

Cracked

"To promises."

As the woman poured tea, Alice felt herself drift into focus. Steam rose from the bone china teacup, and Alice became aware that she was awake. Had she slept?

Silver tinkled softly against white china as the woman stirred warm honey into the cup. Alice shivered like ice candles on the lake during spring thaw—then whoosh, the ice was gone, and there she was. Warm. Liquid.

The woman poured a second cup. The woman was familiar, special to Alice. She belonged here, sitting across the little table from Alice in the lakeside cabin, pouring tea.

"One year to the day," the woman said, wrapping her hands around the blue Jasperware cup in front of her.

Alice knew that cup: pale blue porcelain except for the relief, a white-robed muse holding a wind instrument. The cup had been a gift. Yes, Alice had given it to the woman. And the woman had given Alice the bone china cup decorated with a pink cuckoo and peach flowers. Alice's cuckoo cup that now sat steaming in Alice's usual place.

But why was her cup's handle broken?

Never mind that. The woman, the woman was important. She felt like home. But who was she?

Alice's fingers hovered over her teacup, seeking warmth. A memory: two girls walking mittenend hand-in-hand across the frozen lake, coming home to warm their chilly limbs by the wheezing wall heater. Hot cocoa afterwards. Decades ago.

The woman slumped forward and stared into the blue cup cradled in her hands, then set the cup aside without drinking. "Alice," she whispered.

Jane, Alice thought. The woman was Jane. How could she have forgotten Jane?

"It's too hard," Jane said.

Alice reached out, hands fluttering like Jane's finches . . . Jane's finches! Jane had saved

her allowance and bought the first pair the summer that she and Alice had turned twelve. The clerk had claimed that both birds were female, but suddenly five tiny eggs appeared in the nest and out popped five tufted and voracious babies, and that had been that; more than forty years of finches had lived in a series of increasingly elaborate cages in every home Jane had occupied. The latest cage was sitting in a corner by the breakfast nook next to Jane's flute and the music stand.

Alice turned toward the nook, energized by the flood of memory.

The cage was empty, the stand and flute, dusty. Alice whimpered.

"I miss you." Jane swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I think of something I want to tell you, something to share . . ." Jane's face crumpled. "Damn."

I'm here, Alice wanted to say.

"This morning a loon spent three hours by the dock, just floating there, not doing anything." Jane pointed her finger at the cuckoo design on Alice's cup. "A *loon*." She lowered her finger. "I sat there for three hours, talking to it. Pretending it was you."

The old joke: Alice was Jane's looney bird. Never mind that loons weren't cuckoos. Never mind that the old joke had come true.

Jane fell silent. Alice listened to waves lap at the granite shore. Sun sparkled off the lake and pierced the leafy shadows, lancing through the open glass doors like oncoming headlights. Memory dazzled Alice: she and Jane in college, in a red Cadillac on a double-date with the guys (their guys!), brakes busted, car careening down a dark road at night before they'd nosed the Caddy to a halt on an incline. She and Jane had eventually married those guys. What were their names?

"You shouldn't have made me promise," Jane said, toying with her cup, turning it round and round in its saucer. The deep secret scent of dark fennel and blown roses wafted into the air, along with an unnamed topnote that Alice dimly recalled. Not Jane's usual blend of tea. But an important blend . . .

The topnote made Alice jumpy.

"I'm so tired."

Oh, Jane. After the guys had died, Alice had been tired, and Jane had been tired. They'd survived, though. Found the energy to go on. For nearly twenty years. Because she and Jane had had each other.

And then she'd fallen ill and made Jane promise.

"I remember," Jane said. "I remember the purple lunch sack you were carrying when we met in first grade, I remember the shiny satin dresses your mom made us for prom, I remember the day you got your first accounting job, I remember the disastrous party you threw when I was named principal flautist and the absolutely delightful party when I retired." Her voice dropped. "I remember how cold the doctor's office was the morning we got your diagnosis."

Red-rimmed eyes stared unseeing in Alice's direction. "I remember your funeral."

Alice twitched. She was dead, then?

Jane dropped her head into her hands, jostling the table. Her untasted cup of tea rattled, and a yellow sheet of paper under her elbow rustled.

Across the lake, a loon cried.

Jane lifted the paper, studied the few lines she had written above her signature, folded the paper slowly, and propped it against the Wedgwood tea pot. Taking her phone out of her pocket, she selected a playlist and closed her eyes.

"You always were a control freak, Alice." Jane sounded exhausted. "I get it. I get that you wanted to die on your own terms. But that promise," her eyes opened, "is killing me."

Agitated by Jane's mood, the empty bird cage, the frightening topnote in the tea, and the gloomy flute music emanating from Jane's phone, Alice found herself floating around the room, desperate to *do something*.

Problem was, the dead don't usually do anything. Or if they did, Alice couldn't remember how. Rap on tables? Haunt scrying balls? Blow floating trumpets? Surely any decent control-freak should be able to figure it out.

Alice pushed through the chilly fog in her brain and anchored her attention on Jane's flute. She tried to lift the flute off the music stand, but her hands couldn't grasp anything. Leaning down, she blew into the mouthpiece, but the flute made no noise—not even the incompetent huffing sounds that she'd managed to coax from it when Jane had tried to teach her to play.

"It's guilt," Jane said from her seat at the table. "I just can't get over the guilt."

Alice felt as if she were dissipating. Dimly, she was aware that Jane had pulled both tea cups together and was fingering their sides.

"They've gone cold." Jane lifted the pot in its cozy and topped off the two cups.

"To you, Alice," Jane said, placing the blue porcelain cup to her lips. A single tear slid from her right eye and down her cheek.

No! Warmth surged through Alice. She reached out and caught the tear as it fell from Jane's chin.

The tear rose in the air, shining in a sunbeam.

Jane paused. Slowly, she put the cup down.

Alice moved the tear through the air, making the outline of a heart, like sparklers on the Fourth of July.

Hesitantly, Jane reached for her phone, turned on the video, and recorded the tear.

Alice remembered the many times that Jane had reminded her how to operate a phone, reminded and reminded and reminded until the reminding no longer worked. Jane hadn't wanted to acknowledge that the reminding no longer worked. One evening, for a brief few moments, the fog had lifted and Alice was aware. She had insisted that Jane fulfill her promise.

Now, Alice insisted that the phone ring.

And the phone rang.

Still focused on the levitating tear, Jane answered.

"Jane," Alice said, "it's me. I'm here. Don't drink the tea."

#

Jane's phone case broke when she dropped it, but that was okay, the phone still worked. And now Jane's broken case matched Alice's broken cup.

"Were you trying to scare me to death?" Jane said, shaking the phone.

"No. I was trying to stop you from killing yourself."

Jane mumbled something.

"What was that?"

"Typical, Alice. You make me kill you because you can't remember, and when I want to kill myself because I can't forget, you won't let me."

"Yep. That sums it up. Why did you put the secobarbital in the tea, anyway?"

"Because you hate needles."

"And today?"

"Tradition."

They sat in silence for a while.

"So, now what?" Jane asked.

"You could start by dumping the tea."

Jane put the phone on speaker. "Does that mean you intend to stick around?"

"If I can figure out how."

"It's not some sort of angel-gets-wings deal, is it? You save me, then fly away to heaven?"

Alice snorted. "I'm no angel."

"It's your anniversary," Jane said. "You died one year ago today, at 5:36 p.m. Maybe you're back for that and you'll disappear at 5:36 this evening."

"The phone says it's 6:09."

"Oh. That's okay then." Jane placed the teacups, teapot, and phone onto a silver tray and carried it into the kitchen.

Alice watched as Jane dumped the tea down the drain.

And the world vanished.

#

When the world returned, every burner on the stove was boiling water, and every teapot and teacup in the cabin was filled with tea. Jane was moving methodically from stove to pot to cup, muttering at the phone, which now rode in a small purse hanging from her neck.

"Jane?"

"Alice!" Jane throttled the phone in her haste to reply. "I've figured it out. It's the heat and the volume plus your cuckoo cup and the Wedgwood teapot. Both should be kept full, and the tea should be kept as hot as possible."

"What?"

"The hotter the tea and the fuller the pot and the cup, the more coherent you are."

"How—"

"The secobarbital doesn't matter one way or another; I can leave it out. Funny about that. But using other pots, cups, or tea blends doesn't work. Just the cup and pot and the fennel roses tea I used a year ago. A fresh blend of fennel and roses works, which is lucky, but I'll have to be really careful not to break the pot or the cup. Especially the cup. That cracked handle makes me nervous. But I don't want to try to fix it, in case that's part of what's making all this work. Because, you know, the handle broke when the cup dropped after, after I had you drink

God."

"I'm sorry, Jane."

"No. No being sorry. Look. I'm riddled with guilt, yeh, and part of that's on you for making me help you die. But part of it's on me, because I don't know if I promised to help for your sake or because I just couldn't deal with you being sick anymore."

"I didn't want you to deal with it. That was the point."

"Kinda missed the point."

"I didn't want you to watch me turn into a lump of meat who didn't even recognize you! I didn't want you to spend your days and nights making sure I didn't burn the cabin down or piss my pants or drown in the lake.

"And now," Alice continued, looking at the mess in the kitchen, "I don't want you to start all over again, taking care of me, keeping me going."

"No," Jane said. "This time, it doesn't matter what you want."

She topped off Alice's cuckoo cup, wrapped a second cozy around the Wedgwood teapot, and turned down the burners under three of the cooking pots that held boiling water.

"This time," Jane said, "we do it like we've done everything else. We survive. Together."

Alice sighed, warm with memory. Even cracked, her cup was full.

#

Once more, Alice awoke in steam and heat to the scent of fennel and roses. As always, her first sight was of Jane.

Late afternoon sunlight slanted low in the sky, falling across the table where Jane sat pouring tea. The light told lies: it gave Jane's cheeks the flush of health and threw smoky date-night shadows into the hollows of her eyes.

"Hello, my friend," Alice said. Her voice sounded odd; they were using the old phone and its antiquated speaker today, not one of the clearer devices that she'd learned to manipulate over the years.

"Hello, Alice." Smiling at the usual spot in the air above Alice's chair, Jane lifted her blue Jasperware cup. "Welcome home," she said.

Jane's wrist was painfully thin as she took the first sip, and her fingers shook as she set the cup back down.

Alice leaned over her own cup and inhaled the muggy warmth. "I like the way you've tweaked the blend. You've got the touch. Never a misstep—well, except for that weird white rose debacle."

"*Not a good choice.*"

"Spectral hiccups. Oooohh Oooohhh Urk." Alice made dramatically interrupted moaning sounds. Jane had never been able to get the stains out of the upstairs carpet. Just one more thing that would never get done now. She stopped moaning. "This batch especially. It perks me right up."

"I figured I'd better make this one kick ass."

"Done."

Jane set her cup on one arm of her wheelchair and maneuvered away from the table to look out the sliding glass doors. Beyond the screened porch and the awkward ramp that had had to be built to accommodate the (hated!) wheelchair, a now carefully level path led to the greenhouse Jane had erected years ago. Inside the greenhouse, roses and fennel bloomed and branched, all coaxed and coddled by Jane's loving hand after she'd discovered that growing and drying her own ingredients made a tea that produced tighter coherence and brighter memory.

Alice followed and sat in the air next to Jane's chair while Jane drank her tea.

Closing her eyes, Jane took a deep breath, drawing in the scent of pine trees and humus-rich soil. . . and started coughing. The deep ragged hacking sent Alice darting around the room like a battered moth. Finally, with a visible effort of will, Jane quieted down, but Alice had trouble finding herself. Where were the pieces?

Jane steered back to the table and tested Alice's cup. "It's getting cold." Using a gravy baster, she syphoned out a good portion of the cooled liquid in the cup, replacing it immediately with hot tea from the cozy-wrapped Wedgwood pot.

Alice sprang back into focus. "Rubber band girl."

Of course, they had long since developed the optimal method for keeping the tea cup (carefully) warm and the tea (vigorously) hot, as well as refilling the pot with fresh water and tea blend: small warming burners and various gadgetry readily available at any cooking store. But for this occasion, they were doing everything old school: the old phone in a little purse hanging over Jane's heart, the Wedgwood tea pot protected only by a cozy, the bone china cuckoo cup with the busted handle sitting exposed on its saucer.

"We are clever women," Alice said.

"I won't disagree, but how, exactly?" Jane pulled an old envelope out of her vest pocket and placed it on the table.

Alice paused for a moment, respecting the envelope. "We figured out an extremely excellent system for the tea. And for the telepresence stick. I love rolling that stick around."

"Much better than when you hooked into the TV. That was just too creepy."

"The stick's perfect. As long as you don't ask me to beep-and-flash once for yes and twice for no."

"And as long as you don't sing 'Daisy'." Jane chuckled, then wheezed.

"I wish I was using the stick today," Alice said.

"Tradition," Jane said carefully.

"Tradition," Alice agreed.

After a time, the bone china cup grew tepid, and Alice grew foggy. A fresh infusion of warm tea brought her around.

The sun was setting. Jane reached up and turned on the overhead light.

"Alice, someone else could make the tea."

"Maybe yes and maybe no. But it makes no difference."

So Jane dropped the subject, and they talked for a while, of gardens in the summer, of dances in the spring, of things then and now, and only once of the future, while mosquitoes whined outside in the dark: "We're going to hell," Jane said.

"Haven't we done that already?" Alice asked muzzily, lost and uncertain.

Jane rewarmed Alice's cup. Even after draining the pot, the cup remained half empty.

Alice felt only partly there. "Is that it, then?" *The last cup? The last memory?*

Jane fiddled with the phone's menu and called up a playlist.

"That darn song," Alice said. *Loon on the Lake for Three Flutes*. More tradition.

"And the will," Jane said, placing her palm on top of the envelope. "Everything is taken care of, Alice."

"But you always get the hard part." Alice sounded dreamy, small.

"Oh, Alice," Jane fought back tears. "I wish I could hold your hand."

As a tear dripped from Jane's chin, Alice caught it and set it spinning.

"Show off," Jane said softly. Coughing. Crying.

Alice felt . . . cold. Alice . . .

The tear froze in midair. Then fell.

#

After the tear fell, and after others followed, Jane filled Alice's cup with ice cold water from the pitcher on the table. Lifting the lid off the sugar bowl full of secobarbital, she dumped an overdose into Alice's cup, waited for it to dissolve, and swallowed the mixture.

Jane settled back in her wheelchair, cradling the cup in her hands. So many years, protecting that precious, cracked cup. "To promises," she whispered.

A loon called from across the lake. Another answered. Eventually, the cup fell.
And shattered.