sleeps with my girlfriend so he gets kicked out too. Rooms move around, Zach takes the larger room and we look for someone to take Jeff’s room. Sean moves in and he trashes the house over Christmas break. He goes home from college and Chris moves in. After two years the walls are caked with bad psychic energy, or at least that’s what Meredith says.

I’m home for a little bit, staying with my parents. My mom’s worse off after back surgery and dealing with her medication load for schizoaffective disorder. We’re sitting on the back porch smoking cigarettes. The backyard is a mess of snow and unraked leaves, dirty wet piles of interseasonal procrastination. My mom turns to me and asks, “What did he say to you?” and I ask her who and she responds and says, “The man whispering in your ear.” The little girl playing under the bed and the man who whispers used to scare me. Now they just make me worry.

There’re some phone calls where you just know somehow about the whirlwind of fuck on the other end before you even answer. The earth-quivering moments where you lose the ability to stand for a minute. Your knees buck. And you don’t feel the sharp rocks in the gravel driveway cut holes in your jeans to slice at your legs. Everything will sound tiny and far away on the phone call. The sound of your father’s voice will sound like someone else with a pitch and tone like you’ve never heard your entire life. Someone will drive you somewhere and you won’t really remember where you were going. But you’ll remember the pine trees in the valley north of your home and the way they looked blurring together through tears and motion while you leave yourself because you know it’s the first time but won’t be the last.

“It’s really coming down out there, isn’t it?”

The plate was already clean, but her soapy, cloth-covered hand kept circling it, slowly. It was the last dish. Once it was dry, she would be done. “Maybe we should head out now, before it gets worse.”

An inaudible sigh. She placed the dish on the drying towel beside the sink, then turned her back to it. He stood on the other side of the room before the window, a dark silhouette against the thick white snow that fell on the other side of the glass. The cold of it could be felt even over the heated room.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she finally said.

He turned his head in her direction, begging for an explanation. Brown eyes followed her fumbling hands as she dried the remaining droplets on her dark blue jeans, clumsily clambering for her cell phone in her back pocket.

“It’s only eight,” she said, glimpsing at her cracked screen. “There’s no need to rush. Besides,” she continued, “the snow’s supposed to stop soon, anyway.” She opened her weather app to confirm, but got lost in her lists of cities whose forecasts, as of now, did not matter.

When she looked up again, he was fully facing her, his back against the window, his arms crossed over his chest. He wanted to say something, she knew he did, but he wouldn’t. Jonah was notorious for that. There was something in his eyes that carefully bore into hers. Sadness, maybe frustration. Most likely both.

“Fine,” he answered after a while. He pushed off the wall and started across the room. “I’ll go take a shower, then.”

“Jonah—”

“It’s fine, El,” he continued, passing her. “We’ll head out after I get out. The snow should be done by then, right?”

“Your hair will freeze again.” Her voice was becoming desperate. She wished she would have just agreed.

“I’ll wear a hat.” He said that every time.

The bathroom door shut loudly behind him, and while she tried to convince herself it was accidental, she wasn’t sure. The apartment was silent for a couple of long, dreadful moments, before the sound of the starting shower washed it away.

She exhaled.
Her lungs forgot how to function in that moment, but her heart seemed to be working overtime, purposefully pumping blood everywhere from her overthinking brain to her trembling fingertips that tenaciously grasped the little black box. Opened.

Their spare room that was not long ago filled to the brim with oversized boxes, now only held one small enough to fit in her jacket pocket. Still, she had never felt more claustrophobic in her life.

From the other room, she heard the shower water come to an abrupt stop. She snapped the velvet box shut, ignoring the blinding gleam of the diamond within its miniscule walls. Ellie placed it back into the drawer where she found it and hurried out of the small room, only moments before Jonah emerged from the bathroom.

“Would you look at that.” The towel around his waist was briefly adjusted, his wet hair almost reaching his shoulders.

Ellie couldn’t bring herself to look away. It was as though he was at the end of a long, dark hallway, as if they were not even in the same room. She scratched at her second finger behind her back.

“I guess you were right.”

She was confused for a moment, following his gaze over to the foggy window. It had stopped snowing.

She didn’t know if she wanted to be right.

He didn’t wear a hat. Had the circumstances been different, she would have pointed this out to him, playfully scolding him, reminding him that it was the best way to catch a cold even though the entire time they had been together, Jonah had never been sick. She said nothing.

They walked in silence for a while, and instead of attempting to decipher her thoughts, Ellie focused on her footsteps. Snow covered the ground, thick as a white down comforter that was likely in a storage unit overthinking brain to her trembling fingertips that tenaciously grasped the little black box. Opened.

Almost complete silence. They had not spoken since they left the apartment, but unlike countless times before, this was not a silence that either of them was comfortable with.

“This feels off,” Jonah finally said, breaking the silence. He must have thought that saying the obvious would make it less true in a way, but he was wrong. “Everything about this right now is weird.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Ellie answered, only because she didn’t know what else to say.

Jonah looked over at her for the first time that walk. “You can’t make it normal, Ellie.” She knew that, of course—but it hurt hearing it from him. “It’s not like before. It never will be.”

Almost-silence overtook them again, broken only by their footsteps, slightly out of sync. Her eyes did not leave her feet, treading carefully, knowing that there was a thick layer of ice hiding beneath the snow. Two blocks.

They didn’t try to talk to each other for a while after that. Neither of them wanted to confront what would happen the next day, or what might have happened if things had turned out differently. Most of all, they didn’t want to confront what was happening now—the distance growing between them on a walk they knew more than any other. Glove-covered hands intertwined with one another were replaced with cold hands in coat pockets. A loving photograph being slowly ripped in two. Three blocks.

Ellie looked up sharply at the distant sound of a cackling laughter. It was faded, almost echoing, but it was there nonetheless. It had to be ahead of them—that was about all she could tell. She looked up and squinted into the snow-covered street, but found nothing. In that brief moment, all awkwardness between her and Jonah went to the back of her mind. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” he answered, as if he were pulled from deep thoughts. He looked up and over to her in one solid motion.

“Someone was laughing,” Ellie told him, still trying to find the source of the noise. “Did you hear it?”

Jonah, too, put the awkwardness behind him for a moment. “No,” he replied, but he knew that his answer was not what she was looking for. He reached for her hand. “It was probably from one of the houses. People are still up, it’s not even ten yet.” As she looked at him, he squeezed her hand, a reassuring smile across his lips. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

She nodded, allowing herself to be pulled closer to him. For a moment, things felt normal.

Half a block to go. Ellie and Jonah walked briskly together, their hands still connected, but not as tightly as before. Three and a half blocks.

The air shifted. Ellie stopped abruptly and turned to look over her shoulder. It had felt as though someone had walked past her, their shoulder almost brushing hers, but looking behind her, she found no one. She and Jonah were completely alone out there in the freshly fallen snow.

“You alright, Ellie?”

Ellie watched the corner, as if by doing so, she’d find the nonexistent
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“Yeah,” she said. She turned to look at Jonah, giving him a soft smile. “I’m okay.”

He squeezed her hand again, and this time, she squeezed back. They walked together through the untouched snow.

“Eloise fucking Fitzpatrick, how dare you leave us.”

They had barely gotten the chance to close the door before Ben, a close friend of theirs from the beginning of college, wrapped his arms around both of them. The half-empty wine glass in his left hand nearly spilled onto Ellie’s jacket, but he was somehow able to control it. Ben had an amazing sense of balance, even when he was drunk.

“Oh, no need to make her feel bad,” came a soft voice from within the house. Margo came from the kitchen, three glasses filled nearly to the brim with red wine balanced in her two hands. Even sober, she could not balance nearly as well as her husband. Red droplets splashed onto the hard-wood floor. “We’re celebrating.”

Ellie glanced over to Jonah, but he was too focused on getting the packed snow off of his boots.

“It’s all happened so fast, hasn’t it?” Margo started, minutes later. The four of them sat around the small living room with their wineglasses, as they had done countless times before. But, like the walk over here, it felt off. This would be the last time.

She nodded, taking a small sip of her wine. “I got the job only a month ago, and I’m already about to leave.”

“Austria,” Margo said in genuine awe. Ellie knew she had always wanted to travel the world, but was much too afraid to.


“No, they speak German over there,” answered Jonah.

Ellie watched as he placed his glass on the coffee table and turned to Ben. They started their own conversation, lamenting about the German class the two of them were in their first year. Ellie took another sip of the bitter wine.

“Why don’t I fill you up, El?” came Margo.

Ellie looked over to her with a bit of confusion—she had only drunk half of her glass—but could quickly tell that that was not Margo’s true intention. She followed her into the kitchen.

As soon as they were around the corner, Margo wrapped her arms around her friend.

“Something’s not right between you and Jonah,” she observed. Ellie was taken aback. Margo was normally oblivious to that kind of thing unless it was really bad, and she had hoped it wouldn’t be that bad.

“I’m moving halfway across the world tomorrow.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s the end for you two. You’ve done long distance before.”

“It’s different this time,” Ellie told her. “I don’t know when, or even if I’ll come back.”

“But you love him, don’t you?”

Ellie’s heart sank. She looked down at her ring finger, imagining what it would be like to have a thin, tan line at the base of it, what it would be like to have a little extra weight on it. “More than anything,” she answered.

“Then you guys will find a way to make it work,” she finished. “I know you will.”

Ellie took a deep breath, Margo’s frail hand on her middle back, comforting her. She nodded, and began to follow her friend back into the living room.

To stay or to go. It was a decision she had already made, but every day, every second since making it, she had questioned it. Her dream job as a museum curator started in Vienna. She knew she couldn’t pass it up. But she had a life here, a life with someone she loved more than the world itself. How could she be so selfish as to give that up?

“Can we talk for a moment, El?”

She looked into the brown eyes she would have to leave tomorrow. Margo continued into the living room as Jonah led Ellie back into the kitchen.

He took a shaky breath, as he finally came forth to say what he wanted to say. “I’ve been an asshole.”

“No, Jonah—”

“Really, Ellie, I have.” His eyes were cloudy. It broke Ellie’s heart to watch him like that. “It’s your last day here, and all I’ve done was think about what it’d be like when you’re gone instead of being with you while you’re still here. You don’t deserve that.”

Tears welled in her own eyes as she latched onto him, holding him tighter than she had ever held him before. He returned it. “I can’t bear the idea of leaving you,” she cried into the shirt she had bought him.

She wondered what would have happened if he had knelt down before her then and pulled out that little, black box. She wondered what she would say.

Hours later, Ellie said her goodbyes to Ben and Margo. As she and Jonah walked down their driveway, Jonah squeezed her hand. “No more tears tonight.” He wiped away the single droplet. “We made a promise.”

Ellie smiled. That was four glasses of wine ago. She interlocked their pinkies, as they had done when they made that promise, and smiled at him. “No more tears tonight.”

At the end of their driveway, the two of them turned, and walked back the way they came. “Hey look,” Ellie said, pointing to the lone footprints on the sidewalk. “We made those.”

Jonah grinned, letting go of her hand. She watched him curiously as
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He found his past footsteps and began retracing them, walking clumsily backward. Ellie let out a cackling laugh when he nearly slipped. Jonah was just happy he could make her smile again.

She grabbed his hand tightly and pulled him into her, briefly kissing his cold lips, then each of his cheeks. “You didn’t wear a hat,” she commented.

“Guess my hair’s gonna freeze.” He smiled.

They walked together, hand in hand, walking alongside the footsteps of their past selves. Ellie tried her hardest to keep her mind on the past, knowing that if she thought about the future, even about the next twelve hours, she would dissolve into silence again.

She nuzzled her hair into Jonah’s shoulder and whispered softly, “I love you.”

“I know,” he answered. “I love you, too.”

They were hardly half a block away from Ben and Margo’s when she saw them. Two dark figures, loosely holding hands, walking in almost complete silence. Hey, she wanted to tell them. Don’t think about it. Be together, and don’t think about what’s ahead of you.

They walked past each other, Ellie’s shoulder nearly bumping into the stranger’s. She stopped and turned her head in their direction, watching their retreating figures. She almost recognized them.

“You alright, Ellie?”

Slowly, her head cleared. She knew those retreating figures, and she pitied them. They would have to see the morning light. They would have to say goodbye.

“Yeah,” she said. She turned to look at Jonah, giving him a soft smile. “I’m okay.”

He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back. They walked together through the untouched snow.