

I grew up inside a lightning bolt, in a family of pure momentum. My siblings and I were young, stupid, and fearless in our white gingerbread house, surrounded by dark earth, green shoots, and wild woods—untamed beasts running loose from morning to night. We snarled and bucked, more a pack than a family.

Born less than a year apart, my brother Ethan and I spent most of our lives scrapping after the same few things, pinching each other where we knew it would hurt the most. But we also protected each other. When Trevor Paltree shoved Ethan off the tall metal slide the first day of preschool, I kicked Trevor's little ass, and I'd do it again.

Only, now, I didn't know what protecting my brother looked like, though I felt fairly certain that kicking his fiancée's ass was not it. Besides, I couldn't even say what exactly Beth was up to, which (admittedly) undermined my argument. Putting my head down and going along with the wedding might feel cowardly, but it also seemed like the least destructive path forward.

So, that's how I found myself pulling up to Ethan and Beth's house to pick up my puce monstrosity of a bridesmaid's dress with Beth's recent words still replaying in my mind: Riley, you know I'd never do anything to hurt Ethan. The problem was that she also once said with a wink and a smile that what Ethan didn't know couldn't hurt him. I parked in the shade of a lowlimbed oak and got out, lifting my hair off my neck to catch the breeze. The autumn sun had built throughout the afternoon into the kind of fleetingly gorgeous day that makes up for Ohio's multitude of weather sins: one last warm postscript to summer. Rain loomed in the low shelf of clouds to the north. I crossed my fingers that it would hold off until I could get home to walk Bruno. Maybe I could even get a run in if my energy held out.

My phone buzzed, and I knew without looking it would be Audra. She called most days and knew that just the previous night, I'd finally worked up the nerve to have a conversation with Ethan about Beth. She would want the details. I was amazed she had waited this long.

"How'd it go with Ethan?" Her melodious voice skipped along briskly. People usually went with what she said simply because they were so swept up with how she said it. As her sister, I was an exception.

"Hello to you too." I continued toward the house but slowed my pace. "I'll give you one guess how it went."

"Hello, *dearest* Riley. I guess he got mad."

"Not just mad. He guilt-tripped me. I asked him if he'd noticed anything wrong with Beth, and he acted all injured about it. He told me, 'She thinks you're her friend.'" I mimicked Ethan's self-righteous tone. The jab still stung. "I told him I think of her as a friend too, which is how I know she's hiding something." Granted, I couldn't untangle what it was. It was something I sensed more than saw—a shift in posture or flicker behind an expression. The past few weeks she'd become more self-contained than ever, which was saying something for her.

"Yeah, but can you really be friends with someone who has no personality? It's like being friends with a mannequin. I don't know how you can tell if she's hiding something when she never shares anything—"

"Look, I can't talk about it now." I lowered my voice as I neared the house. "I'm at their place getting my dress. I'll call you later."

I climbed the porch steps, the front of their house looking so Instagram-perfect that I wondered whether I'd been seeing problems that weren't there. The afternoon light slanted across the pumpkins and yellow chrysanthemums that Beth had arranged just so. Dried bundles

of corn rattled in the breeze. Beneath the pale-blue porch swing, Beth had set out a matching ceramic bowl full of kibble for Bibbs, the half-feral cat that had adopted her and Ethan.

The only thing amiss was the open door of the old-fashioned cast-iron mailbox nestled amid the pumpkins and flowers. Beth would kill the mail carrier for ruining the ambiance. I grabbed the few pieces of mail in the box and shut the little door obligingly, like a good future sister-in-law.

Careful not to disturb a precarious wreath of orange berries, I knocked on the screen door and tapped my foot, ready to grab my puffy dress and go. I had been a whirl of motion all day, zipping through work and crossing items off my to-do list. I worked for Wicks, an oversized candle company that sold overpriced candles. Today was my last day in the office before a trip to England to set up the IT network at our new British headquarters.

For months, I'd been fighting some kind of long-term bug my doctors couldn't figure out, but today I felt a glimmer of my former self, twitchy with energy and moving at a clip to get everything done.