

# No Longer and Not Yet

EXCERPT II

## Falling

After her brother fell off the side of the mountain, little pieces started falling off Sage. She started losing eyeglasses, wallets, keys right off the bat. She just couldn't seem to keep things attached anymore. She'd go to unlock the door to her house thinking that the keys were actually in her hand but when she'd look down her hand would be empty, waiting for the keys to appear. They didn't. She called the locksmith so often they started to date. Jake was sweet, and having a locksmith around was handy at the time. He seemed to be taken with her too. At first it was a good deal for him: locks and keys and sex. After a while he thought he had to do the work for nothing but he still wanted to be with Sage. Naturally she wanted to lose him. So she got Jake to cut some extra sets and gave them to a neighbor to keep. She thought she'd better break up with him. It just didn't seem right—a person like her with a key man. But when she told him it was over he was genuinely upset. “Was it just the keys you wanted? I make a good living. You've never even seen my house in Forest Hills — I have five guys working for me and we all make a decent living. I thought it was fate that Luis was out sick that day and I was the one came to your apartment.”

“It's over, Jake,” Sage said. Why did he have to be named Jake? When she said those words she was a slightly outdated character in a Raymond Chandler novel. Maybe if his mother had named him Joe, Tom. Anyway, she knew it was over. She found herself saying with her lip curled, “It was never meant to be. I'm kind of a crazy thing right now. You don't want to be involved with a broad like me. I'd be bad for you.” She hadn't been completely sure she was making the right decision until then. She was still perfectly capable of losing all the keys he'd made me. She was afraid might start talking that way permanently. Anything seemed possible at that point.

She took a week off from work. It wasn't as if she could lose her job. She had her brother's death and tenure. She wanted to get out to Colorado to pack up his things: make arrangements for his rent, his bills, that kind of thing. His roommates said they'd do it for her but she was hoping the trip would help her. She wasn't sure what she expected to find out there.

They couldn't get his body back; it was in place that was too dangerous to send a recovery team, an unfathomable crevice. She didn't have to go out there immediately, but she had become afraid of what would drop off her next.

When she went to call for a plane reservation she couldn't find her glasses. She was standing by her desk bending over, squinting trying to punch in the numbers by feel. She knew she was hopeless without her glasses, she start to cry, blurring what little vision she had left. She called her friend Naomi who was number one on her speed dial. Sage knew Naomi was the person she needed tonight. She asked Naomi to call and make the plane reservation for her. As soon as Naomi found out that Sage's brother died Sage knew that Naomi would try to make this into an opportunity to get her friend to finally see a shrink. Naomi was a shrink. So what else could Sage expect?

But the way she figured it was that she and Naomi had a deal: Sage represented the three people still living in New York who weren't shrinks and who didn't go to shrinks and Naomi represents the rest of New York — the true believers. Someone had to prove there can be mixed friendships.

Naomi came right over as soon as Sage told her what had happened. They stayed up all night drinking the scotch and eating Lindt chocolate with hazelnuts. Naomi brought them with her. How did she know to bring those two things? They looked at old photographs of Sage with her and her brother Tim from when they were tiny kids right up to a recent picnic in Riverside Park when he had been in New York. Naomi was all listening utterances—just ohhmygod and an inhaling of saliva that meant I can't believe that, murmurs and hushed hmms. But the next night when Sage went over to Naomi's apartment, Naomi didn't take long to start in. “You know you might think about getting some backup here.” Sage knew exactly where Naomi was going.

“Naomi, don't go there, don't start on me with that. “I swear I'll just go home and ...” the implied threat, Sage knew she was being manipulative in the face of someone who really cared, but she didn't give a damn. She wanted to just stay on Naomi's couch in the living room and not sleep. Sage would know that Naomi was in the next room. Naomi's daughter, Mia, asleep in the other bedroom. A home.

Naomi drove her to the airport. “Just something to think about,” she kept saying on the way. Not really Sage didn't answer. She just looked out the window so Naomi would leave her alone. Sage needed a ride and her friend's presence. But we never get the package just the way we want it. Sage knew that. We have to take it the way it came. But Sage knew that you can't always help yourself, even when you know better.

Like the way Sage was annoyed that Naomi hadn't used the airline where Sage had an account to get frequent flyer points. She know — how could she criticize Naomi for helping her? But Sage had spent hours on the phone just the week before getting this account with United. She put me on American, which Sage knows is a good airline. Don't get me wrong — they have a good safety record. Her brother, Tim, used to fly with them all the time. But Sage's friend, Marlon, who teaches with her, had told her about United. They had the best something record. How could she be thinking about frequent flyer points? Don't ask.

On the plane ride out she began to wonder if their friendship was going to survive Naomi's need for her to see a shrink.

Sage's brother's roommates met her at the airport. They were so upset: they were crying when she came through the gate. Four guys, in jeans, plaid shirts, climbing boots, weeping over their lost friend. Could there be a more beautiful sight?

They all worked for this small offbeat computer company. Nar, the guy who was driving that night, was the one who got Tim the job with Neruda — which's the name of the company. They were all going to be poets before they got into computers.

Nar's the one who designed the way the components fit together — one of those spatial relations genius types — could fix a vacuum, pack a car trunk using every bit of space and design a hell of a computer. But they all worked there. They were tight: cooked, a ate together, played ultimate all the time—an incredible bunch of guys.

She stayed with them for a week. They were so kind. Lent her their clothes, toiletries, everything. Naturally all of Sage's luggage had gotten rerouted to Texas. It didn't matter. It was better this way. It helped her blend into Tim's life. She slept in his room. She needed to sleep in the sheets he had last slept in — one of the last places his skin had been. They had that smell of sheets that should have been changed, a faint oily smell. She was so grateful they hadn't been changed. So familiar—him — Tim — his smell. You know, all the clichés: his voice on the answering machine, games he had saved on his computer. Nar had designed it especially for Tim. Did she say Na was Indian? He was the one Sage felt most comfortable with. Was that just because he had been driving the car that first night? Who knows? He'd cook—brought her food. She couldn't seem to leave that room.

After a few days the bed began to have her smell instead. Couldn't shower. She only left his bed to go to the john. She still couldn't get her head around the idea that her brother had taken up mountain climbing. She pulled his laptop into bed with her and spent all her time roaming around in there. This was territory that Sage could see him moving through. She started down through the directories. She was trying to find anything that would help her get a grip. She read through his journals, late into the night, entries about someone at work he was trying to work up the nerve to ask out, other ones about their mother calling him driving him nuts, about their father not calling, driving him nuts. Sage isn't sure what she was looking for — at least some hint as to when he had switched from hiking to mountain climbing. We're not a mountain climbing kind of family. He wouldn't even climb the trees in their yard in New Rochelle. Sage had been climbing around inside Tim's drive for a couple of days. The further down she went the less she came upon anything interesting. She began to get real fidgety. It was driving her nuts that his smell was disappearing under her own, so she asked Nar to stay and talk to her the next time he brought her some weed to smoke.

Nar told her they all had been talking about her taking Tim's job at Neruda. She is a CS teacher at the junior high where she teaches, but she closed her eyes, and bit her lip.

Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and told her that he had been the one who had talked Tim into taking up climbing. Tim was the kind of guy who had always wished he could do something like take up climbing — never felt he had the talent, the nerve. She could see why hanging out with someone like Nar would make you feel you could do it. He'd lead the way — you'd follow. It would all be all right.

Nar had that kind of effect on people. He leaned toward her and ran his finger along the slope of her ear. The sensation of the tip of his finger on such a thin piece of skin brought her up out of her grief.

“I couldn't tell you before. There were people watching from the lodge when he fell.” She scorched her ass closer to him. Swallowed.

“He left the ridge. It must have been getting too steep because it looked like he had decided to traverse the scree field. He was heading for the west ridge, but he must have lost his footing — he started to slide. He managed to flatten himself out and stop. He was close to the edge of the field: He had been reaching for a tree, a stump, something, but the next thing they saw he was sliding. Fifteen feet. Off the scree—then it was all air.” Sage jerked her eyes away, looked down, trying to shake that off. Nar waited. Didn't anything. Then she reached over and pulled him toward her mouth.

Can anyone explain why people move in the directions they travel — up, down, off?

She felt bad that that Tim's sheets smelled of their lovemaking. But somewhere in the middle of the night she had one of those moments, an intuition, a flash of absolute knowing. Nar's smell was already on these sheets. The sheets had a hint, a trace memory—Sage had an infallible nose — She knew that Nar and Tim, that her brother and Nar, had been lovers. Now here they were in Tim's bed, where he and Nar had heated and sealed their love. It brought things into focus. Tim had followed Nar up mountains.

She was sure it had brought him a kind of pride he had never had before. Until it killed him.

Nar told me he had warned Tim never to climb alone. And Sage knew Tim was the kind of guy not to listen about the basics. That wasn't Nar's fault.

They spent a week together in Tim's bed. She was sure Tim's spirit or energy or whatever you want to call it — his residue was there in the room with them, completed delighted about this.

On the eighth day she got up and started packing Tim's things, gave most of his stuff to his roommates, his poetry books, his clothes, his boots, all the key stuff. Nar helped her. But she packed Tim's computer herself. Somewhere in the interstices between the hardware and the software, between the root directory and the files was something of Nar and Tim. She needed to take a piece of them home with her. She had to have something to hold onto.

She held the computer on her lap all the way home on the plane. She wondered around all of the directories all the way home on the plane. She wouldn't even take a drink from the stewardess. Finally she took the risk she had been avoiding: She asked the computer to search for all the hidden files. She found what she knew she would. She read a few lines, then moved the directory even deeper in. After that she shut the machine down and asked for a Vodka straight up. Put her head back, closed her eyes, tried to imagine Jake with Naomi. Everyone knew Mort had to go. Jake had the tools to open doors, Naomi with the tools to open you. This would work. Naomi loved the unconventional. Sage was reaching for anything to stop thinking about Nar.

A few times after she got home she found herself in the closet where she put the computer up on her highest shelf where no one but she could possibly come upon it. It was an awkward spot to get it down from. But she had to be sure it was safe. She didn't call Naomi to tell her she was home. She just needed to be completely alone. Not haunted. She'd go into the closet and close the door behind her. Sit on a small stool she kept in there. She felt calm, flat as a plate in there. She only allowed herself one or two tokes.

She was going to have to decide what to do. In the closet there was no one but her, the computer and what she was pretty sure was a zygote inside of her. She was sure Tim would want her to keep this baby, wasn't his too in a way—what there was left of them as a family now? She knew she needed to write a long journal entry to sort this all out on her own, but it belonged in the directory she buried in Tim's computer. Every time she started to reach for the computer she pictured it slipping out of her hands.