

WHAT WE LEFT UNSAID

A NOVEL



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AUTHOR OF *COMPLICIT*

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WHAT WE LEFT UNSAID

A Novel

WINNIE M LI

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

ATRIA

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

To my Mom

Who has given us as much as she can, For as long as she can

PROLOGUE

1991

Somewhere in Arizona

What Alex mainly remembers is the dust. Or maybe, it is somehow easier and safer to ignore the memory itself, shrouded in the haze of her childhood, and think only of the inescapable dust. Getting up her nostrils, under her fingernails. Sifting in through the car window, when she rolled it down a crack to peer at the blue sky beyond.

She was eight years old, and they had stopped the car at some gas station in the middle of the wide, flat desert. Back then, her family drove a beige station wagon. The kind of color they don't make cars in anymore, nor the kind of shape, either. It wasn't a car that inspired great love or adoration in any member of their family—although she hesitates now, wondering if her thirtysomething mom and dad had swelled with joy when they'd handed a check over to the salesman at the car dealership sometime in the 1980s and received a set of keys in return. At the time, it would have been their brand-new family car. At one point, it would have shone, undented. An object of pride.

Like everything in their family now, the car was functional. It got them from A to B, from home to school, to the supermarket, to piano lessons, to soccer practice. And on rare occasions, on longer trips like this, to places like the Grand Canyon.

That day when she was eight, the car had jolted and rolled over miles of interstate, green signs whipping past. Squashed next to her sister and brother in the back seat, Alex had sat through it all, wide-eyed and then later, sleepy-eyed. But always soaking in the miles and miles of emptiness that bordered the highway. Dry, dusty scrubland with nothing to see except for the exit ramps leading to towns she would never actually visit, but occasionally glimpse: a cluster of buildings in the distance, housing subdivisions starting to speckle the land.

Watching all of this, what struck her most was a sense of wonder that there could be so much land. This was America: miles of it rolling in every direction, and however far their car traveled, there would always be more. Sea to shining sea, as they sang in school. If they kept driving on the interstate, how far would it take them? All the way to the Atlantic Ocean? If they picked any one of these exit ramps, what would they discover? There were probably hundreds of them branching off this highway alone. It boggled the mind, to be confronted with the vastness of this landscape.

Somewhere in Arizona, they rolled off one of these exit ramps and left the interstate. Their beige station wagon joined a stream of other cars on a smaller highway north, and there were signs here and there mentioning the Grand Canyon.

“Not too far now!” Her dad glanced back at them, exhorting them in that embarrassing, singsong voice he used when trying to get them excited.

“Aiya, look!” Her mom tapped the gasoline dial in frustration. She muttered something in Taiwanese, and Alex knew it was a reminder to fill up the gas. The arrow was at less than half a tank.

Then followed an irritable exchange between their parents in Taiwanese. She didn’t need to understand it to know what they were saying. Mom always wanted Dad to fill up the gas once it reached halfway. Dad always said that was too soon.

The car trundled along in the desert heat, the sun climbed higher in the sky.

They passed a few gas stations, eyeing the price of gas.

“A dollar twenty-two! So expensive!”

“No, we can find cheaper,” Mom said.

Finally, they saw one where gas was remarkably cheap: \$1.14 a gallon. Alex didn’t recognize the brand—it wasn’t one of those familiar, colorful logos like Mobil with the winged red horse or Shell with the yellow clamshell. Just a dusty, no-name gas station, a hand-painted sign out front, faded in the desert sun.

Dad turned off the highway, the car jolting over ruts and holes in the macadam.

Two men sat out front, and stared at them, unsmiling.

Otherwise, the place was empty.

“Um... do they work here?” Kevin asked, watching the two men warily. They were white and what you might call “grizzled”: cowboy hats pulled low, blue-jeaned legs splayed out, their boots in the dust. Very unlike anyone Alex had seen in Orange County.

Dad parked the car in front of a gas pump and turned off the ignition. The car keys dangled and swung from behind the steering wheel.

“Well, we fill up the gas anyway.”

He shrugged and started to get out of the car.

The two men continued to stare at him.

Alex watched as Dad motioned to the gas pump and their car.

“I just fill up here, okay?” He shouted this to the two men, who looked back in silence. Alex was very conscious of her dad’s accent, his willingness to please. She saw how the two men grinned slowly, as if there were an unspoken joke.

“That’s what it’s there for,” one of the men shouted back. “Just make sure you pay for it.” Not mean, not serious. One of those un-funny jokes men sometimes make to fill up the space.

“Oh, ha ha, of course I pay for it.” Dad attempted to laugh back. The sun glinted off his wire-framed glasses.

But Alex felt the fear coursing beneath the glare of the sun.

“We got our eyes on you,” the man said. Again, posed lightly as if it were a joke. Suddenly, she was ashamed. She no longer wanted to be there in that hot, strange gas station, staring through the dusty windshield at the two men.

Dad started to fill up the car. Alex heard the whir and the chug as gasoline poured into their tank. The men kept staring.

“I have—I have to go to the bathroom,” Kevin said, nudging Mom.

“You wait until your dad finish, then you go with him together.” There was a protective note in Mom’s voice, as if she too sensed danger in the air.

“I have to go, too,” Bonnie said. “Do you think the bathroom will be gross?”

“Aiya, can’t you wait?” Mom asked.

“No, Mom, it’s my...” Bonnie looked around, then her voice quieted. “I think it might come any day.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Alex asked. Why did Bonnie have to be so secretive about things sometimes? Bonnie glanced at her but didn’t say anything.

Mom let out an exasperated sigh. “Okay, okay,” she relented.

Alex still had no idea what Bonnie meant. She hated being left out, when everyone older than her spoke in this mysterious kind of code.

Mom instructed Bonnie. “You and me, we go together. Kevin, your dad finish filling the gas, so you and him to go men’s room. Alex, you need to go bathroom, too?”

Alex saw her dad hanging the nozzle back on the gas pump, taking a used tissue from his pocket and wiping the rim around the car’s fuel tank, before snapping the little door shut. He seemed to hesitate, uncertain about crossing over to the building to pay.

“Yeah, you coming, or you just gonna staaaaayyyy?” Kevin taunted her as he slid toward the open back door.

“No, I—I’ll stay,” Alex said, looking at them.

“You sure?” Mom asked as she got out of the car. She leaned down toward Alex, her face in shadow, her body blocking the sun. “We not stopping again till we get to the Grand Canyon.”

“Yeah, I’ll stay.” Alex nodded. Something in her told her to stay clear of those men. She’d rather be here, in the car on her own. As far from them as possible.

“Okay.” Mom nodded. “Stay right here. Don’t get out of the car.”

She wanted to tell them not to go, too. But the gas had to be paid for, and they needed to use the bathroom.

Alex watched as the rest of her family crossed the broken macadam toward the gas station building. They were four slight figures, and the desert heat rose from the ground, distorting them so they looked wavy.

She pushed down the locks on all four of the car doors. And waited.

PRESENT DAY

Bonnie

WEST OF BOSTON

Bonnie is the first of them to hear it, of course. She is in her expansive kitchen—the New England spring ripening into summer, just outside the floor-to-ceiling windows—when she gets the phone call from her father. It is Sunday afternoon, the usual time for her weekly video call with her parents. What is unusual is the absence of her mother.

When the familiar rectangle flickers to life on her iPad, only her dad sits in front of the camera. He looks bereft, like an empty rowboat adrift.

“Hey Dad,” Bonnie says. She glances outside the window, where Henry and Milo stand on their vast green lawn, forlornly tossing a baseball. Her middle son, Max, rests leopard-like on his favorite thick branch of the maple tree. Choosing to be on his own, as usual.

Dad doesn’t say anything for a prolonged moment—or perhaps it’s the Wi-Fi signal glitching. Then he clears his throat.

“Dad?” Bonnie frowns at the screen. “You okay?”

She studies him a second longer.

“Where’s Mom?”

■ ■ ■ ■

Harold Chu, seventy five years old, coughs a second time in his home in Irvine, California. He traces a quivering index finger across his touchscreen, as if this already near-magical device could miraculously draw his oldest daughter into his room, to sit right beside him, her warm hand squeezing his. But there’s only the hard tap on the scratch-resistant glass, shiny but unyielding.

He summons up the words in English.

“Your mother... she’s not good. She’s had a kind of stroke.”

■ ■ ■ ■

Bonnie suddenly stands very still, her kitchen surroundings, the birdsong and sunlight falling away. She leans on the granite-topped island—and it is an island indeed, stranded amid an ocean of rigid surfaces, expensive tiling, and gleaming, high-tech appliances. Offering her a place to lean upright, but little comfort.

Her worst fear. The kind of news she always dreaded would arrive someday.

“What do you mean? A kind of stroke?”

Bonnie’s mouth has taken on a life of its own, emitting a series of panicked questions, while her mind arches out on a freewheeling trajectory, imagining the worst. Pursuing a single overriding realization: *I never got to organize that seventieth birthday she wanted.*

Her dad shrugs and shakes his head at the same time—a gesture he has always made, for as long as she can remember. The essence of her dad, resigned and hapless.

“It’s a ministroke,” he says, edging around the gap in his language. “There’s a medical term for it, but I don’t remember. She stumbled and couldn’t speak or move... At least we didn’t have to wait too long for an ambulance.”

“An ambulance?!” Bonnie curses herself. She shouldn’t have postponed that birthday celebration for her mom. Were the strains of raising three healthy sons in complete financial comfort that taxing on her? What an ungrateful daughter she was. “Where is she now?”

“The hospital. They’re monitoring her until tomorrow.”

Harold Chu opens and closes his mouth a few times with no utterance, like a beached fish gasping for water.

Keep it together, Dad, Bonnie thinks. *Don’t cry on me.* Because it would be too embarrassing if her seventy-five-year-old father burst into tears right now. Not for her. But a further humiliation for him, with his old-world mentality.

Harold Chu’s eyes are watering now, and Bonnie can see it through the FaceTime call. “They’re scheduling a procedure...”

Without realizing it, Bonnie has slid down to the cold gleaming floor, her back against the base of the kitchen island. Almost as if she were hiding, out of sight from any adults who might come stalking into the room.

Forty-six years old. Forty-six. She is an adult. With kids of her own. She should be able to handle this. She could handle it when Henry broke his arm falling off his first mountain bike, when Milo had his tuberculosis scare... But with her own mother, the fear is childlike, primal. Undercut with an indefinable guilt.

Get it together, Bonnie. Clients used to be charged hundreds per hour for your expertise. Strategy is your thing.

“Okay, okay,” she says to her dad, nodding and processing. “Do you want me to fly out? Someone needs to look after you, too.”

“No, no, Bonnie, you can’t.” Harold Chu holds up a hand, protesting weakly. Something shifts in him, an attempt to regain some form of authority. He straightens up. “Mommy wants to talk to all of you tomorrow. A Zoom call. Do you think you can do that?”

“Uh, sure, whatever you want.” Bonnie scrambles to readjust to Dad’s laconic demands. “What time?”

“Two p.m. our time. That’s five for you. Can you tell your brother and sister?”

“Wait, you want me to...? Uh, sure.”

Bonnie is taken aback by how prescriptive this all is. Behind the scenes, she can imagine Mom dictating the appointment time from her hospital bed.

“Just like that? That’s the time?”

“Yes.” Dad nods, all trace of his previous weakness gone. “You their big sister. Call them now, tell them to come onto Zoom tomorrow.”

“Sure.” Bonnie nods, ever obedient. As if it were as simple as shouting up the stairs to them to announce dinner’s ready.

But the reluctance pours in, thick and deadening.

Her mind flicks ahead, calculating time zones. Kevin’s an hour behind her, no problem there. And Alex... It must be nine p.m. where Alex is. If indeed Alex is still in London. Bonnie can’t remember the last time she spoke to her younger sister. Or she does, but it’s a memory that barely contains any substance, just a faint outline of a conversation.

Alex is like a homing beacon, bleeping fainter and fainter. Bonnie wonders why she's let her drift so far.

Kevin

NORTH OF CHICAGO

Thirty minutes. That's all he needed: thirty minutes to escape his wife and kids. To recuperate, remind himself he was a man and that there was a wholeness, an essence to Kevin Chu—that could exist outside his family.

Jessica had been on his case for months now. Years, even. He was guilty of evading her, that much was true. But he felt such a pure, bracing resentment toward his wife, he couldn't explain it.

It wouldn't have been so embarrassing if it weren't such a cliché. The Midlife Crisis of the Asian American Dad. Life in the suburbs. A five-bedroom split-level, 55 percent of its value still being paid by a monthly mortgage that would persist for the next decade or two. Two cars. Two kids. A lawn that demanded regular mowing and watering before the neighbors started to make snide comments, casually recommend a gardening service.

In his teens he had heard about midlife crises, these fabled traumas that prompted gray-haired men to purchase inappropriate red sports cars, ditch the mother of their children for some hot, nubile blond. He was not that pathetic. Plus, sports cars were terribly fuel inefficient. And hot young blond women, regardless of how alluring their bodies and faces were, probably made for mind-numbingly dull conversation. There was no longer any appeal to the stereotypical all-American girl he would have simultaneously lusted for and resented throughout his horny youth.

No, Kevin Chu would not resort to such clichés.

But thirty minutes was all he was asking for. Close your eyes, turn on some good music—something like Phish or Led Zeppelin or heck, even the wailing refrains of Counting Crows, something to remind him of his earlier, carefree days. And divorce his brain from any thoughts of school drop-offs, or emails from his boss, or the grim,

unmentionable state of his finances. Thirty minutes in what Jessica snipingly called his “man cave.” Was that so difficult to grant?

Jessica had started shouting something or the other about an extended family picnic with her parents and siblings that weekend, but he retired to his room, pretending he hadn’t heard her.

Just shut the door.

Turn off the lights.

Lean back in the padded bliss of his leather power recliner.

And look up at the stars.

What Brian, his seven-year-old, hadn’t noticed—and certainly not Jessica—was that he had slyly purchased an identical extra set of glow-in-the-dark stars when they were redecorating his son’s room last year. Little did his family know, he had spent a neck-wrenching hour here and there affixing the stars to the ceiling of his den, faithfully recreating the constellations displayed on his phone’s astronomy app. Ursa Major. Ursa Minor. Cassiopeia. And good-old Orion, the unmistakable three stars of his belt, beckoning from the ceiling of his study, the same way they had from the night sky in his childhood.

Completing those constellations had earned him an unexpected feeling of satisfaction, even more so because none of his family knew. It was his secret universe.

Of course, they didn’t look nearly as awe-inspiring in glow-in-the-dark sticker form. But Kevin had learned not to expect genuine awe or rapture in his adult life anymore. The supermarket version, ordered on Amazon Prime, and slid out from its mass-produced plastic wrap packaging, was the best he could hope for these days.

Still, it offered some semblance of respite. Forget the rest of the world. Turn your eyes skyward.

And escape.

* * * *

But he has only been sitting in the dark for nine minutes (not thirty) when his wife comes knocking on the door. Rap-rap-rap.

He stays silent.

Rap-rap-rap. Then a huffed exhale. “Kevin! Turn down the music!”

He turns down the music.

“What do you want?” he asks, audibly peeved.

“I’ve been shouting for you for ages! It’s your sister on the phone!”

He pats his pockets in alarm, looking for his phone. He should remember never to leave it in another room.

“She’s on the landline!”

Why? Only his parents and scammers call the landline these days. So, either constant remonstrations or swindlers after your money.

A second later he finds his phone (which he’s put on silent) and notices three missed calls from his sister. And a few texts. He squints at his screen, too bright in his artificially dark cave.

Hey are you there? Call me. It's urgent.

Then:

It's something to do with Mom.

That single syllable, and the deluge of guilt. His mom, whom he should be calling every week at the very least. Whom he should email on more than just her birthday and Mother’s Day, the frenzied last-minute surfing of the 1-800-Flowers website, clicking on an exorbitantly priced Luxury Mother’s Love Bouquet, because that at least could temporarily quell his remorse about being a bad son.

“What’s going on with Mom?” he asks a moment later when he’s called Bonnie.

“It’s some kind of stroke.”

In moments like these, Kevin regrets not having gone to medical school. He had enrolled in premed courses for the first two years of college, all ready to fulfill his parents’ dreams of having a Son, M.D. But the coursework was too much, he grew lazy. And it was the sense of responsibility that intimidated him: the Hippocratic Oath and

everything it required of him. One wrong diagnosis, one slip of the scalpel, and a patient's life could be over.

Now, at forty-two, he has friends who are doctors, ranging from esteemed cardiac surgeons at highly ranked hospitals to general practitioners who coddle whimpering babies and doddering seniors alike. He shuddered at his friends' tales of grueling med school rotations, and then residencies that seemed to last forever in various hospital outposts, further and further specializations that demanded more years, more sleep deprivation.

These days, two decades into his career, he likely earns as much money as those doctor friends. But his job as an insurance underwriter doesn't command the same kind of societal respect. And he doesn't have their medical knowledge. The kind of expertise that could prove very handy now, when his own mother sits tubed up in a faraway ICU. At least to understand the situation, to fully grasp the implications and the possible outcomes, instead of plunging into the blind fear that he now swims in.

"Man, we are horrible Asian kids," Kevin says to Bonnie. "*Three* of us. And not one of us became a doctor."

"Well, not one of us wanted to be a doctor."

"Yeah, you wanted to be a lawyer, I wanted to be an astronaut. And Alex wanted to be... well, it depended on the day with her."

"An actress," Bonnie says, as if to challenge Kevin's sarcasm. She was always leaping to Alex's defense, even now, when Alex lives thousands of miles away, not giving a fuck. "She always wanted to be an actress. I guess of all of us, she got the closest to her childhood dreams."

"Not that it matters anymore. I mean, we're the ones who are gonna pay Mom's medical bill," Kevin points out. "Which reminds me, do you know what kind of medical insurance they're on?"

"I didn't ask... Dad was too exhausted to answer any questions like that. I'll send him an email or something."

"No, I can do it," Kevin says, and immediately regrets it. Some filial sense of duty prompts him to say: *Man-to-man, son-to-father, let's talk about the dry realities of your HMO plan.* He is, after all, the offspring who ended up working in insurance. If anyone

knows how to thread their way through the bureaucratic labyrinth of deductibles and coverage loopholes to get their mother the right kind of treatment, it's him.

But he dreads being on the phone with his dad: the long gap of silence; his dad's dry, papery voice as he awkwardly stitches the English words together, hesitating even after half a century in America.

Too late. He's already volunteered.

"You sure?" Bonnie asks. "I mean, that would be amazing. I can't even get my head around my own insurance plan. And I'm sure you understand this much better than me."

An unusual shred of pride finds its way into his heart. Maybe he can, for once, feel like he has some sense of purpose.

"No problem." Another pause. "So... how are the boys? All four of yours."

Bonnie laughs at the familiar joke. "Chris is good. My other three... well, they're boys. It's almost summer. They're restless."

Yeah, but they have ten acres to run around in. And a private pond with a boat, Kevin is tempted to say. He thinks back to the last time they visited Bonnie in her New England estate. A castle and grounds, a kingdom to itself. Arabella and Brian came back wide-eyed, still disbelieving that all that land belonged just to their cousins. Their tousle-haired boy cousins with their hazel eyes; long, patrician limbs; and their golden-headed father of esteemed lineage. Well, sixteen generations in this country after stepping off the *Mayflower* would allow a family to amass all that wealth.

"Did you see they have a Jaguar?" Jessica commented on the flight home. "Like a vintage one, just parked in their extra garage."

He hadn't noticed. He was too busy trying to guess the value of their house and property.

The next day, Kevin looked up Teslas, wondering if he should treat himself to a belated fortieth birthday present. Then he crunched the numbers and decided he probably shouldn't, not while they were still paying their current mortgage rate. Some luxuries remained definitively out of reach.

“Cool, so you’ll speak to Dad about the insurance. And tomorrow afternoon you can do the Zoom?”

“Yeah, yeah, I said I would.” A note of annoyance at Bonnie’s managerial tone. He pauses, then asks another question. “You spoken to Alex yet?”

“I will, once I get off the phone with you. Though it’s kinda late over there.”

“When’s the last time *you* spoke with her?”

“Uh... I dunno. Maybe a few months ago?” Bonnie sounds uncomfortable. He guesses it was half a year.

“You know, she’s not a little kid anymore,” Bonnie says after a moment. “Sometimes you have this image in your head where Alex is still a teenager and rebelling at every single thing in the world. She’s *forty* now. She actually has a stable job now. And a partner, too.”

This is news to him. Or maybe it’s not. He can’t keep track of Alex’s partners.

“Is the *partner* stable?”

“Yeah, they’ve been together for a few years.”

“Is the partner... a man?”

Bonnie breathes out, her patented exasperated sigh. “You know, you really have to get over that.”

“Get over what?”

“Your whole attitude about this. I can’t believe you’ve let this go on for so long.”

“*I’ve* let it?” Kevin can feel the familiar defensiveness rising, anything to counter Bonnie’s scolding. “*She’s* the one who’s always been a complete drama queen.”

“Can you just—” Bonnie sucks in her breath. “Listen, she’ll be on the Zoom tomorrow. Be nice. It’s important for Mom. I don’t know what she’s gonna say, but she won’t want to see you and Alex squabbling.”

Kevin feels a drop—but only a drop—of remorse. Alex has had five years to reach out, but she’s never bothered, either.

“Yeah, fine,” he agrees.

“I gotta go call her now. See you tomorrow. Two p.m. their time—which is four p.m. yours, okay?”

“Yes, Bonnie, I know how time zones work. Bye.”

He hangs up. Every time he speaks to his sister, it’s like they’re kids all over again.

Kevin breathes out and sits there in the dark, grateful for the silence. Above him on the ceiling, the adhesive stars glow in their fixed constellations.

Alex

London

Alex is just settling down for the night, idly scrolling through social media feeds, when her phone lights up silently with Bonnie's call. Next to her in bed, Nya has drifted off to sleep. She gets tired easily these days, while Alex is ever the night owl. But why would Bonnie call this late?

And who actually calls these days, anyway? Conversations happen more unobtrusively in the twenty-first century, strung out mutely over chains of text and WhatsApp messages. So much easier to ignore.

Alex clutches her phone and quietly exits the bedroom. She answers the call in a hushed voice.

"Bonnie? What's up?"

"Hey, um, can you do a Zoom with Mom and the whole family at around this time tomorrow? Ten p.m. your time?"

Bonnie, as always, cuts to the chase, but Alex is still taken aback by the brusqueness of it all. "Uhhh... Sure. Hello, by the way! What's going on?"

* * * *

It is, in many ways, the phone call she has always dreaded receiving. The predestined inevitability that comes from living thousands of miles away from your family, on the other side of the Atlantic. Your parents will grow older and frailer, your guilt will swell with every unanswered email, every Christmas missed. Until finally, one day the phone will ring—and you will be presented with the irreversible.

You need to come home. Mom isn't well.

After Bonnie has explained what she knows, Alex stands in her darkened living room, the dread growing inside her. She could apologize for letting things drift this far, for living a rich and interesting and colorful life in another country and failing to truly share it with her family. But there is no excuse really, except for her own laziness, her own hidden disinclination.

“How are you?” Bonnie asks, and Alex considers how much she hasn’t told her own sister.

“I, um, I’m good. Really good. But I...” She pauses and leans against the wall, imagines the five of them sharing a computer screen tomorrow and cringes at the thought. “God, there’s a lot I haven’t told you. Any of you.”

Bonnie pauses, as if she is about to remonstrate. “Like what?”

“Like I’m... married?”

“What?! To who?”

“To Nya, who I’ve been with for years. You know about her.” She can imagine Bonnie breathing a sigh of relief. “We just had a small ceremony at city hall, so it wasn’t a big thing or anything.”

“Wow, well, you’re still married! Congratulations!”

Alex catches the unintentional slight from Bonnie: “still married,” as if Alex and commitment are incompatible. Yet there is even bigger news. Alex wasn’t expecting to feel nervous, but she is.

“And... um, Nya’s pregnant. We’re pregnant. We’re gonna be—I’m gonna be a mother.”

Each of these short, stuttered sentences chipping closer to the final truth. She, Alex Chu, is actually going to be mother. Something she’d never imagined possible. And she still doubts it is possible.

She can hear Bonnie’s intake of breath. “Oh my god. That’s huge. How far along are you?”

Nearly five months. Five exciting, terrifying months of watching her wonderful Nya reel with nausea, weather the exhaustion, dutifully relinquish wine and coffee and blue cheese toward the future health of their child. She has begun to understand, if only infinitesimally, the necessary sacrifices that mothers undertake, even months before their baby makes it into this world.

“And why didn’t you tell any of us?” Bonnie is asking, affronted.

“Well, I—” Alex catches herself, trips over an unexpected jab of emotion. “After what happened with Kevin... I didn’t think anyone would care.”

She has migrated onto the sofa now and stretches out on the cool cushions, closes her eyes. The light from a nearby streetlamp casts a yellow gleam into the shadowed room. Somehow it helps to calm her heartbeat.

“Of course we care,” Bonnie says, her voice compassionate, entreating. “*I* care. I would have wanted to know as soon as possible. And Mom and Dad? Of course they’d be happy for you.”

“Mmmm. You think?” Alex emits a questioning hum and leaves it at that. “And Kevin?”

Bonnie sighs. “Kevin’s just—whatever, don’t worry about Kevin for now. But *I* want to know everything. Tell me all about Nya! Tell me about the pregnancy! Are you excited to be a mom?”

“Bonnie, I have no idea what I’m headed into,” Alex confesses, relieved to be able to share this with someone. “And I’m—I’m kinda terrified of being a parent.”

She says this with a laugh: oh, the irony of adventuring, commitment-phobic Alex finally being saddled with parenthood. But she doesn’t need to explain further. Bonnie gets her and always has. It has been so long since Alex has sunk into a long conversation with her sister that she almost forgot the ease of telling a story to her, the shared idea that can be communicated with a single grunt or phrase. The emotional shorthand that siblings speak in.

Here in London, late on a Sunday night, everybody is sleeping desperately, resentfully, in anticipation of Monday morning. But where her sister is, it is still early evening, and the sun still shines. Alex dwells in that imagined warmth, grateful for this familiar respite.

It’s almost like being home again.