

ONE

Karina, 2018

The wind whips around the coffee shop each time the old wooden door creaks open. It's unusually cold for September and I'm pretty sure it's some kind of punishment from the universe for agreeing to meet up with him, today of all days. What was I thinking?

I barely had time to put makeup over the swollen pockets under my eyes. And this outfit I'm wearing—when was the last time it saw the wash? Again, what was I thinking?

Right now I'm thinking that my head aches and I'm not sure if I have any ibuprofen in my purse. I'm also thinking that it was smart of me to choose the table closest to the door so I can get away quickly if I need to. This place in the middle of Edgewood? Neutral and not the least bit romantic. Another good choice. I've only been here a few times, but it's my favorite coffee house in Atlanta. The seating is pretty limited—just ten tables—so I guess they want to encourage a quick turnaround. There are a couple of Instagram worthy features, like the succulent wall and that clean black and white tile behind the baristas, but overall it's quite severe. Harsh gray and concrete everywhere. Loud blenders mixing kale and whatever fruit is trendy at the moment.

There is only one creaky door: one way in, one way out. I look down at my phone and wipe my palms on my black dress.

Will he hug me? Shake my hand?

I can't imagine such a formal gesture. Not from him. Damn. I'm working myself up again and he isn't even here yet. For about the fourth time today, I can feel the panic bubbling just

below my chest and it dawns on me that every time I imagine our reunion I see him the way I did the very first time I laid eyes on him. I have no idea which version of him I'll get. I haven't seen him since last winter and I have no idea who he is anymore. And really, did I ever know?

Maybe I only ever knew a version of him—a bright and hollow form of the man I'm waiting on now.

I suppose I could have avoided him for the rest of my life, but the thought of never seeing him again seems worse than sitting here now. At least I can admit that. Here I am warming my hands on a coffee cup, waiting for him to come through that that raspy door after swearing to him, to myself, to anyone who would listen for the last few months that I would never . . .

He's not due for another five minutes, but if he's anything like the man I remember, he'll strut in late with that scowl on his face.

When the door tears open it's a woman who walks in. Her blond hair is a nest stuck to the top of her tiny head and she's holding a cell phone against her red cheek.

"I don't give a shit, Howie. Get it done," she snaps, pulling the phone away with a string of curse words.

I hate Atlanta. The people here are all like her, tetchy and forever in a hurry. It wasn't always like this. Well, maybe it was; I wasn't, though. But things change. I used to love this city, especially downtown. The dining options are out of this world and for a foodie living in a small town—well, that alone was reason enough to move here. There's always something to do in Atlanta and everything is open later than it is around Ft. Benning. But the biggest draw for me at the time was that I wasn't constantly reminded of military life. No camo everywhere you

look. No ACUs on the men and women waiting in line for the movies, at the gas station or Dunkin Donuts. People speaking real words, not just acronyms. And plenty of non-military haircuts to admire.

I loved Atlanta, but he changed that.

We changed that.

We.

That was the closest I was getting to admitting any blame in what went down.