

It Ends with Us

(a summary by Pat Evert)

For my father, who tried his very best not to be his worst. And for my mother, who made sure we never saw him at his worst.

• Rooftop meeting

I just—twelve hours earlier—gave one of the most epic eulogies the people of Plethora, Maine, have ever witnessed. Okay, it very well could be considered the most disastrous. It was the funeral of the prodigious Andrew Bloom. Adored mayor of my hometown of Plethora, Maine. Owner of the most successful real-estate agency within city limits. As soon as I finished delivering his eulogy today, I caught a flight straight back to Boston and hijacked the first roof I could find. I'm twenty-three. At this moment a man bursts onto the rooftop. I learn that he is a neurosurgeon, Ryle Kincaid. My name... is Lily Bloom. I absolutely love gardening. I love flowers. Plants. Growing things. It's my passion. It's always been my dream to open a florist shop. **"Naked truths aren't always pretty."**



"Tell me a naked truth, Lily." "My father was abusive. Not to me—to my mother. He would get so angry when they fought that sometimes he would hit her. When that happened, he would spend the next week or two making up for it. The abuse was inevitable with their marriage, and it became our norm. I spent most of my life hating him. "Lily," he says pointedly. **"There is no such thing as bad people. We're all just people who sometimes do bad things."** "Your turn," I tell him.

"I watched a little boy die tonight." His voice is despondent. "He was only five years old. He and his little brother found a gun in his parents' bedroom. The younger brother was holding it and it went off by accident. There was nothing that could be done by the time he made it to the operating table. I wanted them to know that not only did they just lose a child, they just ruined the entire life of the one who accidentally pulled the trigger. Give me another one," he says.

"My mother asked me two days ago if I would deliver the eulogy at my father's funeral today. I told her I didn't feel comfortable. I just didn't want to do it because I feel like eulogies should be delivered by those who respected the deceased. And I didn't much respect my father." She said all I had to do was walk up to the podium and say five great things about my father. "Hello. My name is Lily Bloom, daughter of the late Andrew Bloom. I wanted to take a moment to honor his life by sharing with you five great things about my father. The first thing..." "I stood up there for two solid minutes without saying another word. There wasn't one great thing I could say about that man. "Your turn."

He looks me straight in the eye. “I want to fuck you.” I can’t get over the fact that he just said that. Maybe because he’s a neurosurgeon and I never pictured someone so educated throwing around the word fuck so casually. I gather myself... somewhat... and then say, “Okay. Since we’re on the subject... the first guy I ever had sex with was homeless. I became friends with a guy named Atlas who stayed in a condemned house. No one knew he was living there other than me. I used to take him food and clothes and stuff. Until my father found out. He beat him up. That’s as naked as I want to get about that subject. “Your turn.”

“The thought of marriage repulses me,” he says. “I’m almost thirty years old and I have no desire for a wife. I especially don’t want children. The only thing I want out of life is success. Lots of it. I don’t just want to be a great neurosurgeon. I want to be the best in my field. One-night stands is as close as I want to get to relationships. How far would you go, Lily?” “I don’t know,” I whisper. The piercing of a ring rips through the air. His hand stiffens when we both realize it’s a phone. His phone. “Dr. Kincaid,” he says. Silence is followed with, “Yeah, give me ten minutes. On my way.”

• Atlas

My Ellen Diaries. I addressed each of my entries to Ellen DeGeneres, because I began watching her show the first day it aired in 2003 when I was just a little girl.

Dear Ellen, The house behind us has been empty since Mrs. Burleson died, which has been about two years. I know it’s been empty because my bedroom window looks out over the backyard, and there hasn’t been a single soul that goes in or out of that house since I can remember. Until last night. And it was the first time he rode my bus. I saw him walk into my school, so he must go there. And I later saw him sneaking back inside that empty house. —Lily

Dear Ellen, so I found out who the guy is, and yes, he’s still going over there. It’s been two days now and I still haven’t told anyone. His name is Atlas Corrigan and he’s a senior. If he doesn’t have access to a shower—he probably doesn’t have food, either. I went inside my house and made a couple of sandwiches. I grabbed two sodas out of the fridge and a bag of chips. I put them in a lunch bag and I ran it over to the abandoned house and set it on the back porch by the door. He now knows I know he’s staying there. —Lily

Dear Ellen, he said, “Thank you.” He sat down next to me on the bus. “Did you tell anyone?” he asked me. I shook my head and looked back out the window. We get home from school at 3:45 and my parents get home at about 5:00. I said, “If you hurry, you can take a shower before they get home.” I had given Atlas a change of clothes. I’m sure my father would recognize his own clothes on some random teenager in the neighborhood. Right before he walked out the back door he said, “Thank you for not being disparaging, Lily.” How does a guy who is obviously humble, well-mannered, and uses words like disparaging end up homeless? I’m going to find out what happened to him. —Lily

• **Allysa**

My mom got a job at one of the elementary schools, so she did end up moving here. As we are looking over the building I just purchased to start my floral shop I see a woman walk in. “I’m Allysa,” she says. I shake her hand. “I’m not really hiring yet,” I say. I wave my hand around the room. “I’m opening up a floral shop, but it’ll be a couple of months, at least.” She doesn’t look like she’d be satisfied with a minimum wage job. “I’m not going to pretend I have a degree in design, but it’s my absolute favorite thing. If you need any help, I’d do it for free.” “I’m not going to let you work for free. But I could do \$10 an hour if you’re really serious.” Two hours later, I’m convinced I’ve met my new best friend. “Brave and bold,” I say. “I want this place to be different. I want to take risks. We’ll take everything everyone loves about flowers, and we’ll do the complete opposite! There are floral shops on every corner for people who love flowers. But what floral shop caters to all the people who hate flowers?” In cleaning up I hurt my ankle. If I broke it, I’m screwed. I just spent my entire inheritance on a building that I won’t even be able to renovate for months. Allysa calls her husband. Her husband and brother show up in a few minutes with ice. I know those arms. Those are the arms of a neurosurgeon. Allysa is his sister? The sister that owns the entire top floor, with the husband who works in pajamas and brings in seven figures a year? Ryle and I are two people going in different directions. “I specialize in one-night stands and you’re on the quest for your Holy Grail.” “Naked truth coming. I’m very attracted to you,” I say. “My turn. I’m very attracted to you, too. So if you still aren’t going to agree to a one-night stand, then I think it’s best if we do what we can to avoid each other. Because it won’t do either of us any favors.”

• **Letters to Ellen**

I’ve been so busy with my mother’s move and secretly searching for a new building between work hours, I haven’t had time to finish reading the journals I started reading all those months ago.

Dear Ellen, When he made that comment about being bored, I asked him if he ever watched your show. He said he’d like to because he thinks you’re funny. I turned on your show and that’s about all that happened. We didn’t talk much. —Lily

Dear Ellen, He’s been living in that house for two weeks now. He’s taken a few more showers at my house and I give him food every time he visits. I even wash his clothes for him while he’s here after school. —Lily

Dear Ellen, If I had access to a gun or knife right now, I’d kill my dad. As soon as I walked into the living room, I saw him push her down. They were standing in the kitchen and she’d grabbed his arm, trying to calm him down, and he backhanded her and knocked her straight to the floor... —Lily

How happy I am that Allysa showed up today. I could use a friend—not to mention help—during these next few months. I have a feeling it’s going to be more stressful than I bargained for.

by Colleen Hoover

Ryle just finished a forty-eight-hour shift. “For the past week, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head. I don’t know why. At work, at home. I need you to make it stop, Lily. Please have sex with me. I want you so, so bad and I swear, once you have sex with me you’ll never hear from me again. I promise.”

It’s been fifty-three days since I’ve heard from him. We flip over the sign to *Open*. My very first customer is none other than Ryle Kincaid. He bought me a bouquet of lilies. The card reads, “Make it stop.”

At Allysa’s birthday party I say, “I like you, Ryle. And knowing that you only want me for one night makes me really, *really* sad. He takes me to his bedroom. My God, this man can kiss. It’s as if he takes kissing as seriously as he takes his profession. I want him for so much more than just one night. He wants the exact opposite of what I want. And it terrifies me that I’ll give in to him and he’ll walk away. I know him enough to know that sex with him won’t be enough for me, though. But how do I know sex won’t be the only thing he wants? We slept together - no sex.

*Dear Ellen, Atlas is the first friend I’ve ever had that’s ever been inside my house. He’s also the first friend to know how much I like to garden. And now he’s the first friend to ever ask me why I garden. **Plants reward you based on the amount of love you show them.** If you’re cruel to them or neglect them, they give you nothing. But if you care for them and love them the right way, they reward you with gifts in the form of vegetables or fruits or flowers. Most plants do need a lot of care to survive. But some things, like trees, are strong enough to do it by just relying on themselves and nobody else. I could tell he was resilient. Way more than I would ever be if I were in his situation. —Lily*

*Dear Ellen, Dad had her pushed down on the hood with his hands around her throat. He was choking her, Ellen! I might cry just thinking about it. He was yelling at her, staring down at her with so much hatred. She drove me to the hospital. On the way there she only said one thing to me. “When they ask you what happened, tell them you slipped on the ice.” When she said that, I just looked out my window and started crying. Because I thought for sure this was the final straw. That she would leave him now that he had hurt me. That was the moment I realized that **she’d never leave him.** I felt so defeated. I had to get nine stitches in my forehead. My father was the reason I was hurt and he didn’t even stay and check on me. He just left us both there on the floor of the garage and left. —Lily*

Dear Ellen, Do you ever do things you know are wrong, but are somehow also right? If a person knows someone needs a place to stay, isn’t it that person’s responsibility as a human to help them? He slept on the floor by my bed, so it’s not like it was anything more than me just giving him somewhere warm to sleep. “When I turned eighteen a few months ago, we got in a big fight and my stepdad kicked me out of the house. I’m signed up to go to the Marines come May, so I’m just trying to hang on until then.” May

*is six months away, Ellen. Six. I've never once thought that school might be the only home some kids have. It's the only place Atlas can go and know he'll have food. I'll never be able to respect rich people now, knowing they willingly choose to spend their money on materialistic things rather than using it to help other people. **Not everyone is homeless because they choose to be. They're homeless because there isn't enough help to go around.** —Lily*

• Re-finding Atlas

I drop the journal on my chest. I'm surprised to feel tears running down my cheeks. Especially for my mother because for the past year, I haven't really thought about everything she had to go through before my father died. I know it probably still hurts her. Mom wants me to try a new restaurant with her tonight. She's an obnoxious foodie. Ryle comes along with us. "Can I get you ladies something to drink?" a waiter asks. And then I clamp my mouth shut. I stare at the waiter and the waiter stares back at me. My heart is in my throat. I can't remember how to speak. I know it's been years since I saw Atlas, but I'll never forget what he looked like. It had to be him. I know it was and I know he recognized me, too, because the second our eyes met... it looked like he'd seen a ghost. For nine years I've wondered what happened to him. "Lily?" I glance up and suck in a breath. He's standing at the end of the hallway like a ghost straight out of the past. I stay pressed against the wall, not sure what to say to him. "Atlas?" As soon as I say his name, he blows out a quick breath of relief and then takes three huge steps forward. I catch myself doing the same. We meet in the middle and throw our arms around each other. He had changed so much. "Eight years in the military will do that to ya." Unexpectedly running into Atlas tonight put such a wrinkle in my emotions. I didn't expect to feel this much hurt after seeing him. But it's good. This happened for a reason.

*Dear Ellen, "**Just keep swimming.**" Recognize that quote, Ellen? It's what Dory says to Marlin in Finding Nemo. Atlas got sick. Like really sick. He's been crawling through my window and sleeping on the floor for a few nights in a row now, but last night, I knew something was wrong as soon as I looked at him. He needed me to help him and I was all he had. We stayed home from school and he stayed with me at the house all day. He was still getting sick, so I let him use my room to sleep. Finally around lunch he stopped throwing up. He went and took a shower I don't know when I started feeling comfortable enough to snuggle up to him, but it just felt right. We watched Finding Nemo and when that part came up where Marlin was looking for Nemo and he was feeling really defeated, Dory said to him, "When life gets you down do you wanna know what you've gotta do?... Just keep swimming. "Just keep swimming," I whispered to him. —Lily*

Dear Ellen, he crawled in my window last night. He had slept in my bed the night before because he was sick, took off his shoes and crawled in the bed with me. "I got in touch with my uncle today in Boston. He told me once he gets back from his work trip I can stay with him. Thank you, Lily. For everything. Have you ever been kissed, Lily?" I shook my head no. His lips closed over mine ... and kept kissing me. It just got better and better as I grew more comfortable. I don't know how long we kissed. A long time. —Lily

by Colleen Hoover

Dear Ellen, every day we get off the bus, Atlas takes a quick shower and then we make out. Every day. It's awesome. —Lily

*Dear Ellen, when we were riding the bus, Atlas kissed me, the first time he ever did it in public. Katie noticed and I heard her say, "Gross," as soon as he leaned over and kissed me. She was talking to the girl next to her when she said, "I can't believe Lily lets him touch her. He wears the same clothes almost every day." I was angry that Katie **would say something so ignorant just to hurt someone she thought was beneath her**. I was also hurt that Atlas appeared to be used to comments like that. I said to him. "You're my favorite person." At home he opened the refrigerator and started moving things around. "Yep. I probably love to cook as much as you love to grow things." Cookie dough and Atlas's mouth mixed together is like heaven, in case you're wondering. For the most part, I hate men because the only example I have is my father. But spending all this time with Atlas is changing me. They were by far the greatest cookies I'd ever eaten. "I made you something," he said, reaching into his pocket. was a small, flat outline of a heart, about two inches long, carved out of wood. "I carved it with an old whittling knife I found at the house. From the oak tree in your backyard." I don't want him to move to Boston, Ellen. —Lily*

Dear Ellen, Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. He's moving to Boston. I don't really feel like talking about it. —Lily

*Dear Ellen, My parents were on the couch and he had his hand around her throat, but his other hand was pulling up her dress. Ellen, I didn't know **one human was capable of feeling so much hate inside one heart**. And I'm not even talking about my father. I'm talking about me. I walked straight to the kitchen and I opened a drawer. I grabbed the biggest knife I could find and... I'd never seen her this upset. Or this hurt. Or this scared. It broke my heart, Ellen. I helped her clean up her lip and her eye. —Lily*
Dear Ellen, this morning I had to tell him goodbye. —Lily

My chapter with Atlas is over. He's happy now. My mom sent me a text message. A doctor, Lily? AND your own business? I want to be you when I grow up.

• Another view

Allysa just starts nodding and I don't know who starts crying first. Me or Marshall or Allysa. "I'm gonna be a dad?" he yells. Once the parents-to-be stop making out in the booth, Ryle and I both stand up and congratulate them.

"I'm taking the day off tomorrow. Your floral shop doesn't open until one o'clock on Sundays. I'm on my way to your apartment with two bottles of wine. You want to have a sleepover with your boyfriend and have drunken sex all night and sleep until noon? I'm going to be an uncle. I have a smoking hot girlfriend. And I get to perform a very rare, possibly once-in-a-lifetime craniopagus separation on Monday. Conjoined twins. It's a very rare surgery. Very rare." He holds up his right hand and wiggles his fingers. "But this is a very special hand that has been through almost half a million dollars' worth of

specialty education. I have a lot of faith in this hand. This hand,” he whispers, “is the steadiest hand in all of Boston.”

The casserole! “Oh shit!” I say, laughing. Ryle rushes to the kitchen and I stand up and follow him in there. I walk in just as he pulls the oven door open and waves away the smoke. Ruined. he reaches in to pull the burnt casserole out. “Ryle! You need a...” “Shit!” he yells. “Pot holder.” The casserole falls from his hand and lands on the floor, shattering everywhere. Laughter bursts from me. I’m still laughing as I lean over to get a look at Ryle’s hand. I hope he didn’t hurt it too bad. In a matter of one second, Ryle’s arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward. There was enough force behind it to knock me off balance. When I lost my footing, I hit my face on one of the cabinet door handles as I came down. Pain shoots through the corner of my eye, right near my temple. Everything shatters. My tears, my heart, my laughter, my soul. Shattered like broken glass, raining down around me. “Goddammit, Lily,” I hear him say. “It’s not funny. This hand is my fucking career.” **Fifteen seconds. That’s all it takes to completely change everything about a person.** I didn’t mean to push you, Lily, I’m sorry.” I don’t hear Ryle’s voice this time. All I hear is my father’s voice. “I’m sorry, Jenny. It was an accident. I’m so sorry.” I just want him away from me. I use every ounce of strength I have in both my hands and legs and I force him the fuck away from me. He falls backward, onto his hands. He slowly pulls up his right hand and it’s covered in blood. Blood is trickling out of his palm, down his wrist. It’s his right hand. His surgery Monday. He pulls the hand away and, with his good hand, he lifts my chin. “Fuck the hand, Lily. I don’t care about my hand. Are you okay?” “No.” I’m a little in shock, and I know he can hear my heart breaking with just that one word, because I can feel it in every part of me. “Oh my God. You pushed me, Ryle. There’s too much happening. The smoke, the wine, the broken glass, the food splattered everywhere, **the blood, the anger, the apologies, it’s too much.** He’s not like my father. He can’t be. He’s nothing like that uncaring bastard. We’re both upset and kissing and confused and sad. **I’ve never felt anything like this moment—so ugly and painful.** But somehow the only thing that eases the hurt just caused by this man *is* this man. I try to forget what happened in the kitchen, but it’s everything right now. He pushed me away from him. For fifteen seconds, **I saw a side of him that wasn’t him. That wasn’t me.** I laughed at him when I should have been concerned. He shoved me when he should have never touched me. I pushed him away and caused him to cut his hand. First he burned it, then he sliced it open. Not even an hour after he was just telling me how important this surgery was to him. I secure the bandage around his hand and then look him in the eye. “But Ryle? If anything like that ever happens again... I’ll know that this time wasn’t just an accident. And I’ll leave you without a second thought.” “You’re the most important part of my life, Lily. **I want to be what brings you happiness. Not what causes you to hurt.**” All humans make mistakes. What determines a person’s character aren’t the mistakes we make. **It’s how we take those mistakes and turn them into lessons rather than excuses.** “Lily,” he says, brushing his thumb over mine. “I’m in love with you.” I feel his words in every part of me. And when I whisper, “I love you, too,” it’s the most naked truth I’ve ever spoken to him.

• **Waves of Emotions**

I tried twice to get them to change the restaurant location, but Allysa was hell-bent on eating here after Ryle told her how good it was. The next five seconds go unnoticed by everyone at our table, but they play out in slow motion to me. Atlas's eyes fall to the cut on my eye. The bandage wrapped around Ryle's hand. Back to my eye. Later in the ladies room, "It was an accident." Atlas laughs, but then his face falls flat. "Leave him." He tilts his head and leans it forward a little bit. "Funny. You sound just like your mother." I reach forward and unlock the door, then pull it open. I gasp when my eyes meet Ryle's. I quickly glance over my shoulder to see Atlas filing out of the bathroom with me. Ryle's eyes fill with confusion as he looks from me to Atlas. "What the fuck, Lily?" God, this looks so much worse than it is. Atlas steps around me. "You touch her again and I'll cut your fucking hand off and shove it down your throat, you worthless piece of shit!" "Atlas, stop!" I yell. "This is Atlas? The homeless boy you pity-fucked?" The hallway instantly becomes a blur of fists and elbows and my screams for them to stop. Two waiters push through the door behind me and shove past me, separating them just as quickly as it started. "Out!" Atlas yells, pointing at the door, but looking at Ryle. "Get the hell out of my restaurant!" He just saw me locked in a bathroom with a guy I used to be in love with. Then, out of nowhere, that guy attacks him. **There's so much pain in his eyes right now, and it's not even necessary.** It was all due to a stupid misunderstanding. "I didn't want this, Lily," he says. "I didn't want a relationship! I didn't want this stress in my life! Naked truths, Lily. That's all I want from you right now. Can you please give me that? If you don't want to be with me... please tell me right now, Lily. Because when I saw you with him... that hurt. I never want to feel that again. And if it hurts this much now, I'm terrified to think of what it could do to me a year from now."

I wasn't sure if he'd be able to do the surgery today, but knowing how much he was looking forward to it makes me happy for him. Meanwhile Atlas visits me at my shop. "I wanted to apologize for saying that you sounded like your mother. That was hurtful." I don't know why I always feel like crying when I'm around him. When I think about him. When I read about him. It's like my emotions are still tethered to him somehow and I can't figure out how to cut the strings. He slips the case off my phone and puts the sticky note between the case and the phone, then slides the cover back over it. "In case of emergency." He also brought me a book he got for me three years ago. There's a picture of Ellen DeGeneres on the front. The title is Seriously... I'm Kidding. I laugh and then open the book, gasping quietly when I see it's autographed. I run my fingers over the words of the inscription. **Lily, Atlas says just keep swimming.** —Ellen DeGeneres

I think about how sometimes, no matter how convinced you are that your life will turn out a certain way, all that certainty can be washed away with a simple change in tide.

*Dear Ellen, several weeks later. It was my sixteenth birthday and when Atlas showed up, **it became the absolute best day of my life. And then the absolute worst.** I had crawled into bed that night, I couldn't shake the sadness. I was crying when I heard the tap on my window. He smelled so good. I could tell when I hugged him that he'd put on some much-needed weight in just the six weeks since I'd last seen him. "What are you*

doing here?" I asked him. "It's your birthday," he said. **"And you're still my favorite person.** And I've missed you." He told me the first night he went to that old house, he wasn't there because he needed a place to stay. He went there to kill himself. He was sitting in the living room floor with a razor blade to his wrist. Right when he was about to use it, my bedroom light went on. "You were standing there like an angel, backlit by the light of heaven," he said. "I couldn't take my eyes off you. You saved my life, Lily," he said to me. "And you weren't even trying." He was leaving for the military and he didn't want me to hold on to him while he was gone. He wasn't really breaking up with me because we weren't ever really together. We'd just been two people who helped each other when we needed it and got our hearts fused together along the way. "I'm going to make a promise to you," he said. **"When my life is good enough for you to be a part of it, I'll come find you.** But I don't want you to wait around for me, because that might never happen." We both kissed a lot. We both laughed a lot. We both loved a lot. We both breathed a lot. A lot. And we both had to cover our mouths and be as quiet and still as we could so we wouldn't get caught. He had a birthday present for me. It was a magnet that said "Boston, where everything is better." I told him I would keep it forever, and every time I look at it I'll think of him. My father heard me in there talking to someone, and when he threw open my door and saw Atlas in bed with me, he was angrier than I'd ever seen him. Being completely helpless as my father came down on him with a baseball bat. The sound of bones snapping was the only thing piercing through my screams. By the time the police got to my bedroom and pulled my father off of him, I didn't even recognize Atlas, he was covered in so much blood. My father became revered for his heroic act—saving his little girl from the homeless boy who manipulated her into having sex with him. I've been avoiding writing this letter for six months now. No offense, Ellen, but my head still hurts. So does my heart. Maybe even more right now than it did yesterday. This letter didn't help one damn bit. —Lily

That was the last time I ever wrote to Ellen. On a particularly lonely night in college, I went alone to a tattoo studio and had a heart put in the spot where he used to kiss me. It's a tiny heart, about the size of a thumbprint, and it looks just like the heart he carved for me out of the oak tree. After college I ended up moving to Boston, not necessarily because I was hoping to find him, but because **I had to see for myself if Boston really was better.** Seeing Atlas in his restaurant for the first time filled me with so many emotions, I didn't know how to process them. He was a huge wave that left a lot of imprints on my life, and I'll feel the weight of that love until I die.

Part Two

We decide on the fly to go to Las Vegas and get married. "Are you sure about this, Ryle?" He runs his hands through my hair and pulls my face to his, brushing his lips against mine. "Naked truth," he whispers. "I'm so excited to be your husband, I could piss my damn pants." Ryle and I talked about kids on the flight to Vegas. I wanted to make sure that possibility was open for discussion in our future before I made a commitment to spend the rest of my life with him. He said it was definitely open for discussion. Then we cleared the air about a lot of other things that might cause

problems down the road. I told him we had to start some kind of charity, or at least donate to the ones Marshall and Allysa like. He said he already does.

“Ryle, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?” He holds up my phone and just looks at me like I should know what’s happening. When I shake my head in confusion, he holds up a piece of paper. “Funny thing,” he says, setting my phone on the coffee table in front of him. “I dropped your phone by accident. Cover pops off. I find this number hidden in the back of it.” He chunks my phone clear across the room and it crashes against the wall, shattering to the floor. He’s going to leave me. Or he’s going to hurt me. He grabs my wrists and pushes me away from him.

“Lily, be still. Please.” His voice is soothing. My head hurts. “Ryle?” I try to open my eyes, but the light is too bright. I can feel a sting at the corner of my eye and I wince. I open my eyes again and look up at the ceiling. It’s our bedroom ceiling. My mouth hurts when I speak, so I bring my hand up and cover it. “You fell down the stairs,” he says. “You’re hurt.” I close my eyes again and try to remember why he’s angry. Why he’s hurt. My phone. Atlas’s number. The stairwell. I grabbed his shirt. He pushed me away. “You fell down the stairs.” But I didn’t fall. He pushed me. Again. That’s twice. You pushed me, Ryle. I can feel my whole body start to shake with the sobs. I have no idea how bad I’m hurt, but I don’t even care. No physical pain could even compare to what my heart is feeling in this moment. “You pushed me,” I say through tears. “You fell,” he says calmly. “About five minutes ago. Right after I found out what a fucking liar I married.” He places something on my pillow next to me. “If you need anything, I’m sure you can call this number.” I look at the crumpled up piece of paper by my head that holds Atlas’s phone number. I hear the front door slam. Five minutes. That’s all it takes to completely destroy a person. I’m scared to look in the mirror. I’m just... scared. I hear the front door open and slam shut again. Ryle appears in the doorway and I have no idea if I’m supposed to hate him. Or be terrified of him. Or feel bad for him. How can I be feeling all three? I say to him, “Now get the fuck out of my apartment.” My words knock the breath from him. I see it happen. His back meets the wall behind him and he stares at me silently. In shock. “Lily,” he whispers. “You fell down the stairs.” I can’t tell if he’s trying to convince me or himself.

“Remember when we met on the rooftop and you said, ‘It’ll destroy him for life, that’s what it’ll do.’ I knew it would destroy him. I knew exactly what that little boy was feeling... because that’s what happened to me. I shot him, Lily. My best friend. My big brother. I was only six years old. I didn’t even know I was holding a real gun. Allysa was only five when it happened. Emerson was seven. We were in the garage, so no one heard our screams for a long time. And I just sat there, and... there are things I can’t control. I get angry. I black out. I’ve been in therapy since I was six years old. It is not my excuse. It is my reality. Like last night **when I feel that much emotion**, something inside of me just snaps. I don’t remember the moment I pushed you. But I know I did. / *did*. You are my wife. I’m supposed to be the one who protects you from the monsters. I’m not supposed to be one.” He holds me with so much desperation, he begins to

shake. I have never, in all my life, felt so much pain radiating from one human. But I swore I wouldn't let it happen again. I swore to him and to myself that if he ever hurt me again, I would leave. This isn't how this was supposed to be. My whole life, I knew exactly what I'd do if a man ever treated me the way my father treated my mother. I'm supposed to be the woman my mother was never strong enough to be. **I have to stop comparing us to them. We're our own individuals in an entirely different situation.** "Remember what you said to me on the roof that night? You said, **'There is no such thing as bad people. We're all just people who sometimes do bad things.'**"

I see the difference between Ryle and my father. Ryle is compassionate. He does things my father never would have done. He donates to charity, he cares about other people, he puts me before everything. I think we needed what happened on the stairwell to happen so that I would know his past and we'd be able to work on it together. Shortly after Ryle surprises me with a new apartment he bought for us a couple of floors below Allysa's. Now we're neighbors.

I'm married. I have a great husband. An awesome house. My best friend just happens to be my sister-in-law and I'm about to be an aunt. Dare I say it... but can my life get any better? I'd been notified that my business was nominated for an award for Best of Boston. Lily Bloom's was nominated under the "Best new businesses in Boston" category. Allysa is in labor. They're naming her Rylee. Seeing the way Ryle looks at his new baby niece makes my heart expand.

When I get home I see an empty glass that probably recently held scotch. His eyes fall to his hand, and I notice he's holding the Boston magnet. He places it back on the fridge and taps it. "Where'd you get this? Naked truth?" he whispers. He picks up a newspaper. It's the same newspaper he showed me earlier, with the awards article printed in it. He holds it up, then tosses it toward me. "Did you get a chance to read that yet? Read the last few paragraphs." "The business with the highest number of votes should come as no surprise. The iconic Bib's on Marketson opened in April of last year, quickly becoming one of the highest rated restaurants in the city, according to TripAdvisor. The owner, Atlas Corrigan, is a two-time award-winning chef and also a United States Marine. It's no secret what the acronym for his highly successful restaurant, **Bib's, stands for: Better In Boston.** 'It's a long story,' Chef Corrigan stated. 'It was an homage to someone who had a huge impact on my life. Someone who meant a lot to me. She still means a lot to me.' " Ryle read my journal. His lips meet my skin, right over the tattoo, and then he sinks his teeth into me so hard, I scream. The pain from his teeth piercing my collarbone rips through my shoulder and down my arm. I immediately start crying. Sobbing. "Ryle, let me go," I say, my voice pleading. "Please. Walk away." I start trying to fight him off of me, but it's useless. He's too strong for me. He's angry. He's hurt. And he's not Ryle. "Why is he still here, Lily?" His voice isn't as composed as it was in the kitchen. He's really angry now. "He's in everything. The magnet on the fridge. The journal in the box I found in our closet. The fucking tattoo on your body that used to be my favorite goddamn part of you!" Hatred rips through me and

I start screaming. Ryle tries to muffle my screams with his mouth. I bite down on his tongue. His forehead comes crashing down against mine. The pain is throbbing in my head too hard for me to decipher his words. I try to open my eyes, but it stings. I can feel something trickling into my right eye and I instantly know it's blood. "Lily, I love you, I'm so sorry." His words are full of panic. He's kissing me, his lips gentle against my cheek and mouth. He knows what he's done. He's Ryle again, and he knows what he's just done to me. To us. To our future. Can I call Allysa and Marshall? I can't do that to them right now. I could call the police, but my mind can't even process what all that entails. I just don't have the energy to make that decision right now. My mother? I can't involve her in this mess. I wipe the tears from my eyes and then begin dialing Atlas's number. I knew there was a chance that I might one day need it. So I memorized it.

Atlas took me to the hospital to get stitches. The doctor didn't want to administer a CT. "We avoid that on pregnant women." I am in shock. We leave the hospital without anyone noticing. Too exhausted to cry. Too in shock to speak. I feel submerged. Just keep swimming. I spent the night at Atlas's home.

*Dear Ellen, My father died. I'm twenty-four now. I got a college degree, worked in marketing for a while, and now I own my own business. A floral shop. I also have a husband and he isn't Atlas. And... I live in Boston. I am in a really bad place right now. More so than the last time I wrote to you. I am in love with a man who physically hurts me. Of all people, I have no idea how I let myself get to this point. It feels like Ryle has died. It's an astronomical amount of grief. An enormous amount of pain. It's a sense that I've lost my best friend, my lover, my husband, my lifeline. **Words can't express the amount of hatred I have for him.** I can't even begin to process the thought that I'm having a child with this man. And no matter which option I choose—whether I choose to stay or choose to leave—neither are choices I would wish upon my child. To grow up in a broken home or an abusive one? I read somewhere once that 85 percent of women return to abusive situations. I thought it was because the women were stupid. I thought it was because they were weak. I thought these things about my own mother more than once. **But sometimes the reason women go back is simply because they're in love. I love my husband,** Ellen. For better, for worse? Fuck. That. Shit. —Lily*

I feel robbed of the joy a mother should have when she finds out she's pregnant. I feel like Ryle took that from me last night and it's just one more thing I have to hate him for. **Hatred is exhausting.** Allysa sent me a picture of her and Rylee, and it makes me smile. Then cry. Damn these emotions. **I've never understood how someone can be so rock solid, yet comforting** like Atlas. But that's always how I've viewed him. Like **he could withstand anything, but somehow still feels the weight that everyone else carries.** So I spent a few more days at Atlas's house. Ryle visits me at my floral shop to tell me he is going to England for three months. I can go home and he won't be there.

I found out Cassie doesn't exist. *Why would Atlas lie to me?* "Why did you never come back for me?" "I did. When I visited you at college I saw that you were happy, it was the worst and best feeling a person could ever have at once. But I believed at that point that

my life was still not good enough for you. I had nothing to offer you but love, and to me, you deserved more than that. The next day I signed up for another tour in the Marines.” “Why did you lie about having a girlfriend?” I can already see the regret before I even hear it in his voice. “I said that because... you looked happy that night. When I saw you with Ryle, it hurt like hell, but at the same time I was relieved that you seemed to be in a really good place.” He thought he was giving me what I wanted, because **all he’s ever wanted for me was happiness. Considerate Atlas. Two days ago I was asking myself how my life could possibly get any better. Today I’m asking myself how it could possibly get any worse.** “Lily,” he whispers, still holding me tightly. “I know this is the last thing you need to hear right now. But I have to say it because I’ve walked away from you too many times without saying what I really want to say. In the future... if by some miracle you ever find yourself in the position to fall in love again... fall in love with me.” He presses his lips against my forehead. “You’re still my favorite person, Lily. Always will be.” **My heart has suffered through two separate heartaches in the course of two days.**

It’s been six weeks since Ryle left for England, and no one knows what happened between us. I also still haven’t told anyone about the pregnancy, I’m eighteen weeks along now. I almost feel a little relieved that Allysa reads me so well. I tell her everything. I tell her about the fight. I tell her about Atlas picking me up. I tell her about the hospital. I tell her about the pregnancy. She wraps her arms around me and we cry over the mutual love we have for Ryle. We cry over how much we hate him right now. For the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I feel happy about it.

Ryle’s eyes fall to my stomach and he takes a slow step forward. He’s cautious, as he should be. He reaches out a timid hand, asking for permission to touch me. I nod softly. **Despite the resentment I’ve built up in my heart toward him, it doesn’t mean the emotions aren’t still there.** Just because someone hurts you doesn’t mean you can simply stop loving them. It’s not a person’s actions that hurt the most. It’s the love. If there was no love attached to the action, the pain would be a little easier to bear. Part of me wants to scream at him and call the police like I should have done that night. Part of me feels for that little boy who held his brother in his arms and watched him die. Part of me wishes I would have never met him. Part of me wishes I could forgive him. “Naked truths?” He nods. “Lily, you have no idea. I am so sorry. You have no idea what I’ve been through these past two months knowing what I’ve done to you.” I stand up, the anger and hatred spilling out of me. I spin, pointing at him. “*You* have no idea! *You* have no idea what it’s like to go through what you’ve put me through! To fear for your life at the hands of the man you love? To get physically sick just thinking about what he’s done to you? *You* have no idea, Ryle! None! Fuck you! Fuck you for doing this to me! Yes. I kept the magnet Atlas gave me when we were kids. Yes. I kept the journals. No, I didn’t tell you about my tattoo. Yes, I probably should have. And yes, I still love him. And I’ll love him until I die, because he was a huge part of my life. And yes, I’m sure that hurts you. But none of that gave you the right to do what you did to me. You goddamn son of a bitch!” “My truth is that I have absolutely nothing to say,” he says quietly. “I’ll never be able to take back what I did to you. And you’ll never believe me if I promise it won’t

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happen again.” Please don’t take this child away from me, Lily. Please.” Our eyes, locked together, speak more naked truths than our mouths ever have. My eyes are telling his that I can no longer stand being touched by him. His eyes are telling mine that he already knows. I thought if I could just hurt him like he had hurt me, I would feel avenged. I don’t. Instead, I feel vindictive and mean. I feel like I’m my father.

Of all the secrets I’ve held over the last few months, I’m the saddest about keeping everything from my mother. I don’t know how she’ll take it. Most days I’m so mad at him that the thought of ever forgiving him is ludicrous. But some days I miss him so much I can’t breathe. I miss the fun I had with him. I miss making love to him. I miss missing him. She’s the only one I know who has been through this. She’s the only one I know who would understand the **massive amounts of confusion I’ve been experiencing**. “Most of me feels like I’ll never be able to trust him again. But a huge part of me grieves what I had with him. We were so good together, Mom. Maybe I could put up with him when he’s at his worst just so I can have him when he’s at his best.” “The last thing you want to do is lose sight of your limit. Please don’t allow that to happen. Every time you choose to stay, it makes the next time that much harder to leave. Eventually, you lose sight of your limit altogether, because you start to think, ‘I’ve lasted five years now. What’s five more?’ **If Ryle truly loves you, he wouldn’t allow you to take him back.** He would make the decision to leave you himself so that he knows for a fact he can never hurt you again. That’s the kind of love a woman deserves, Lily. The day you gave your father’s eulogy? I know you didn’t freeze up. You stood at that podium and refused to say a single good thing about that man. It was the proudest I have ever been of you. You were the only one in my life who ever stood up for me. **“Be that girl, Lily. Brave and bold.”**

I think about how easy it is for humans to make judgments when we’re standing on the outside of a situation. I spent years judging my mother’s situation. When you experience it firsthand, it isn’t so easy to hate the person who mistreats you when most of the time they’re your godsend.

“I don’t want to give you false hope, Ryle,” I say quietly. “If I had to make a choice today... I’d probably choose divorce. But in all honesty, I don’t know if I would be making that choice because I’m overloaded with pregnancy hormones or because it’s what I really want. I don’t think it would be fair to either of us if I made that decision before the birth of this baby.”

When they lay her on my chest, it’s the absolute greatest moment of my life. Ryle asks if he can hold her. He raises the head of my bed to make it easier for both of us to sit on the bed. After I hand her to him, I lay my head on his shoulder and we just can’t stop staring at her. “I’d like to name her after your sister,” I say, glancing at him. “Or maybe your brother?” He glances over at me, not expecting that. “Emerson?” he says. “That’s kind of cute for a girl name. It isn’t until this moment that I finally make a decision about him. About us. About what’s best for our family. I was blinded to all the best things about him thanks to all the glimpses I got of him when he was at his worst. Five minutes of

witnessing him at his worst couldn't make up for even five years of him at his best. I don't make this decision for me and I don't make it for Ryle. I make it for her. "Ryle?" I want a divorce." I don't think I realized what choice I was going to make until I held my daughter for the first time. "What if..." My voice breaks. "What if she came to you and said, 'My husband tried to rape me, Daddy. He held me down while I begged him to stop. But he swears he'll never do it again. What should I do, Daddy?' What would you say to her, Ryle? Tell me. I need to know what you would say to our daughter if the man she loves with all her heart ever hurts her." "I would beg her to leave him," he says through his tears. I would beg her not to go back, no matter how much he loves her. **She's worth so much more.**" We become a sobbing mess of tears and broken hearts and shattered dreams. We hold each other. We hold our daughter. And as hard as this choice is, we break the pattern before the pattern breaks us. In the last fifteen minutes, he became a father to a beautiful little girl. **That's what fifteen minutes can do to a person. It can destroy them. It can save them.** I know the day will come when he'll understand that I made the right choice by his daughter. Cycles exist because they are excruciating to break. **It takes an astronomical amount of pain and courage to disrupt a familiar pattern.** I kiss her on the forehead and make her a promise. "It ends with us."

I'm in such a rush, a man has to step out of our way and into the wall just to avoid being plowed over. "Lily?" A familiar voice - Atlas. "What's her name?" "Emerson. We call her Emmy sometimes. Her middle name is Dory. It's Ryle's day to have her." "Opened a new restaurant on Boylston last month." "Wow. Congratulations. I'll have to take Mom there to check it out soon." "Lily," he says quietly. "I feel like my life is good enough for you now. So whenever you're ready..." I pull back and look up at him. "Do you donate to charity?" Atlas laughs with confusion. "Several. Why?" "Do you want kids someday?" He nods. "Of course I do." "Do you think you'll ever want to leave Boston?" He shakes his head. "No. Never. Everything is better here, remember?" His answers give me the reassurance I need. I smile up at him. "Okay. I'm ready." He pulls me tight against him and I laugh. He brings his mouth to my ear, and in a whisper, he says, **"You can stop swimming now, Lily. We finally reached the shore."**