will tower over her.

When she arrives, she looks at the brochure map that the booth man gave her when she bought her ticket. She decides to go on the trail that passes the giant sculptures she saw when she was driving.

As she gets deeper and deeper into the woods, she becomes fascinated with the art pieces she comes across. Some of them are made from metal and some glass. She is alone here in the woods, willing to look at everything in her own space. Maggie likes this idea that there is no one else pushing her forward or making her go back. She could sit here looking at this strange sculpture for hours if she wants to.

If Martin and Julie were here with her, she is sure they would be trying to see if it looks like an animal or a person, seeking an answer that only the artist could know.

The sculpture has cylinder tubes sliced in different positions. From different angles, the sculpture changes every time she moves, altering her feelings and view. She looks at it for hours. The longer she stays, she realizes she wants to hear Julie and Martin's silly questions.

A group of people pass her on the trail and she hears their conversation as they pass by. The words, "She raised the child as her own. Isn't that insane?" echoing in her ear.

Even here in the woods, she couldn't escape her life. Pleasantville was still two hours away, but this news still came to haunt her. She hated it. She is tired of hearing about the case that is practically ruining life. The more she thinks about it, it feels like everything began to plummet the moment Martin agreed to take it on.

She didn't even like that he is representing her, but who was she to judge this woman for what she did. Maggie practically did something sinful herself when she felt like everything from her world was crumbling.

Instead of finishing the path, she walks back, knowing she can't keep fleeing from her life. The overheard conversation being the proof. Maggie tries to shake off the sins of her past. She hated thinking about them because they still lingered in her life every day.

She is sure she will find a part of herself again, even if it's not today. She knew one thing before leaving. She cared about all the people who were making her head explode, and she wanted to see them.

## Chapter 5: Martin

Maggie arrives at the house later than usual. He has waited for her by the door for hours. After all the fights they have had together, none of them resulted in her disappearing for hours.

When she walks through the door, the first thing he says is, "I'm sorry." He did many things that were out of hand last night, and he knew that now.

Maggie says, "I know," and embraces him. The familiar smell of coconut send tranquility within him. Maggie hugs him tighter than she has in years, and then let's go. She then proceeds to go into their living room, where she rests her head on the recliner.

"Where were you?" Martin asks as he joins her in the living room.

"On a walk. I ate a burger" He watches her look at the ceiling as she speaks, her brain elsewhere.

"Did you like it?" he asks, hoping to get more information.

"You know, Martin. I went on this walk, and I'm walking, right?" She doesn't pause for his response but keeps on talking. "Everything's perfect. The sun is out. There aren't people. So I can take my time. But as keep walking, I feel like something is missing."

"What's missing?" Martin asks.

“You and Julie, of course.” Martin watches Maggie lift her head from the recliner and then looks at him. “But then sadness also strikes me, and it’s not from missing you two but somewhere else deeper inside me.”

Martin has never seen her like this. He doesn’t even know if he should respond. It’s as if she is only stating her truth.

“You know what I realized,” Maggie speaks up again. “I think I forgot how to be myself.” He then watches her pick up the tv remote and turns it on. She stays like this for the rest of the night in a strange trance.

\*\*\*

Martin feels weird going to work on Monday morning when his wife seems slightly out of it. He doesn't know what to do to make her feel better. Is this something that he can help her with? When he left to work, he saw her walking through the house when she should be at work. He found it odd, but he couldn't question her, knowing she is fragile right now.

Martin takes a deep breath hoping to focus on what's in front of him now. A grey building fenced with barbed wire faces him. Sadly, all his thoughts this week were about his mother and Maggie that he didn't get time to review Angeline Mason, but Martin knew what his mission is for today.

Angeline Mason is sitting in the same chair he last saw her in, her straight blond hair falling in front of her face. Her body slumps onto the table, different guards standing by the door. He knew how he should play this. He is not going to let her plea guilty. No, not yet.

"You have to tell me why you did it?" Martin says as he sits confidently on the other side. "I'm going to need it if you want me to win this case."

Angeline Mason's lean body shifts off the table. "I've been calling you all weekend," she says. "You didn't pick up once. I needed to know what the plan was. I needed to know how you were going to get out of here. I needed to believe in you. Yet here you are, hours, days later."

"Yes, but I am here. And right now, I need you to tell me why you did it? We need to humanize you. We need the jury to sympathize with you if you want to get out. So tell me so I can do that."

Martin watches her sit up at the idea of freedom. "Fine," she says, finally giving in. "But you better get me out of here."

"I'll try my hardest. I give you my word."

She takes a moment and speaks. "I didn't expect to do it. I went out to have a breather and collect my thoughts. I had just passed by the hospital as I headed to the gas station to get a drink. But I walked inside and ended up looking near the incubator and where they had all the children sleeping while the mother rested."

Martin doesn't say anything as she tells him. His head nods slightly as he processes her words.

"Early that week, I felt something on my leg, a familiar feeling. It happened once before when I first got the possibility to carry a child, but that day, the blood trickled down my leg, sticking to my thighs. Indicating to me and every person that I won't have the possibility to have a kid in the next few months. The child I was going to have, Jason, wouldn't see what the sky looks like or how it feels to live, laugh, and enjoy life. So when I saw those babies, lying there so fragile and youthful. I thought I deserved to be a mother. I wanted to rock my baby, see my baby, watch him grow."

Martin remembers when he first heard the news he was having a baby. It came as a shock at first. He was too young, still in college, nowhere near ready, yet it excited him. Maggie, on the other hand, dreaded the way she acted when she first found out. He didn't tell her, but he saw the fear in her eyes flashing between conversations about where to live, what crib they should buy, and if they should continue school. It wasn't the plan either of them expected, but it was there. Angeline Mason sadly got that happiness, that joy, taken from her. Martin knows exactly the moment his heart dropped for her.

Angeline whipped her eyes. Her voice is lighter than before. "I didn't expect to find one of the babies unattended, but when I did, my hands grasped onto this adorable baby boy and laid him onto my purse, with a sweater as a cushion, and I left. I felt like my body was moving on its own and I was just there watching it all unfold. That baby became my soulmate."

"Would you can say that you loved this child as you own?" Martin asks to confirm.

"Of course, He is my son, then, now, and forever."

"Do you have anyone who would go on the stand to confirm this?"

"My cousin Lou Lou can, the one who recommended you to me."

Angeline Mason mentioned Lou Lou in their first meeting. In the earlier days of the firm, he helped her on a first offense. She got off easy. I guess he could thank Lou Lou for this case and also for possibly helping to sway it.

"That will have to do."

"You think this is going to work."

"There's much more we need to do but maybe. Do you have more people?"



The talk between Angeline Mason and Martin went on like this for an hour. Martin continues to ask questions, and Angeline Mason continued to answer in hopes that this would be the solution.

"One more question, You were the one who told your son the truth? But why? You could've kept on living without him knowing."

"My son is going to start a family of his own, and soon he will know the truth when the paperwork for insurance will fall through. So I thought I should tell him myself before he found out on his own."

"So you are saying you admitted to the truth in hopes that the boy's feelings wouldn't be hurt as much?"

"Yes, I did."

"I think that's all I need for today." Martin closes the folder he brought in with him. He felt for once that he is right. There is a way to spin this case. Soon the media would be portraying her differently than they are now.

When Martin returns to the office, the phone rings, he wonders who it could be from. Maybe it was Angeline Mason forgetting to tell him something, or maybe it's his mother wanting to talk about the party. When he raises the phone onto his ear, he hears a deep voice asking him if he is the parent of Julie Williams. When he says yes, they tell him that no one has picked her up from practice. Usually, Maggie was the one to pick. It wasn't like her to do something like this. Maggie is generally so organized that it shocks him. He picks up his keys and leaves.

On the drive home, his mind bounces back and forth, thinking about Angeline Mason and then about Maggie. The case is starting to come together. But there's so much left to do for it.

When his mind gets exhausted from thinking of Angeline Mason, it drifts to Maggie. It begins to imagine what could've happened to Maggie. She was never like this, even at her lowest of lows.

As Martin arrives home to drop Julie off, he sees that Maggie's car is in the parking lot. Relief and anger hit him at once.

He finds her sitting in the living room on the recliner when they walk in. She hardly glances at them. Once Julie enters her bedroom, he walks in front of the tv, hoping to grab Maggie's attention.

"Maggie, why didn't you pick up Julie. You know I can't just leave work to do it." Maggie glances at him. "I forgot, okay."

"And you couldn't call me? You know, how hard I've been working for this promotion, this could tarnish it."

"I forgot, Martin. Didn't you hear me? Everyone is home, and we are safe."

"That's not the point, Maggie."

"Isn't it weird how these people are just living their lives content?" Martin doesn't know what she is talking about, but then she gestures to the Tv with the remote control. "The characters on this shows will never know anything else. They are just living their days as their written, content, and unaware of the world around them. Weird, right?"

"I'm not going to talk about Tv right now. When you left my daughter all alone waiting for you."

"Maybe, she needs a better mom," Maggie says in a slight whisper and doesn't say another word after.

For the rest of the night, Martin enters and leaves the living room. The first time he finds her just staring at the screen completely entrance, and when he asks her about dinner, she shrugs

him away. The second time, she is eating some of the fruit gummies she packs for Julie's lunch. The third time, Martin tells her to stop watching the television and join him in bed. She looks at him and asks him, "Have you ever wanted your life to be like a show?" Martin doesn't answer her. Instead, he takes her to the room, frustrated that she is acting in this manner.

Martin isn't sure when home slowly became dreadful. All week Maggie has been in a trance. It was already Thursday, and yet, nothing in Maggie's behavior has become normal. She stopped watering the flowers in the front yard, and she is no longer drenched in water from the sink. Instead, she lays on the couch and watches tv. He isn't even sure if she is actually watching or just zoning out the whole time. When he talks to her, she gives him a straight answer, the responses becoming shorter each day. She doesn't even leave the house anymore. She just stays on the recliner, occasionally getting up for food.

He doesn't know what to do, and when he asks, "Maggie, are you okay?" She tells him that's a ridiculous question. Even Julie came up to him and asked if her mother was okay, and although he wasn't sure, he told her yes.

He thinks about calling her brother or even her mother to ask if they know if she is okay, but he keeps telling himself it hasn't come to that yet. It isn't as if she is sick. She just passes her time in the same lifeless routine, hardly interacting with him or Julie. Only speaking, when necessary.

On Friday night, when he returns home, the television's static isn't ringing in his ears, only silence. Instead, Maggie is in their bedroom, sitting on the bed reading, an odd sight. He hasn't seen her read so intently since college.

When he sits on the bed to join her, she shifts her body just a little bit away from him. Lately, that's all she does to keep her distance. He swears at night; she shoves a pillow between them to make sure their bodies don't touch.

"Martin," she opens her mouth. "I'm going to stay with my mom for a while. I need some time to remember who I am. Plus, she needs me right now."

Martin wants to stop her from leaving, but he knows that she needs to do this to make herself feel better. So he lets her go.

## Maggie

"*Nel nome del Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo, Amen,*" Maggie recites as she enters the church, joining the Friday mass. People clutter the doorway, and she shimmies her way through. In the front, pastor Carl is setting up. For as long as Maggie can remember, this was her pastor, and this was her church. She remembers sitting in the first two rows when her mother would drop her off at church school, and how she would wait for the moment, they would get down on their knees and pray. Her head would just peak over the wooden pew ahead of her. She would trace her finger on the scratch markings on the wood till they asked her to stand again, knowing it would end soon.

The words of Pastor Carl don't process in her brain. As much as she tries to concentrate on his words, not many make it through. When everyone goes on their knees, the words *Are you happy?* settle in her head. She holds onto the gold cross necklace resting on her chest, her grip practically crushing it. *Am I happy?* She tries to push the question away, as she tries to tell God to protect her family, but the question pops up again in her mother's voice.

Praying was always there for her, bringing her mind at ease when she couldn't rely on anyone else. But now, Martin and her family stole this relief from her. She wonders if God can hear the war inside her head right now.

This is the third time in her life that she couldn't pray. The first time was when she was twenty-two, and she had just peed on a stick or two, hoping that the two pink lines weren't real. Yet there they were staring back at her, and fear that was always there appeared.

Maggie always kept pregnancy tests hidden underneath her socks and underwear drawers out of paranoia. Secretly scared to have a child more than anything in her life. The responsibility and the idea she could corrupt someone tormented her. She was sure she couldn't pray then because God could hear the dark thoughts that not even she wanted to hear.

The second time was when she had Julie. When she wanted to pray for a healthy baby, but she couldn't. She started forming her words in her head, but her mind knew the truth. She bet God could sense all the fear running through her body, every doubt, and insecurity. Back then, she thought of talking to her mother about her fears. But how could her mother understand these thoughts in her head?

Maggie looks at Pastor Carl and wonders if he knows that she feels out of place in this room. That she doesn't even know who she is. Maggie rubs the small beads on her necklace and slowly exhales.

She closes her eyes and attempts to pray again. She doesn't tell God to take care of her daughter or Martin. She decides to speak to him about herself.

"God," she says in her head. "Things were supposed to be easy. I was supposed to fall in love and live the life I wanted. But that's not the path you gave me. You gave me my daughter, who I have come to love more than anything else in the world. That night, I came to you, with my eyes drenched and my thoughts running a mile. I was supposed to do so much, college, become a nurse, and make my family proud. Instead, you gave me a family. I spent the day contemplating if I should give her life. That was entirely selfish of me. But I didn't do it. God,

you are testing me again. I find myself looking at my husband and feeling jealous. He knows who he is. He got everything he ever wanted for his own life. You see God. You took something from me, or maybe I stopped trying. I just want to remember what it's like to worry about myself more than others. I know this is selfish, but do me a favor, forgive me for wanting more. Forgive me for wanting to remember who I am."

Maggie opens her eyes, her truth finally being released into the air as she lets out a sigh, all these words she has wanted to say for years but couldn't. She doesn't even know when she began to give her life only to her family. Maybe when her life started to feel mute.

She pulls open the church doors, and she feels the cold wind of the night flow through her tight curls; they lose up a bit, just like the rest of her. *What can she do now that her thoughts are free?*

\*\*\*

They are playing deep relaxation music here to further the experience. When Maggie looked at the site earlier, she didn't expect to come here. The slogan "Forget Your Worries at Healthy Minds" felt too close to home not to.

The woman at the desk greets her and asks her how many days she would stay here. She decides on five days, and the woman proceeds to tell her all the rules and information. "All hot spas are open from 8 am to 9 pm. Extra towels are in each bathroom for guests. Make sure to be respectful to the other guest."

Maggie shouldn't have lied to Martin about coming here instead of her mother's, but she couldn't stand to be near anyone right now. She knew they couldn't possibly understand the feeling she is going through.

“Also, no cell phones. We will store them in our office until your last day here,” the woman continues. She waits for Maggie to respond back, and when she doesn't, the woman clears her throat to catch Maggie's attention. "Your phone, mam, we promise to keep it safe."

Finally, realizing what the women said. She searches through her purse, looking for it. At first, Maggie is hesitant to release her phone but then drops it in the woman's palm.

The woman takes it to the back room and returns with her hands empty.

"All that is left is payment." The woman gestures to the card machine in front of her. She looks at the cards in her wallet, the expense already burning her purse. She swipes that card with firmness, imagining this is how Martin did it all the time.

She spends the next few days bathing and soaking her body, finally in harmony with it. The worries of the last few days appearing in her head ever so faintly. When they did appear, she would go to one of the resort's events or package deals to forget about it.

She likes how the hot water burns on her skin and melts away her thoughts. She is just starting to get used to it here, as she notices she only has a few days left. At some point, she even debates about extending her stay.

In this resort, nothing could find her, not even people gossiping about the news or the tv reporting on Martin's case. She loved that there was no technology here, only her, nature, and steamy baths. The only thing that can haunt her is her mind. Without her phone with her, Maggie finds herself thinking of Julie and if she is okay. Out of everyone, she is the one she misses the most. She didn't want Julie to worry about her. She is too young for that.

It is her last day here, and she no longer feels guilty for lying because she felt a form of freedom, much different from when she was at the sculpture park or eating the burger or even watching tv at home. It could be that the relaxation music is finally getting to her head or the



steam clouding her nerve, but she felt like she is communicating with her inner self in this moment of clarity. Although, her daughter never left her mind, and she prayed for her to be okay every day they were apart.

When she leaves, the woman at the resort hands her phone, and she realizes how much it weighed her down. Her phone takes a moment to turn back on, her messages still not coming through.

She waits in her car. As the messages start to come through, many are from Martin worried about her and begging her to come back.

A familiar ring comes from her phone, and Maggie expects it to be Martin calling to ask her to come home. But when Maggie glances at her phone, it isn't Martin but an unknown number. She thinks about declining the call, but then she picks up just in case.

The voice takes a second before speaking. It's a young voice, a female voice, a voice she never heard before. "Hello, this is Sandra speaking from Family Health Center. Is this Maggie Williams speaking?" the voice asks.

Maggie clings onto the phone harder as if the voice will come stronger to her this way. "Yes, that's me."

"Can you please come to the Emergency Center? Your daughter is here with us?"

*Her daughter, Julie, is in the hospital.*

"Is she alone?"

"No, mam."

"I'll be right there."

She drove to the hospital with socks and sandals and no recollection of how she got here, except that she hit every red light and the cars wouldn't move any faster.

The same fear that she felt when Julie was born fills her body, only worst this time, with a burning sensation taking over her whole body. She enters the emergency portion of the hospital in a frenzy and halts when she sees the line to the front desk. People are lined up near the windows waiting to be called on. There are three people ahead of her in the line for the front desk. She wishes she can cut them all and walk in to see her daughter. She couldn't imagine how scared Julie is right now. The receptionist is calm and collected. He instructs each person to the right section of the hospital until it's Maggie's turn.

Maggie's voice sounds broken, as if she forgot how to speak. But then the words finally form. "I'm here for my daughter, Julie Williams."

The receptionist types on his computer and makes her spell out the name just in case. She tastes a metallic tinge on her lips from biting her lips too hard. She is thinking about everything that can be possibly be happening behind the Metal doors. When he finds the info, he simply says room 409. To Maggie, these mean words mean more to her than her own life.

Through the metal door, people are crowding the halls. She reads the signs until she finds the one with 409 written on the side. Julie is not there when she enters, but Martin is sitting in the chair, looking down on the floor. His hair covering his eyes.

"Martin, What happened?"

When he looks up, his eyes are blazing red. "Maggie," he says in a fragile voice. "You're back."

She looms over him, "What happened to Julie?"

"She fell."

"She fell? What? Where did she fall?"

"Why did you leave us alone, Maggie?"

Maggie leans down to the floor and cups Martin's face. "I know we're not okay right now, but this isn't the right time for this. I need you to tell me what happened to my daughter?" Maggie's face is stern, just like her voice. Right now, she doesn't care about talking to her husband about the last few days. She needs to know what happened to Julie.

"She fell off the trampoline, Maggie."

"What trampoline?"

"The one my mother bought her."

She slumps down in the chair next to Martin with her head low.

"I left her with you," Maggie says in a slight whisper. "And now she's here. Where did they take her, Martin?"

"Surgery."

"I left her with you, and now she's in surgery."

"Why did you leave me alone?"

"Don't blame this on me."

"Aren't you already blaming this on me?" His voice doesn't waver. It's the strongest it's been since she entered the room.

"I never said such things."

"You don't have to."

They sit like this for a while. Maggie will hear the clinking sound of Martin's shoes hitting the floor as he shakes his legs, trying to release his anxieties every couple of minutes. Sometimes, She would look out the door for a distraction and see nurses walking about the area.

If she made it out of school, she could have been a nurse here. She would have friends here who would check up on her daughter. They would come in and give her hours updates to

make sure she was okay. She might know what is wrong with Julie. But Maggie never made it that far, and now maybe Julie wouldn't either.

Maggie breaks the silence. "What kind of surgery did they say she needed?"

"Cervical."

She repeats that one word over and over in her head, hoping her knowledge of cervical surgery is somewhere deep in her mind, but she can't find the information she is looking for. All she can do is wait.

The clock seems to keep moving, and no one has come in to talk to them. She isn't sure if that good news or bad news. Maggie is about to ask one of the nurses at the desk when a woman in green scrubs walks into the room. Maggie gets up from her chair immediately. Martin follows her lead.

The surgical doctor takes a moment to speak, or it feels like a long pause to Maggie, but when the doctor does, the words don't register. The doctor starts with the word surgery and then follows it with complications. She says a big word Quadriplegia, several times. She begins to mention sections of the cervical spine, C1-C4, as if she knows what she means. When she asks for clarification, the doctor shows her a diagram that demonstrates the parts of the cervical spine. She shows her parts near the neck. Maggie and Martin both nod as if they are registering the words from the doctor. She reassures them she is here to explain this again, constantly checking if they are okay.

When she is done speaking, she looks at Martin and asks the question they both are wondering. "What does it mean?"

She responds with a line she obviously preferred not to say. "Your daughter's cervical nerves are not functioning. She is completely paralyzed."

Maggie isn't sure how her hands reached the cold white tiled floor so quickly, but they did. She is in fetal position breathing into her knees. She can feel her chest rising and lowering against her thighs as she tries to catch her breath. How could this happen? And how could it happen to her daughter?