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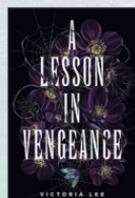
WHAT KEEPS
YOU UP AT
NIGHT?

A POWERFUL
HOMECOMING

HOPE



ON SALE
6.29



ON SALE
8.3



ON SALE
5.4



ON SALE
5.18



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7.6



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Sunkissed



AUTHOR OF THE FILL-IN BOYFRIEND

Kasie West

GO BACK
TO QUIZ!

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . .

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: West, Kasie, author.

Title: Sunkissed / Kasie West.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, [2021] | Audience: Ages 12 and up. | Summary: Betrayed by her best friend and dragged off to a remote family camp, seventeen-year-old Avery's dreams of a perfect summer seem over until a whirlwind romance leads to an unexpected journey of self-discovery.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020031481 (print) | LCCN 2020031482 (ebook) | ISBN 978-0-593-17626-9 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-0-593-17627-6 (library binding) | ISBN 978-0-593-17628-3 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Family life—Fiction. | Camps—Fiction. | Love—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.W51837 Sun 2021 (print) | LCC PZ7.W51837 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 11.2-Columbus MT Pro.
Interior design by Cathy Bobak

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

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Sunkissed

Kasie West

DELACORTE PRESS

Chapter 1

I TOOK A BREATH AND CLOSED MY EYES, LETTING THE SUN-drenched glass warm me as I leaned my head against the car window. This was going to be a perfect summer. If I said it enough times, it would come true. After everything that had happened this week, I needed a good summer. The one before my senior year was mine to claim, Dad had said months ago. I was ready to claim it.

Up front, my parents had turned the radio to barely audible but I could just make out a Taylor Swift song. My AirPods had lost their charge ten minutes ago, rendering the remainder of my perfectly curated road trip playlist—*Stuck in the Backseat with You*—useless. As I felt myself drifting toward sleep, my sister's voice rang out louder than necessary from beside me.

“Hey, viewers. Happy summer! We’re on hour four of our car ride and so ready to be done. Say hi to my older sister, Avery!”

Lauren had her elbows propped on the pillows between us and was holding up her phone, the camera facing me. Behind her phone, she gave a silent plea that said, *Give me something, anything, aside from*

your normal boring face. Since boring was the face I was born with, I held up a peace sign, which apparently was good enough, because she flipped the recording back to her. “This year, the parents are taking us to the middle of the forest. Are you ready to join us?” She pointed the camera out the car window, the tall pine trees zooming by in a hazy blur.

The middle of the forest wasn’t exactly how I’d describe the four-star family camp we’d be spending the summer at, but exaggeration is the key to any good social media video. I shook my AirPods case as if that would make them charge faster. I needed some noise-canceling, head-clearing music.

“Did you girls pack your swimsuits?” Mom asked, even though there was nothing we could do about it now, four hours from home, if we hadn’t.

Lauren dropped her hand. “Mom, I was recording.”

“Oh, sorry,” Mom whispered.

“Well, I’m not anymore.”

“I hear there’s a huge Slip ’N Slide at this camp,” Dad said, as if this was the most exciting thing a seventeen- and a fifteen-year-old could hear. “Supersized for super kids.” He laughed at his own joke, and I couldn’t help but laugh too.

Lauren gave me the *Really?* look, then said, “There’s real water, too, though, right?”

“Real water?” Mom asked.

“A lake or something?”

“Yes, there’s a lake *and* a pool,” Dad responded as he took a curve too fast, pushing me against the door.

“I don’t know why we couldn’t just go to the camp we went to

a couple years ago,” Lauren complained. “It was closer and the roads weren’t so windy.”

“Because this year is our epic adventure,” Dad said. “Next summer Avery will be so busy prepping for college she’ll boycott a family vacation.”

“So true,” I said, and smiled when my mom turned around to make sure she shouldn’t be offended. When she saw my face, she gave my leg a little slap.

Both my parents had summers off. Mom was a professor at UCLA and Dad taught sixth grade and coached middle-school basketball. So most summers for as long as I could remember, we went on an “adventure.” Sometimes it was a cabin on the lake or a KOA near the beach. And most of the time, it really was an adventure. Sometimes even a good one.

My phone vibrated against my thigh on the seat next to me, and I immediately tensed. I didn’t want to look. I didn’t want to read more excuses. I was trying to start my perfect summer. It buzzed again. I sucked in a breath and looked at the screen. As I expected, it was from my best friend, Shay.

I’m sorry. I can’t go the whole summer knowing you’re mad at me. It was an accident.

I wasn’t sure how one *accidentally* kissed their best friend’s ex-boyfriend. Trent and I had only been broken up for a couple weeks! I had even thought we might get back together. Now I wondered if Shay was the real reason we’d broken up in the first place. They obviously liked each other. I felt stupid for thinking Trent and I had just hit a rough spot and would work it out.

Another message popped up.

It was a big mistake. We were both just talking about how you were leaving for the whole summer and how much we were going to miss you! Please forgive me.

I put the phone, screen down, on the seat, as if the messages would go away if I couldn't see them.

"Hello, everyone!" Lauren said again into her camera. "Time for our summer trek into a wooded forest. Trees and lakes and excitement. Hope you're all ready to join me. Say hi, Avery."

The recording was on me again. I could feel my eyes stinging from the texts. I clenched my teeth and willed myself to control the tears. Finally, I faced Lauren and puffed my cheeks out like a blowfish, a creature with a defense mechanism I could appreciate.

She lowered her phone and raised her eyebrows. "Can I post that?"

I honestly didn't care what her fifty followers thought of me. Well, actually I did . . . and I hated myself for that. But she was giving me that pleading look again.

I sighed. "Post away."

"Thank you!" Her eyes were back on her phone, watching the clip.

I turned my attention to the very-much-still-there texts on my phone.

Shay had been my best friend since the summer before third grade, when she declared me such through a fence. She'd moved into the house behind us, and we'd met one day when her ball flew over the fence and directly into my head. I'd given her ball back, and after that we talked every day through a crack for weeks before we convinced our parents to let us actually hang out. And that's

how it had felt when she told me what happened with Trent: like a ball to the head all over again—unexpected and embarrassing—except without the happy ending.

My dad took another curve too fast.

“Ugggh,” Lauren said, grabbing her stomach. “I’m going to be sick.”

I scooted closer to my window. The last thing I needed was a lapful of vomit.

Mom smacked Dad’s arm. “Slow down.” Then she turned in her seat. “Do you need a plastic bag?”

“Didn’t you take Dramamine?” I asked.

“Yes, *Avery*, I took Dramamine. But obviously it’s not helping.”

“I was just asking,” I said.

“You weren’t just asking. You were trying to say I had done something wrong.”

My sister and I weren’t exactly best friends, which was why she had no idea about my crappy week or the unanswered texts waiting on my phone. Nobody knew. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant.”

I caught my dad’s eye in the rearview mirror and he mouthed, “*Fire and Ice.*”

For the past couple years, Dad had taken to calling my sister and me *Fire and Ice*. We were opposites in nearly every way. Lauren was dramatic and over the top; I was chill and go with the flow. Lauren’s looks begged to be noticed. She was tall and strong and had bright blond hair and big *blue* eyes. She always seemed happy, even when she was being a total grump. I, on the other hand, was one of those people who blended in. I had plain brown hair and a normal build. My smile was nice but nothing that drew stares. I did

like my eyes. They were hazel, and I could say a lot with my eyes. Even though we were opposites, I didn't love the nickname (who wanted to be compared to ice?) but I loved my dad and I knew he thought it was cute and funny, so I did what any chill person would do—ignored it.

“Pull over! Pull over!” Lauren screeched, unbuckling her seat belt.

Mom riffled around by her feet and Dad jerked the car to the right and stopped on the dirt shoulder. Mom held a plastic bag in the air just as my sister flung open the door, jumped out, and threw up all over the side of the road with loud, heaving retches. She was dramatic with everything she did, even barfing. She moaned, bracing her hands against her knees, waiting for another round.

Mom turned to Dad. “Not sure why you're in such a hurry.”

“I'm just driving.”

“You know she gets sick when you take the curves like that.”

I looked down at my phone, still trying to decide how to respond.

It's great! I typed. *Now we can compare notes and buy him extra ChapStick.* I immediately erased the text. Now was not the time for a dumb joke. *It's fine,* I typed this time. *We'll be fine.*

My finger hovered over the SEND button. *Fine* wasn't how I felt. I felt betrayed and angry and confused and alone. I felt like I'd lost my best friend and my boyfriend in the same week. I wanted to give her the silent treatment for a while. But I hated feeling like this. I didn't want to lose her. The sooner I forgave her, the sooner we could get past this.

The muffled sound of my sister's voice drew my attention. With her back pressed against the window, she recorded another video. I

couldn't hear what she was saying, but it was probably something about throwing up. I didn't understand her videos at all.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pushed SEND.

"Everything okay?" Mom asked. "You're not feeling sick, too, are you? You look a little pale."

"What?"

Mom studied my face.

"No, I'm fine." Was that my favorite word today?

The side door flew open and Lauren's phone appeared first. "There's no service," she said, sliding in.

"Huh," Mom responded, handing Lauren a water bottle. "Well, we are in the wooded mountains."

"There's going to be service at the camp, though, right?" she asked, pulling the door shut and buckling her seat belt.

"A summer without cell service wouldn't be the end of the world," Dad said.

"What?" Lauren gasped. "What do you mean? What does that mean?" Each question got increasingly louder.

"It said right on the website I sent both of you months ago," Mom said. "No Wi-Fi. A chance to disengage from the world."

"You think we actually read that?" Lauren responded.

Mom shrugged. "Maybe you will next time."

As my sister's words finally sank in, my chest tightened and my eyes slid to my phone. Sure enough, there was a red triangle next to my text. It hadn't sent. Maybe I should've been happy that the lack of cell service was fulfilling my fleeting wish of giving Shay the silent treatment, but instead I felt worse.

"I have a channel to maintain!" Lauren whined. "My viewers

are counting on me! I promised a summer of updates! This is completely and totally unfair. You have to warn us about stuff like this.”

“Maybe this is the best thing for both of you,” Mom said, exchanging a look with Dad.

I slid my half-charged AirPods into my ears and turned on my only downloaded playlist—*Emos Need Love Too*. Most of my song catalogue was stored online. So much for my perfect summer.

Chapter 2

DESPITE THE FACT THAT BEAR MEADOW CAMP APPARENTLY resided in the last century, it was quite beautiful. Nestled in the pine trees sat a huge multistory lodge, a warm beacon of yellow light in the darkness. And behind it, the sky was a confetti of white stars. I could get used to a summer of this view.

Dad pulled into a parking space in front of the lodge. “Here we are. Everyone grab your things and let’s get checked in.”

My sister, for once, was speechless as she stared out the window at the building in front of us. It didn’t last long. “A place like that has to have Wi-Fi . . . right?” she asked me under her breath.

“Or at least a suggestion box,” I said.

“What?”

I pretended to write on a little note. “Please add Wi-Fi. Thank you.”

She blew air between her lips and climbed out of the car.

I pushed my door open and stepped out as well, joining my parents. The air had the sharp, tangy scent of pine needles and a

crisp chill had me wondering if I should dig through my suitcase for a hoodie.

“It’s cold here,” Lauren said from the other side of the car. “Is it going to be this cold the whole summer?”

“Just after the sun goes down,” Dad said. “Isn’t this so exciting, girls?” He gave me a side hug.

“Think of the potential!” Lauren said in a deep voice, quoting what Dad always said at the beginning of every summer trip. Sometimes I wondered if my dad was more excited about what a trip could be than what it actually ended up being.

“Exactly,” he responded. “Our last summer together before everything changes.”

“Are you getting a new family?” I asked, pulling out a joke before he made this too serious. I still had a whole year left of high school before college. Plus, if everything went as planned, I’d be going to UCLA and would probably live at home. Exactly how much did he think would change? I had a feeling nothing would and I wasn’t sure if I should be relieved or disappointed about that thought.

“Maybe I can trade you all in here for younger models.” He popped open the trunk.

Mom shot him a look as she clutched her pillow to her chest.

“I didn’t mean you,” he said. “I meant the kids because they’re growing up and leaving us.”

“Yeah, yeah, nice save,” Mom said.

We unloaded the car and trudged up the paved path to the tall wooden doors of the lodge. My backpack was full of summer homework for my fall honors classes, and my suitcase was at max

capacity because two months away required a lot of clothes. Dad held open the door and we all made our way inside.

The lobby was just as beautiful as the outside had been. A large oak tree sprung from the middle of the circular room, its branches reaching toward the skylight above. Everything else was wood—the floors, the desks, even the ceiling, almost as if we had walked into a tree.

Music drifted from a hall on the opposite end of the room.

Lauren sank to the bench that circled the tree as my dad went to the check-in desk, where a girl who didn't look much older than me sat ready to help. A big letter *D* adorned her green polo shirt. Was that her name or her initial?

"Hello! Welcome to Bear Meadow," she said in an overly friendly voice. "Last name, please."

I let my heavy backpack slide off my shoulder and onto the ground next to Lauren, abandoning my suitcase there as well.

"Young," Dad said.

"Welcome, Youngs." D typed something into her computer and then opened a tri-fold pamphlet in front of my parents. "We're here at the lodge. This is where the action happens. Movies on Friday nights." She pointed to the hall where the music was coming from. "Bingo nights on Wednesdays."

"I think I could get into bingo," Dad said.

D gave him a wide smile. "We also have dance lessons and crafts. Basically, something happens every day in this building."

"That's great!" Mom said, waggling her eyebrows at us. Lauren rolled her eyes.

"On the lawn area behind the lodge there's Grass Games—

badminton, volleyball, and such—then we have our tennis courts and pool.”

“We heard you have a supersized Slip ’N Slide,” I said, and my dad gave me an appreciative smile.

“We certainly do. The biggest one in California!” D responded with enthusiasm. She pointed at the map again. “The dining hall is in the middle of the cabins. That’s where you’ll have your meals.”

“*All of them?*” Lauren asked.

D looked at the computer. “Your package includes two meals a day. We have a small general store, where we carry milk and cereal and such for that third meal.”

While D showed my parents the road that led to our cabin, the lodge doors opened and a family of five came in. Two of the kids immediately began chasing each other around the tree, which at the moment also included Lauren and me, screaming about a bigfoot hunt. The woman went straight to the coffee station and poured herself a cup.

“Boys, stop running!” the man called out in a sharp tone, then went to stand in line behind my parents.

Lauren opened the front pocket of her backpack and dug around. “Movie nights, crafts, Slip ’N Slides?” she said at a volume only I could hear. “Is this a little kid camp?” At this, she pointedly stared at the kids who had not, in fact, stopped running. “I’m sensing no age-appropriate boys for us.”

This thought did not disappoint me in the least. I had sworn off guys exactly three days ago. The guy drama I was in the middle of had left a bad taste in my mouth. The taste I worried would linger all summer now that I had no contact with the outside world.

Lauren freed a long cord from her bag with a breath of relief. “Oh good. I thought I forgot this.”

“Good thing you can keep your overpriced flashlight charged.”

“I haven’t lost hope for Wi-Fi. And even if there isn’t any, I can still record and do a compilation video at the end of summer. I’ll figure something out,” she said, like she was still talking herself down.

I wondered if I’d figure something out, a way to talk to Shay and get this taste out of my mouth, this weight off my chest.

The music from the hall caught my attention again and I moved to see where it was coming from. I had only taken a few steps before one of the boys running around the tree and the woman with her full cup of coffee collided, sending the cup flying. I watched as it tumbled through the air in seemingly slow motion. Its contents arced across the space between us, then drenched the entire front of my white shirt. The cup landed, drumming three short beats on the floor, before it skidded across the dark wood and came to a stop against my gray Converse. I didn’t feel the heat of the liquid at first but then the burning sensation spread across my stomach. I sucked in air and pulled my shirt away from my skin.

“Oh my goodness!” D called from behind me.

“Boys!” the man said again.

The woman, now empty-handed, stared at me and then at the cup by my foot as if this was somehow my fault. “I’m sorry,” I heard myself saying.

My mom had magically found a roll of paper towels somewhere and began mopping up the floor. My dad was helping Lauren move our luggage away from the expanding puddle on the floor. I wasn’t

sure how any coffee had made it on the floor, when it felt like an entire pot's worth was on my shirt. "You okay, Avery?" Dad asked.

By this time D was at my side. "The bathroom is this way. Follow me." And without a word, I did. We walked through the lobby to the hall where I'd heard the music. It was louder now—was it a movie? A radio?—but as we passed the doors where it was obviously coming from, I couldn't see inside. D continued to the end of the hall.

Once safely inside the bathroom, I took off my shirt, throwing it onto the counter, and studied my skin. It was red but not burned. D grabbed a paper towel off a stack on the counter, ran it under cold water, then handed it to me. I pressed the wet towel against my stomach.

"Should I get the nurse?" she asked.

"What? No." I already felt stupid enough. "I'm good."

"Are you sure?"

"I take really hot showers. Apparently, I've conditioned my skin for this specific scenario."

She didn't laugh, just picked up my shirt. "I'll have this laundered and delivered to your cabin." She backed out of the bathroom and the door swung shut.

I took a deep breath and slowly peeled the paper towel away from my stomach for another look. The redness was already subsiding. I dropped the towel in a gold-trimmed trash bin and faced the door.

I probably should've realized before this moment that I was standing there in my bra, my shirt in the possession of an eager-to-please (or probably more like a please-don't-sue-us) employee, and I

was trapped. I let out a low groan and turned a circle. The bathroom was nice—the stalls individual rooms with full doors, the counters shiny granite, and the fixtures polished brass. There was even art on the walls. But it didn't have the one thing I needed—a stack of extra shirts lying around.

Just as I was trying to think of a way to fashion one out of paper towels, the door opened again and D reappeared.

I took a breath of relief. "Could you ask my—"

Before I could finish the sentence, she held out a blue T-shirt. "Here you go."

"Or you could bring me exactly what I need."

She smiled. "Do you need anything else?"

"Coffee?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"It was a joke."

"Oh . . ." She gave the worst courtesy laugh ever and left.

I unfolded the shirt and held it up. Across the back was the Bear Meadow Camp logo—a friendly bear in front of three pine trees—and on the front, the word *STAFF*.

"Thank goodness for please-don't-sue-us employees," I mumbled, and pulled it over my head.

I leaned against the counter for a moment and looked in the mirror above the sink. My brown hair hung limp around my shoulders and my hazel eyes were tired. Was it too late to go home?

I let out a sharp breath. I knew home wasn't an option, but a bed was a good second choice, one that only existed outside of this bathroom. I ran my fingers through my hair, wiped a bit of mascara from beneath my eyes, and exited the bathroom.

This time as I passed the doors where I'd heard the music earlier, I stopped and peered inside.

The room was a small theater with stadium-style seats facing the stage. At the moment, the seats were dark and empty. But the stage was lit and a three-person band, surrounded by instruments, stood talking among themselves. I wondered what events here required a live band. Bingo night?

"Are you lost?" a voice said, startling me.

To my right, behind the last row of red velvet chairs, was another guy, squatting by a guitar case, closing the lid. He had long, wavy hair and intense blue eyes that seemed to stare right through me.

I almost took a step back. "You scared me."

He stood, and even though he was an average size, there was something about his posture or confident gaze or knowing head tilt that commanded the space. "You new here?" His question didn't sound rude, but it wasn't friendly either.

"Yes, just got here." A clash of cymbals echoed through the theater and I looked over to see the drummer, a big Polynesian guy, standing up.

"Sorry!" he called out, and then did a drumroll on his snare and laughed.

"Are you . . . Is this . . . a band?" I asked the guy near me.

His eyebrows shot up.

"I mean, obviously it is, but why?"

A half-smile finally crept onto his face, lighting up his eyes and making him seem more approachable. If a half-smile could do all that, I found myself wondering what his full smile was capable of.

"Mostly for, you know . . . the music," he said.

I rolled my eyes but also smiled. “The music? How unoriginal. I’d do it for the groupies . . . or the drugs.”

“I’ve known for years that I’m a total sellout,” he shot back.

My smile widened. I couldn’t help it. He was the first person tonight who seemed to actually get my dumb jokes. “So where can this music be heard?”

“We play at dinner.”

“Live dinner music? How fancy.”

“Nothing but the best for our entitled guests.”

I blinked, not sure if he intended that as a dig or not. No, we’d just been joking. It was a joke. “Well, if music isn’t a human right, it should be.”

“Agreed.” He lifted his guitar case.

“Brooks! You coming?” another bandmate yelled out. The three of them were heading toward the black curtain at the back of the stage.

Brooks held up his hand to them, his eyes still on me. “Yeah!” His hand dropped to his side. “And you are?” he asked, seeming to imply that his name being called had counted as an introduction.

I sort of agreed. “Avery.”

“Avery. We have band practice most nights after dinner. Next time come a little earlier and tell me what you think.” And then the full smile I’d been waiting for took over his face. And I was right, it was magic.

I gave a small nod.

He walked several steps past me, up the aisle, then turned. “Is Janelle showing you around?”

“Um . . . no.” I threw a thumb over my shoulder. “D.”

“Well, then, welcome to Bear Meadow, where your paycheck will be small and your patience even smaller.”

“What?” was my first confused response. And then, just as fast, I remembered the shirt I wore. The staff shirt. He thought I worked here.

I opened my mouth to correct him but found myself saying, “Thank you,” instead. *Why* would I say that? Two reasons came to mind immediately. One, I hated making people feel stupid, and two, he still had on that magic smile.

He half jogged to the stage, joining the other guys. I tugged on the bottom of the shirt. Dumb shirt.

“There you are,” Lauren said from behind me. “Everyone is waiting on you. What are you even doing?” She looked past me to the now completely empty theater.

“Nothing. I’m coming.”

Back in the lobby, the coffee-spilling mom and her family were up at the counter listening to D explain the camp amenities. My parents were at the entrance with our luggage.

“Everything okay?” Dad asked as I joined them.

“All good,” I said.

“You should go beat that lady up,” Lauren said, narrowing her eyes toward the check-in desk.

I shook my head. “I think I stepped into the kid’s way or something.” It was the only thing I could think of—that the kid had been trying to avoid me. Why else would the woman have acted like it was my fault? “But maybe I’ll go find that suggestion box.” I pretended to write on a paper. “More Wi-Fi, less hot liquids.”

Lauren let out a big impatient sigh.

Dad winked at me. “Fire and Ice.”

“Right,” I said. *Just let it roll off, Avery. Let everything roll right off.*

Mom held out several card keys. “Let’s go see our home for the next couple months.”

Chapter 3

"HAVE A FABULOUS DAY!" THE GIRL SAID AS SHE USED A pair of tongs to put a whole-wheat roll on my plate. It was dinner-time and we were in the big dining hall—buffet-style eating in what looked a lot like a school cafeteria. Unlike the big lodge and our family cabin, which seemed newly built, the dining hall was probably a relic from the camp's past—paneled ceiling, fluorescent lighting, oak-trimmed doorways. But they'd done a good job hiding all that with nice tables and chairs and big framed art of the lake and surrounding forests.

After settling into our cabin the night before, we'd woken up this morning and spent the day exploring camp—the general store, the sports courts, the lake, the lodge—my dad pointing out all the activities we could try over the summer. And even though the only thing we'd ended up doing that day was a family game of badminton, I was ready to spend the rest of the night back in the cabin reading or something.

“Will you say that again for my video?” Lauren said, holding up her phone, as if it really wasn’t a question at all but a demand.

“Excuse me?” the girl asked. Her name tag said TIA.

“The ‘have a fabulous day’ thing. While you’re putting a roll on my plate.” She lifted her plate so it was in the shot.

“Lauren, not everyone wants to be an extra in your film.” I sympathized with the helpless look on Tia’s face.

Lauren waved her hand in my direction. “It’s not a film. I have a channel. It’s really just pieces of my life. This will be part of an end-of-summer mash-up. Please?”

“Sure!” Tia said, suddenly unleashing a dazzling smile.

Guess she didn’t need my help. It’s not like anyone would see it anyway. Who wanted to watch pieces of our boring life? I moved to the next station and filled a plate with lettuce and tomatoes, then drenched it in ranch. Several families sat around the dining hall, each at their own circular table. My parents waved me over to where they were already eating.

I slid into the seat across from my mom. The phone in my pocket dug into my hip, so I took it out and set it on the table next to my plate.

“It’s my music,” I said when Mom looked at the phone like it was pointless to carry around. “I won’t listen to it now, of course.” I liked music when I was walking around. A soundtrack for life.

“You don’t need it anyway. They have live music during dinner.” She craned her head around.

My heart seemed to stop. I couldn’t believe I had forgotten—

Brooks and his band performed at dinner. I sank a little lower in my chair, my lie from the night before replaying in my mind.

Just as it registered that I couldn't hear any music, Mom turned back around and said, "They must be on break or something. They were playing when Dad and I first got here."

In the corner of the cafeteria was a makeshift stage with the abandoned instruments. It was mostly blocked from my view by my mom.

"They announced a ten-minute break a little while ago," Dad said.

Ten minutes. I could eat in less than ten minutes. Because avoiding Brooks seemed like the mature way to solve this problem I'd created. I sighed. Like avoiding Shay before we left had been? No, I'd clear things up, but not now, in the middle of the dining hall. Especially because my explanation would sound something like: *Well, you were smiling, so you can see how I couldn't correct you about me working here.*

"I added another item to my birthday list," Lauren said as she plopped her plate on the table and her body in the seat next to me. "A handheld phone stabilizer. It will help with my videos."

"Your birthday is not for five months," Dad said.

"I know. I'm giving you all plenty of time."

I knew my parents, especially my dad, thought her hobby was just that, a hobby. But they mostly kept quiet about it while redirecting her attention to other things.

Mom pointed to a laminated schedule that sat in the middle of the table. "If either of you are interested, there's a motivational speaker down at the lower amphitheater tonight," she said, in a perfect example of redirection.

“What are they motivating us to do?” I asked.

Lauren spread her arms wide. “Live a productive life without internet.”

“Knit socks and bake banana bread?” I asked with a smirk.

Mom rolled her eyes. “Really? Is that what you think pre-internet life was like?”

“You probably also mapped stars and wrote poetry,” I said.

Dad raised his fork. “I actually did take an astronomy class one semester in college.” He flipped the schedule around to face him. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they offered some stargazing here. . . . Aha!” He stabbed his fork into the middle of the page, his eyes lighting up. “All your wishes come true.”

I smiled, looking between Dad’s fork and his goofy expression. The stars the night before had been pretty amazing. It *would* be fun to learn more than the basic constellations.

I shoveled a couple bites of salad into my mouth, then stood.

“You done already?” Dad asked.

I swallowed. “Yes, that badminton earlier really took it out of me.” I lifted my phone off the table.

Lauren scoffed at the lame excuse. Microphone feedback rang out and I dropped back into my seat as quickly as possible. That had *not* been ten minutes. Not even five.

“You don’t have to stay,” Dad said as if I’d changed my mind because of his question.

“It’s fine, I’ll leave when you guys do.”

Lauren narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously, but continued to eat.

Brooks’s voice came over the microphone. “We’re back, and, just a

reminder, we take requests. The song list is on the back of the schedule on each table.” Was he the lead singer?

“Hello,” Lauren said, her eyes glued to the stage, which, unlike me, she could obviously see clearly. I ducked a little more and reached for the schedule at the same time Lauren did. I let her have it first.

“Hello, what?” Mom asked.

Lauren scanned the song list, then handed it to me. “Hello, cute band in the middle of the woods. Sign me up. Avery, check them out. Let’s go request something.”

I looked down the list, which contained mainly oldies—the Beach Boys, Elvis, the Beatles, and more. None of which were the punk rock vibe I’d heard the night before in passing. I peeked around Mom and watched as someone who wasn’t Brooks began singing a Billy Joel song. He had a nice voice—smooth with just the right amount of rasp.

Dad, now staring at the band too, said, “They are way too old for you to be fraternizing with.”

“How do you know how old they are?” Lauren asked.

I wasn’t sure how old the others were, but Brooks hadn’t seemed that old. Around my age maybe. Lauren was fifteen, though, so I could see why my dad was laying down the law.

“Plus,” Mom said, “they work here. This isn’t some dating camp. There are plenty of guests visiting that you can hook up with throughout the summer.”

Lauren almost spit her mouthful of water all over the table.

I shook my head and whispered, “Mom, *hook up* means *have sex with*.”

Now it was Mom's turn to be shocked. "That's not what I meant!" "When did the meaning of that change?" Dad asked.

Lauren laughed, then stared longingly at her phone. "I wish I had been recording this whole conversation."

"Any good songs on there?" Dad asked, nodding at the list I held.

I passed it over and then wished I hadn't when Mom scooted her chair closer to Dad's, leaving me completely exposed. I sat still, knowing movement would only draw attention. None of the band members were looking at me. The singer, a wiry white guy with floppy brown hair, held the microphone stand with both hands as he sang. His body hardly moved. The buff Polynesian guy behind the drums looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. The bleached-blond guy on bass kept looking at the wall, where, following his gaze, I noticed a clock. And the commanding presence of Brooks I'd noted the night before was only half as commanding. He seemed as though he wanted to blend into the paint on the wall as he stood there strumming his guitar with zero energy.

I was surprised, but then noted the dining hall was loud with talking and clattering dishes and laughter, nobody paying much attention to the band. That would be a hard audience to perform to. As if he sensed me looking, Brooks's eyes caught mine.

Crap.

I gave him a little smile and a small wave. As he took in the table and my family, his brows went down. Maybe he didn't recognize me. Or maybe he was trying to fit me into the story he'd previously thought was true. He didn't return my smile, just looked away.

Over the next half hour, as my parents and Lauren carried on

a conversation I pretended to be part of but didn't follow at all, I tried to catch his eye. I wanted to mouth "Sorry" or something. But he didn't look my way again.

Was he mad? Why would he be? We didn't know each other. It was just a silly misunderstanding. I'd clear it up. He'd caught me off guard the night before. That's all I had to say and then it would be over.

So when my parents announced they were done and stood to leave, Lauren standing as well, I said, "I'm going to check out the dessert bar."

"Okay, see you back at the cabin," Dad said.

Lauren pointed to the stage and said something to my mom as they walked away. My mom only shook her head.

I listened to three more slow-paced, low-energy songs before Brooks leaned into a mic and said, "That's a wrap. Thanks for being a good audience. We'll see you tomorrow."

I clapped, but when nobody else joined me, I let my hands fall back to the table. Then I watched as Brooks and the guys gathered up their instruments and walked through a door off the side of the stage. I stood, looked over my shoulder, and followed. I caught up with them on the back side of the building, where they were loading the drums and guitars onto a flat trailer attached to a golf cart. I stopped by the back door.

"We should put a tip jar on the edge of the stage," the drummer was saying. "Supplement our income, yeah? Tell me that's not the best idea you've ever heard." He held out a fake jar. "We take hundreds, people. Or fifties. Those work too." At this he laughed loudly.

The bass player slapped at his neck, the action making me aware of the bugs I could see dancing around in the last streaks of light from the setting sun.

Brooks shook his head. “They don’t even clap for us, Kai. You think they’d cough up money?”

“Come on, have some imagination.”

Brooks plucked a drumstick from the front pocket of Kai’s shirt and pretended to stab him in the gut with it.

“Ugh!” Kai grabbed his stomach and stumbled forward. “Ian, Levi, save me.” He reached out for the two guys who stood there as unimpressed by this performance as they were with their own earlier onstage.

“How many more drum pieces inside?” Brooks asked.

“Just one of the cymbals and the snare,” Kai responded, recovered from his fake injury. “Oh, and the pedal.”

Brooks turned back toward the door, toward me, and stopped cold when he saw me. After that initial reaction, he was in motion again. “You like to linger in doorways?” he asked as he swept past me and back inside. The friendly manner we had ended on the night before was completely gone.

I followed him. “No, I mean, I’m sorry.”

The cafeteria was emptying out and employees were wiping down surfaces and putting away food. Brooks hopped up onstage and grabbed the two drum pieces by their stands. As he stared at the pedal still on the ground, it was obvious he was trying to figure out a way to pick it up too. I stepped onto the stage and scooped it off the floor.

“You’re sorry for what?” he asked, heading back the way we’d come.

“I’m sorry that you assumed I worked here and—”

“*Assumed?*” he asked. “You were wearing a staff shirt and when I said ‘Welcome to Bear Meadow,’ you said thank you.”

I groaned. “I know.”

“Well, I hope you won,” he said.

We’d stepped outside again and I stopped on the gravel path just short of the guys and the golf cart. “Won?”

He turned to face me. “Whatever bet you had going with your friend. Trick an employee or mock an employee or sneak into the lodge after hours and steal some stupid T-shirt for whatever night-time prank you wanted to play. I know your type and I’m over it.”

“My type?”

He stood there with a drum in each hand like a weird version of Lady Justice with her scales in one hand and her sword in the other. “Yes,” he said, obviously not needing any more evidence in his case. “Your type—entitled, rich snob.”

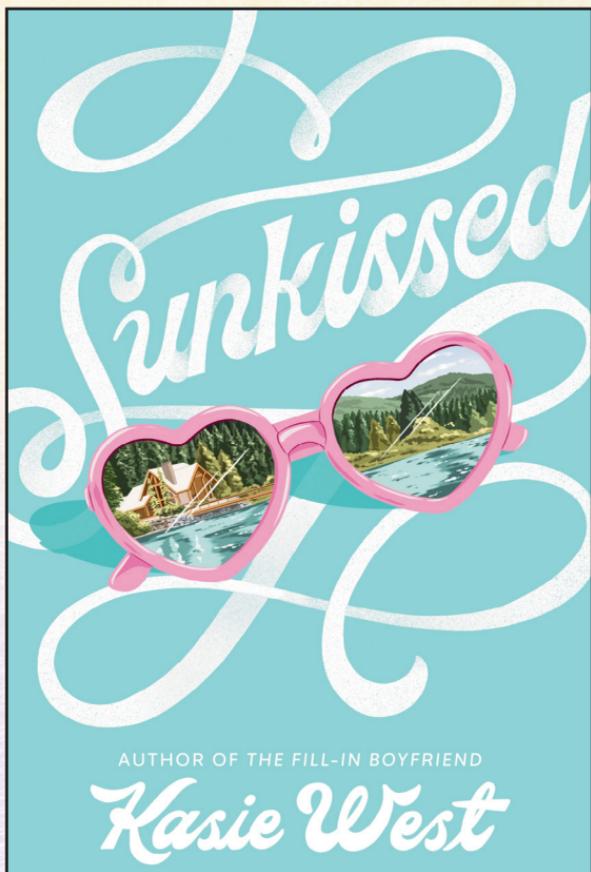
I sucked in a sharp breath and tightly gripped the pedal in my hands. I wanted to chuck it at him. Say something equally rude back. But as it often did when faced with conflict, my brain went blank. He didn’t need a response; he finished his walk to the trailer.

It took me a second to realize the lead singer with his floppy brown hair and kind eyes was now standing in front of me, reaching for the pedal. It was obvious he’d heard everything and felt sorry for me. I thrust the pedal forward and he took it without a word; then they all drove away, the cymbals in the trailer clanking together over each bump.

That's when I let out an angry breath. How dare he. One tiny misunderstanding and I was suddenly a snob? All the things I should've said when Brooks was standing in front of me now flooded my brain. "Useless brain," I muttered.

I turned down the nearest path and started walking.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Garrett, Camryn, author.

Title: Off the record / Camryn Garrett.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, [2021] |

Audience: Ages 14 & up. | Audience: Grades 10–12. |

Summary: "A teen journalist uncovers the #metoo scandal of the decade: a bigshot Hollywood director is taking advantage of cast members." —Provided by publisher

Identifiers: LCCN 2020043217 (print) | LCCN 2020043218 (ebook) |
ISBN 978-1-9848-2999-3 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-9848-3000-5 (library binding) |
ISBN 978-1-9848-3001-2 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Journalism—Fiction. | Sexual abuse—Fiction. |
African Americans—Fiction. | Youths' writings.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.G3745 Of 2021 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.G3745 (ebook) |
DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 10.5-point Berling MT.
Interior design by Ken Crossland

Printed in the United States of America

May 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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OFF THE RECORD

CAMRYN GARRETT



Alfred A. Knopf
New York

CHAPTER 1

I've rewritten the same sentence five different times. No matter how I rearrange the words, they don't sound good enough to be published.

Clearly, Black films only receive critical acclaim when they heavily feature Black suffering. Where are our happy movies? They exist, but you don't see them winning Oscars.

I smack my keyboard. Nothing changes. I'm still on the living room couch, an episode of *Real Housewives* playing on the TV. My Word document stares back at me, cursor blinking as if daring me to rewrite the sentence for a sixth time. How am I supposed to end an op-ed like this? *In conclusion, I'm sure most of the people reading this are white and don't want to hear about race, but please don't cancel your subscription.*

I minimize the Word document, flipping to my email. My inbox is still empty. Still the same emails: one from Target, one from Spelman College confirming that I sent my application, a few from Instagram. Nothing from the contest. Nothing telling me whether I won or lost.

Ugh. I rub my forehead, staring up at the *Deep Focus*

magazine covers hanging above our TV. The Obamas, Serena Williams, and Jimi Hendrix. They've been hanging there forever, some of the best covers of my favorite magazine ever. Normally, they inspire me.

They're a little too in my face right now—while I'm waiting to hear back from the talent competition. If I win, I'll get the chance to write an actual cover story for the magazine. *Me* writing a *cover story* for *Deep Focus*.

I take a shaky breath. It's almost too much to think about.

I *should* be focusing on this op-ed I owe Monique. She enjoyed my last piece, and the one before it. That *should* make me feel better. But my anxiety doesn't pay attention to how I *should* feel. According to my sisters, I worry about everything, even the pointless, but especially the very important.

I glance at the inbox again. Still no change. The winners are supposed to hear back by the end of today. But why are they taking so long? What if they didn't like the samples I sent, or they thought my writing was too immature, or they got turned off by how much I write about race—

"Well, look here. Josie's right where we left her."

My head snaps up. Dad lumbers through the door, rolling a purple suitcase with one hand and holding his backpack strap with the other. I don't know why Alice is bringing so much stuff when she's just an hour away. She could come home every weekend, if she wanted.

Dad's still in his accountant uniform—white shirt, black tie—the air of math and numbers swirling around him. He glances at the muted TV. Blond women in sparkly dresses lunge for each other across a gigantic table. I shrug.

"I leave it on for background noise," I say.

Alice appears with an eye roll. She looks the same as she did

when we dropped her off in August: ripped jeans, edges of her box braids tinged purple, her signature bored face. Looks like her first few months of college didn't change a thing.

"What are you writing now?" she asks, swinging her backpack to the floor. "Another review of *Real Housewives*?"

"Shut up." I only wrote those recaps to get my foot in the door and she knows it. "It's a serious piece."

"That's what you said last time."

I scowl, opening my email and sending the piece before closing my laptop. This piece is fine. If Monique doesn't like it, she'll send me edits, same as usual. At least it's better than a *Real Housewives* recap.

"Come on, girls," Dad says. "Where's Maggie?"

"She's at work," I say, closing my laptop. "And the library is having a pre-Thanksgiving playtime or something, so Mom took Cash with her. She'll probably have to stay to clean everything up."

"They work her too hard." Dad shakes his head, but there's no bite in his voice. "Always have."

I stand up to hug him, but he pulls me in first. He always gives the best hugs. Eventually, I pull back to hug Alice, but she just scoffs and steps away. I don't know why I even try.

By the time she and Dad have put away their stuff, Mom is back from work, and so is my oldest sister, Maggie. She's still dressed in her apron and khakis. I hold up my phone.

"It's the rare employee Maggie," I say, opening my camera app. "Take a picture for good luck."

Maggie's eyes widen as she lunges for me. "Josie, I swear—"

"Mama," Cash says, worming between the two of us. "No swearing."

"You're right, baby," Maggie says, glancing down at him. "No swearing."

When he heads into the kitchen, she sticks her tongue out at me. I snort.

We haven't had a family dinner since the day before Alice left for school. It's not that we don't like each other. Our schedules just never line up. Dad works late, Maggie is always doing overtime, and Alice is usually at school. That leaves Mom, Cash, and me eating in front of the TV most nights. Cash looks a little startled to be sitting at the dinner table right now.

I tap my fingers against my side as everyone settles in, fighting the urge to go back on the computer and see if I've gotten a response from the contest yet. If Monique has replied to my email yet.

Maggie says all I ever do is search for things to keep myself anxious. I guess that's what I'm doing now. My deadline isn't until next week, and I'm pretty sure the piece is fine. It's just that when I'm anxious about one thing, it tends to bleed over to everything else. I'm already worried about hearing back from the contest, and now I can't stop myself from thinking about everything that might go wrong with the piece I wrote for Monique—the article deleting itself, Monique hating it and deciding she never wants to work with me again my words sounding too similar to someone else's and me being accused of plagiarism, Monique calling me a racist (even though she's also Black)—and wondering what I'm going to write about next. . . .

It never ends, not unless I'm actually writing. I don't know what it is. Something about writing shuts off my brain for a little while.

"How are things at Spelman, Alice?" Mom asks, snapping me out of my thoughts. She always dresses like a hip librarian—Skechers, a T-shirt that reads "ALL THE COOL KIDS ARE READING," a pair of pink reading glasses clipped to her sweater.

"Great," Alice says, grabbing another slice of pizza from the

open box. No homemade food until tomorrow, when the entire family comes over for Thanksgiving. I cringe just thinking about it. "I love the psychology department. All of my classes are interesting. And I joined a sorority, actually, and it's really helping me feel like I'm part of a community."

"You? A sorority?" I raise a brow. "That sounds fake."

"Oh, come on," Maggie says, cutting up Cash's pizza. "She can try new things."

Alice flashes a smug smile. I like it better when I have Maggie to myself.

"You'll probably try a bunch of things when you head there next fall," Maggie continues. "Who knows? Maybe you'll join a sorority, too."

Alice snorts. I glare at her.

"Yeah," I say. "Maybe. I guess we'll see."

"There's a lot to do at Spelman," Alice says, rolling her eyes. "You can find something that I didn't try first."

I grip my cup extra hard. If Mom and Dad weren't here, I'd tear into Alice, and she'd probably tear right back. But now I have to force myself to be *civil*, even though none of this is my fault.

I've wanted to go to Spelman ever since I was in middle school. It's where Mom went, where Grandma went, where Auntie Denise went. It was always *my* thing, but Alice applied last year, completely out of the blue, and got in. I still applied early decision, the way I always planned to. But now, when I get in, I'll have to share the campus with my sister.

I definitely never dreamed about that.

"Auntie Josie?" Cash's little hands reach for me. "What's a sorority?"

"It's a sort of club," Dad says before I can. "But for people at college."

“Make sure you’re eating your vegetables, Josephine,” Mom says, shoveling some salad onto my plate. “It’s better to eat some salad than to have more than one slice of pizza. You have to remember that we have diabetes in our family.”

Alice and Maggie share a look. I force myself to stare at my plate, but I doubt Mom notices. She makes comments like that all of the time, as if I don’t already second-guess everything I put in my mouth.

“Grandpa?” Cash turns to Dad. “Will you tell me a story?”

“After dinner, buddy.”

I poke at my salad with my fork. Maggie always says I should tell Mom how I feel in the moment, before she forgets what she’s said, but I can’t now. Cash is *right there*. Plus, we’d get into an argument, since she’d say she’s *only thinking about my health*. How do I respond to that without sounding like a brat?

Instead of responding, I get up and start clearing the table before anyone can ask. I want to get this over with as fast as possible.

“Josie, don’t go,” Dad calls from his seat. “Your mother and I want to talk to you. Alone.”

Maggie scoops Cash up and disappears. Alice jogs up the stairs. Traitors.

Normally, Mom and Dad don’t *announce* this sort of thing. They just start talking. The only time they make my sisters leave is when we talk about my anxiety. I actually stare longingly at the empty hallway. I’d rather babysit Cash than have a private talk with Mom and Dad.

I rack my brain to figure out what we could be talking about. I’m not pregnant. I don’t do drugs or drink. I’m *boring*. All I do is go to school, write freelance articles for different magazines, and work at Cora’s Chicken Stand, a dingy restaurant a few minutes away. I don’t even really have a lot of friends. Everyone

has *school friends*, kids you see in class and sit with at lunch and partner up with in gym. But it's almost December, which means it's almost Capstone Month, when none of us seniors have to physically show up for school. I haven't seen the girls I hang out with at lunch, Jordan and Sadie, since yesterday, and besides the two days of school we have next week, I doubt I'll see them again until the new year.

"What is it?" I ask, standing near the door. I fist my hand in my shirt. "The Spelman application?"

I did it mostly myself, but Mom and Dad had to fill out the financial stuff and pay the application fees. Oh God. Are we having money problems? What if they don't have money for college? I always knew I'd have to pitch in—my parents get a discount on my private school because Auntie Denise is an administrator, but with three daughters and relatively normal jobs, I doubt they can pay for college, too—except, what if it's so bad that my money from writing and working at Cora's isn't enough? We applied for financial aid, but what if it doesn't work out?

I want to take a deep breath, but all my air is caught in my chest.

"No, not that." Mom grabs my hand, pulling me back toward the table. I'm still irritated about the pizza thing, but it's hard to stay mad at her for long, with her warm hands and tender smile. "We've just been worried about you, Josephine. That's all."

"Worried about me?" My eyebrows shoot up. I shift my gaze to Dad. I don't think he's blinked once since this conversation began. "Why?"

"Well," Dad says, "you barely act like a teenager."

"Oh." I smack my thighs. "This again?"

I've had this conversation with them almost monthly, ever since I started high school. I guess I've never been *normal* to

them. I've always been shy, but they used to say I'd grow out of it, until I started locking myself in school bathroom stalls for entire periods. That ship sailed a long time ago.

"It's just," Mom says, glancing at Dad, "since the hard time you had in middle school—"

"I'm fine," I say, sitting in the closest chair. "Really, I promise. That was years ago."

The lines in Dad's forehead crease.

"Seriously," I say. "I've just been busy with my senior project and everything."

My parents switched my schools after my *hard time* in middle school. Maggie had already graduated by then and Alice didn't want to leave her friends, so I'm the only one who went to Oak Grove, a private school full of kids with bougie parents. It's weird and artsy; I get to take classes with a real journalist, and we have an actual newsroom that students are allowed to use. Capstone Month is another positive. Every senior looks forward to it because we basically get all of December off. Technically, it's for a big senior capstone project; you have to volunteer, do a big project, or work in a field you're interested in. All of the kids love it, but my parents weren't exactly thrilled with the idea of me being home until the new year.

I glance between the two of them. Dad looks kind of constipated.

"It's not that," Dad says. "You've been doing a great job. But that's not what we're worried about, Josie."

"We find it difficult not to worry about you," Mom says, as if they practiced this. "Maggie was a little wild, but she was involved, and Alice flourished. I know you've been hard at work getting started on your project, but—"

"You don't have any friends," Dad interrupts. "It's just not normal for a girl your age."

“I do—”

Mom gives me the *look*, which means *Watch your tone before I make you regret opening your mouth*, so I shut up. But what am I *supposed* to say? Just because I’m not president of every club, like Alice was, or don’t have a ton of friends, the way Maggie did, doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with me.

Sure, I might not have any best friends from school, but how many people do? And really, how many of these people are going to keep talking to each other once May comes around and we all graduate? Most of them don’t even like each other. That’s why everyone subtweets or gossips or fights in our class group chat. I want to be around people who care. If I can’t, I’d rather be alone.

“Well,” I say, shrugging, “I’ve been busy with my writing, like I said. And the holiday rush at Cora’s.”

There’s a bit of a reaction then—the tightening of Mom’s mouth, the glance Dad gives her. But they can’t blame me. Writing is the only thing that helps.

“We’re proud of your writing,” Dad says, patting my shoulder. “But you can’t put all of your eggs in one basket. You need to make some friends.”

“I *have* friends,” I say, sticking out my hand. “My Twitter mutuals are my friends. Jordan and Sadie are my friends. Monique is my friend.”

Mom throws back her head and sighs. Dad presses his lips together.

“Isn’t Monique your editor?” Dad asks. “She doesn’t count.”

“And neither do strangers online,” Mom snaps. “You don’t know them.”

“Monique is literally my mentor for my senior project,” I say, cocking my head to the side. “Principal O’Conner had to approve of her, remember? She’s an actual person and she’s, like,

impressed by me. She only started taking my pieces because she followed me on Twitter! It leads to quality relationships.”

“That’s not what we mean,” Mom says. “It’s not normal for you to have adults as friends. You should be spending time with kids your own age.”

It’s impossible to understand my parents. One minute they’re talking about college, and the next minute they’re telling me I don’t fool around enough. I’m not sure what they expect me to do. Sure, sometimes I scroll through Instagram and get jealous when I see everyone at parties or going into Atlanta together. On the other hand, I don’t know what I would do if I actually hung out with them. I hear Jordan and Sadie talk about sports and dances and how much weight people need to lose all the time at lunch. I’m lost about sixty percent of the time, and I have no desire to catch up.

“It’s not that simple,” I say. “I spend a lot of time with kids my own age. Lots of other kids work at Cora’s, remember? Lots of kids I see in school, like Josh Sandler and Liv Carroll. You remember them?”

I leave out the fact that Josh is annoying as hell and I spend most of my shifts staring at Liv and her super-tight uniform shirt while she waits on customers, but I figure they don’t need to know that.

“But you never go out,” Dad says. “You don’t go to school dances or clubs. You don’t bring anyone home. We aren’t trying to corner you. But maybe it’s something we should discuss up with Laura.”

I press my lips together. My therapist and I have had *many* conversations about the kids at school and around town. I don’t need Mom and Dad to take up a chunk of our time with whatever *this* is. We have more important things to talk about.

I've accepted that I probably won't have close friends in high school. I'm just glad I'm almost done. But there's no way to explain that to Mom and Dad without them worrying more. I don't even want to try it.

"I think I need to clear my head," I say, resting my hands on the table. "Can I go out for a drive?"

@JosieTheJournalist: i figured my rebellious teenage phase would be cool, but all i've managed to do is watch Tarantino movies behind my dad's back (not worth it)

CHAPTER 2

The best part of finally being seventeen is driving. I can't leave whenever I want, since I don't have my own car, but I feel better as soon as I get my hands on the wheel. Driving reminds me that there's another world out there. Life isn't just our town and high school, no matter how much it feels like it.

There's also the Dairy Queen ten minutes away from our house.

I've always loved writing, but the fact that I get paid for my articles now definitely adds to the fun. I don't have to beg anyone to buy me a milkshake and hide the evidence. I try, I really do, but this diet Mom's pushing doesn't work. I've done it all: counting points, tracking calories, cutting out dairy or wheat, and making this "healthy lifestyle change" Mom's now into. None of them work. Either I lose a max of fifteen pounds (gaining it back after two months) or nothing changes. It's not worth it. I wish Mom understood.

I'm still full from dinner, so I fly past Dairy Queen and head onto the main road. Warm Southern air flows through the open windows; the radio plays in the background. Mom hates listening to music when she drives, but when I'm behind the wheel, I blast it.

My phone's sharp ring makes my eyes snap to the passenger seat. I never have the volume loud enough for me to hear at home, mostly because I'd rather text than talk on the phone. The only reason it's up now is because it's one of Mom and Dad's rules. I pull over and park the car.

It's Monique.

For some reason, I thought it might be the contest. My heart momentarily sinks before the anxiety ramps up again. Monique probably read my last piece. Already. God. It starts again: the shallow breathing, the racing thoughts, the mental block.

It's okay. It's okay. She's going to say something nice.

Yet I can't help but wonder if she's calling for another reason. Maybe she hated what I wrote. Maybe it was so bad that she doesn't want me to write for her ever again, and then she won't write a progress report for me for school and I'll have all this horrible work and no progress report and fail senior year.

It doesn't even have to be something big and horrible. Just awkward silences make me anxious. I hate them in face-to-face conversations and on the phone. I never know what to say. I never know how to sound. And then the silence beats down on me, harder and harder, until all my air is gone.

The ringing stops. I tighten my grip on the wheel, glancing down. It barely takes a second for it to start ringing again. I force a deep breath. Before I can chicken out, I accept the call and hold the phone up to my ear. The faster we get talking, the faster I'll feel comfortable. Maybe.

"Hi," I say. My voice cracks. *Ugh*. Hopefully she didn't notice.

"Hey, Josie!" Monique's voice is big and loud. I worry so much about how I sound, but it's like she doesn't care at all. "Hope I'm not getting you at a bad time."

"No, no," I say, shaking my head even though she can't see me. "I'm just hanging out after dinner. How are you?"

“Having a lovely time at home, finally,” she says, laughing. “We’ve been in the office for a long time, trying to finish deadlines before the holiday, and New York in the winter is most definitely not like in the movies. But speaking of deadlines, I wanted to talk to you about the piece you sent me earlier.”

“Oh.” Something in my stomach burns, my fingers gripping the phone a little tighter. Whenever she has notes, she’s nice about it, but it’s easier to not take it personally when they’re written down in an email. “You finished it? Already?”

“Yup.” She pops the *p*. “I couldn’t stop reading. What you were saying, how movies by Black filmmakers are only valued when Black characters are suffering, it really resonated with me. I think I’ve always noticed the really difficult movies winning awards and the fun movies, like *Coming to America*, being excluded.”

“Yeah,” I say, clearing my throat. “I wish every movie came out on an equal playing field. Like, when we have coming-of-age movies about Black kids just living, people don’t really pay attention, but when you have all the misery and suffering of movies like *Precious*, people eat it up. So are audiences just super interested in Black pain? I feel like we’re told that stories about pain are the most important. And they can be. They just don’t have to be the only ones.”

“It’s brilliant,” Monique says. My heart soars. I always think my pieces are important, but that doesn’t mean everyone else will. Monique’s praise literally fuels me. “And you explored it so well. I swear, you get better and better with each essay you send me.”

“Oh,” I say, shifting in my seat. “Wow. Thank you so much.”

Compliments are awkward because I’m not sure how to react to them. I want to be humble and sweet, but also don’t want to come across like I’m surprised. Writing is my *thing*.

I know there's always room to be better, but I'm good at it. I've known that since Monique first read my blog posts and emailed me about writing film essays for *Essence* magazine. I've known that since I told her I was seventeen and she freaked out. But it's still nice to hear it.

"It has the potential to be really powerful," Monique continues. I lean back in my seat and soak it up. "I wish you were getting more attention for this work, though, especially since you're so young."

"I guess so." I pick at my jeans, not sure what else to say. "But I don't want people to pay attention to me just because of my age, you know? I want them to like my work."

"I get it," Monique says. "But between you and me, you're more talented than some of my coworkers."

I laugh, but it sounds strangled. Am I that good? It makes me giddy.

"But anyway, I just wanted to call you so that you knew what I thought," she continues. "I know I tell you how talented you are in my emails, but I need to make sure that you're really aware. It's not even a matter of potential, Josie. You're already a writer. All you have to do is keep working. By the time you're my age, you'll have people eating out of the palm of your hand, if you don't already."

"I wish." I snort. "No one cares about writing here. My parents think I'm strange, and my sister listens, sometimes, but I know she's just trying to make me feel better. And I don't talk to any of the kids at school about it. I don't think they'd get it. The only ones who really pay attention are my Twitter followers."

As soon as the words tumble out, I regret them. She called me to compliment me, not to hear me complain about high school. I don't want her thinking I'm just some petulant teenager.

But Monique doesn't hang up. I didn't really think she would, but sometimes these ridiculous thoughts are hard to shake.

"Oh, high school." Monique sighs long enough for it to sound like a song. "Girl, I *definitely* don't miss that. But don't feel bad. Your people just aren't there. That's fine, all right? They could be anywhere, even the places you don't expect, and you have so much time to find them. It's the best part of growing up."

I smile up at the sky through the windshield. There's so much world I haven't seen yet—movies I haven't watched, brains I haven't picked, countries I haven't been to, people I haven't met. The real world isn't so small. Some days, this idea is what keeps me going.

@JosieTheJournalist: do you
ever just read emails and cry

CHAPTER 3

Maggie always has a *thing*. There's always a new project—putting inspirational quotes all over the walls, doula training, even starting a raw food diet (which was truly the *worst*). The rest of us always get roped into it somehow.

But Mirror Time is something I don't mind. I can't really get out of it, either, since the three of us share a bathroom. And it's just another way Maggie has tried to help. Like leaving Post-its with positive messages around the house or creating a *quiet corner* with beanbags and relaxing music for me in the room I share with Alice.

I appreciate the effort. It's just that a lot of my anxiety comes from people paying attention to me. I can't help but overthink it. Am I too much of a burden? Am I bothering them?

It seems like everyone is already downstairs helping Mom get ready. It means they're too busy to come looking for me. It means I get the bathroom all to myself. I kind of need it.

After not hearing from the contest yesterday, I'm guessing I lost. I'm used to rejections—sending pitches to different magazines will do that to you—but it still hurts.

I push my hair away from my face, revealing myself in the

mirror. There are lines under my eyes and a few crusty bits by my mouth, but I look fine otherwise. The rule is, we're supposed to start off the morning by saying something positive about ourselves in the mirror.

It took a little while, but I *do* like my face. I have dark brown skin and plump lips and what Beyoncé would call a “Negro Nose.” This face is a very cute face, especially with my cheeks. Mom still likes to pinch them sometimes, like I’m a toddler. And I have been working on my hair. I don’t exactly have an Afro, but there’s a nice amount of follicles up there. I smile.

Honestly, I don’t need this. I don’t think I’m ugly. But Maggie says it’s not about physical beauty. It’s about *inner peace* or *self-confidence* or something. So I open my mouth and say, “You’re smart and kind and talented.” It sounds like something from Barney.

Liking my face is pretty easy. It’s the rest of my body that can take some work. I pull up the tank top I slept in, looking at my belly as it spills out. I think it’s just a habit to suck it in at this point. It’s freeing and sort of disappointing every time I let go.

My therapist, Laura, and I work on framing—that’s what I call it, since it sort of reminds me of TV. The idea is to look at your situation in a different light.

So I try not to frown when I see my belly. It shouldn’t be so big, but it’s okay, because everyone’s body is different. And I don’t mind my belly when it’s just me. I try to think of Winnie-the-Pooh, how everyone loves him and he wears a crop top and he’s generally a fashion icon. It makes me smile. I rub my hands over my own stomach, swaying back and forth in front of the mirror. There’s nothing wrong with a belly. Bellies are cute, and they hold important internal organs.

“Do they hurt?”

My eyes snap up, locking on Alice’s in the mirror. She’s taller

than me, which isn't that hard to be, seeing as I'm just barely taller than five feet. Her scarf is still on, and her sleep shirt is falling off her tiny frame. I have to shove away some of the jealousy in my gut.

"Do what hurt?" I ask, clearing my throat and moving my arms.

"The stretch marks." Her eyes dart to my stomach faster than I can pull the shirt down. "Maggie got them when she was pregnant with Cash, even though she kept using shea butter every few minutes."

"I remember." I shake my head at the memory. I was thirteen, old enough for my parents to talk to me about waiting until marriage. "And no, they don't hurt."

It doesn't *seem* like she's trying to make me feel bad, but I can never tell with Alice. Even if she didn't mean it that way, a switch has already been flipped. It's not just my voice telling me there's something wrong with my body. Normal people aren't supposed to get stretch marks unless they're pregnant. I don't even know how I got mine: deep ripples at the edges of my stomach, darker than the rest of my skin.

"Well, I guess you don't have to worry about it, then," she says, pulling off her scarf and running her hands through her braids. "Does Maggie still do Mirror Time?"

"Uh, yeah." I try not to roll my eyes. "You've been gone three months. Not much has changed."

"Hmm." Her eyes narrow as she studies herself. "I like my eyes today. They're looking hazel."

"Your eyes are brown."

"I said they *look* hazel," she says, shaking her head. "My eyes can *look* any color I want them to."

I can't tell if she's being serious or not. Alice sort of makes a joke out of everything.

I change into my Thanksgiving outfit (an orange-and-red floral dress I'm in love with) before slipping downstairs. Mom is already in the kitchen, ordering Dad, Maggie, and even Cash around with a wooden spoon. I step back, but the spoon flies up in my direction. Shit. She saw me.

"Why are you already dressed up?" She narrows her eyes. "You still have to help."

"But it's late." I glance at the ticking clock on the wall. It's eleven. "People will start showing up in an hour. You know Auntie Denise."

Dad snorts. Mom shoots him a look and he turns back to the turkey.

Auntie Denise and her new husband, a guy whose name I haven't bothered to learn yet, show up earlier than we expected. They ring the doorbell three times. Mom gives me a pointed look. Maggie is setting the table, Cash helping, and my parents are still cooking. Who *knows* when Alice will come down? That leaves me to entertain them. I know it shouldn't, but my anxiety flares up around them, too.

"Josie!" Auntie Denise pulls me into her chest. "Oh, look at you! So big!"

I wince. It doesn't help that Auntie Denise is as thin as my pinkie. She pulls back, appraising eyes running over my body. I stare at a spot on her chest that's lighter than the rest of her body. Maybe it's a birthmark.

"How are college applications going?"

"Good." I shrug. "I applied early decision to Spelman, so waiting to hear back."

"Aw," she says, pressing a hand against my cheek. "Following in your older sister's footsteps, huh?"

"Well, actually, I wanted to go before she did," I huff. "She followed *my* footsteps."

Auntie Denise smiles like I'm a little kid.

"Right," she says. "Of course, sweetheart."

She bustles past me, pulling her husband along. I peek into the kitchen. She's already grabbed Mom and Dad's attention. That gives me a few more minutes to hide from everyone. Before they can wonder where I am, I jog back up the stairs.

Alice and I are sharing a room while she's home. Her bags are too close to the door, so I have to suck in my stomach to squeeze through. I kick one of the suitcases over. Technically, the door could've done it.

I grab my phone off the charger. Mom hates phones at the table whenever we all sit down as a family, but that barely happens, even on Thanksgiving. Everyone ends up sitting in clusters throughout the house. We don't even keep up the pretense of sitting at the table anymore. She won't notice my phone as long as I say hi to everyone.

I've been reading this article about how *Boyz N the Hood* got made. The door stays closed while I read, even as I hear the sounds of the front door opening, of people talking and laughing. I almost miss the sound of my email notification.

There's the usual—spam emails about spying on my ex-husband, college ads . . . but.

But.

There's one from *Deep Focus* magazine. I open it, trying my best not to scream.

Dear Josephine,

Congratulations! You've been selected as the winner of the Deep Focus Talent Search. A team of fifteen writers and editors reviewed this year's entries and took part in the judging process. We delayed making our announcement because our judges had trouble choosing

just one out of the 400 finalists, but they finally picked you. You should be proud of your achievement.

Oh.

My.

God.

I let out a scream. Downstairs, there's a loud thud. I look back at my phone.

As you are aware, the grand prize is the chance to take part in a press tour for a new film, Incident on 57th Street, starring Academy Award nominee Art Springfield, Grace Gibbs, and newcomer Marius Canet. With Deep Focus partnering with Spotlight Pictures, you'll have unprecedented access to the cast and crew, but you will be focusing on writing a profile about Marius, who has garnered rave reviews for his performance. You will be taking part in press events for two weeks in Los Angeles, Austin, Chicago, Atlanta, and New York, where our offices are located. Deep Focus will cover all expenses related to travel and lodging. You will also receive a \$500 cash prize.

I'm so glad that you will be joining the Deep Focus team. I will be your supervisor during your assignment, which means I will organize interviews, events, and transportation during the press tour and be the first to review your final article before it's submitted to our editorial team. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me!

I've also attached a contract to this email. Please review and sign, along with one of your parents, as soon as possible, as we can't proceed without a signed contract.

You will then receive an official Deep Focus press pass in the mail, which you must wear while on assignment. After the contract is signed, we will fly you to a screening of the film in Los Angeles next weekend, with a press conference being held afterward. If you accept, I will contact you soon with more details.

We look forward to working with you!

Best,

Lauren Jacobson

Publicity Manager of Deep Focus

My hands are shaking.

Me. I won the contest. *Me.*

When they first emailed me about being a finalist, they told me two thousand people had applied before they narrowed it down to four hundred. And out of *four hundred* people, they chose *me*. It doesn't feel real. The publicity manager of my favorite magazine just emailed *me*. I'm going to write a story for my favorite magazine. *Me, me, me.*

I don't even know how many things this could do for my career. For the past forty years, *Deep Focus* has been *the* center of popular culture. Anyone who's anyone has been on the cover, including, but not limited to:

- Classic music stars like the Beatles, Michael Jackson, and David Bowie
- Newer music stars like Adele, Kendrick Lamar, and Lorde
- The Queen (Beyoncé)
- Actors like Heath Ledger, Denzel Washington, Cate Blanchett, Natalie Portman, Keira Knightley, Andrew Garfield, Issa Rae . . .

Thinking about it all at once makes me dizzy.

I've always devoured profiles of writers and directors and actors, even though I'm sure most of them are staged. This is my chance to finally see for myself how it works. How do you even include this on a résumé? In a special box with shiny letters and glitter?

This could help me get more freelance gigs. This could lead to *bigger* things. It's *Deep Focus*, for crying out loud. I could do whatever I want after this.

I hold my hand over my mouth. Nervous laughter mixes with another scream, which makes me sound like a nervous horse. I'm not even concerned. Sure, I haven't told my parents that the grand prize entails hanging out in five different cities with a group of actors and a director and other moviemaking people. Sure, I have anxiety and hate being around too many people I don't know.

But *God*, do the positives outweigh the negatives. This is my chance to do something exciting for once. This is my chance to do what I love on a bigger scale. This is my chance to be taken seriously as a writer.

I open up two different tabs: one with the name of the actor and one with the name of the movie. I start an email reply to Ms. Jacobson. But what do I say?

"Josephine?" Mom's voice travels up the stairs. "Get down here!"

Oh, right. First things first: I have to ask Mom and Dad.

@JosieTheJournalist: my parents are actually the best in the entire world, don't @ me

CHAPTER 4

It's torture waiting *all* night for everyone to leave. And when I say *all night*, I really mean it. Uncle Eddie doesn't leave until eleven. Mom has to call him a cab. I sneak up behind her as she watches him through the screen door.

"Mommy?"

She raises a brow. "What do you want?"

I pull her back into the kitchen. There's a mess: half-full containers and bottles, dirty dishes and silverware. Dad's already organizing leftovers. We'll be eating them for the next week, at least.

"Well," I say, clasping my hands together, "I've been presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"What?" Dad looks up. "A scholarship?"

"Uh, no," I say. "Not that kind. But it's even better."

Mom folds her arms, both eyebrows raised in expectation.

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "Do you remember that contest I entered a few months ago? The *Deep Focus* Talent Search? It was for teen reporters."

"Yes," Mom says. "We remember that. Did you hear back?"

"I did," I say. "And it's really amazing news—I won. Out of two thousand people."

"Oh my goodness, Josie," Dad says, straightening. "That's *amazing*. Come here."

He pulls me into his arms, squeezing the life out of me. I laugh against his shoulder.

"*Deep Focus*," he says, shaking me back and forth. "Josie! We're so proud of you!"

"We are." Mom smiles. "So what's the downside?"

"There really *is* no downside, if you think of it." I lick my lips. "The grand prize is the chance to write a cover story for the magazine."

"I remember you telling us that," Dad says, shaking his head. "Our daughter, writing a cover story for *Deep Focus*. You know Obama was on the cover?"

"You hung the cover up in the den." I try my best not to roll my eyes. "So I'll get to write a cover story, too, about this new movie starring Art Springfield—"

"Art Springfield," Dad repeats. He glances at Mom. "Sounds like we'll have to see that one."

"Sure, honey." Mom doesn't take her eyes off of me. "Get to the catch, Josie."

"Okay." I force a deep breath through my nose. "I have to go on a press tour with the cast and crew to cover the story accurately. And the tour goes to five cities across the United States for two weeks. The first event is next weekend, in Los Angeles."

There's a heavy moment of silence as she and Dad look at each other.

"Oh," Dad says, tossing a rag over his shoulder. "Well, if that's *all*."

I flush.

“There’s no way I’m sending you across the country by yourself,” Mom says, shaking her head. “How many different cities? And where do you expect me to get that money from?”

Good. She’s explaining herself. If Mom *really* means no, she just shuts the conversation down before it can begin. This is her way of inviting me to fight for this.

“They’ll cover hotel and airfare,” I say. “And I get five hundred dollars cash.”

“Five hundred dollars,” Dad says. “They’re big spenders, aren’t they?”

“The rest of it can be my Christmas present,” I say. “Or I’ll use my money from Cora’s to help pay.”

“That money is for school,” Mom says.

“Right,” I say. “But a press tour is way more impressive than just freelancing. And Monique can still be my mentor and everything.”

I haven’t even run this by her, but I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. This is the type of thing capstone projects are made for. Other kids fly to different continents to do missions and build houses. I can go on a press tour that will launch my career.

“It’s just—” I huff. It’s hard to say everything I’m feeling all at once. “I’ll do anything. This is really, *really* important to me.”

“I don’t know,” Dad says, glancing at Mom. “It sounds like a lot of responsibility.”

“I’m responsible,” I say, holding out my hand, counting on my fingers. “I watch Cash when no one else can. I go grocery shopping on the weekends. I have a job. I practically did all the college stuff by myself. I can do this.”

Dad nods. Mom shoots him a look.

“I understand,” Mom says slowly. “I just don’t feel comfortable with you being by yourself, and I can’t take off of work for that long.”

“Neither of us would be able to,” Dad chimes in. “I really want this for you, but—”

“Maggie can go with me.” The words fly out of my mouth. “She can go with me.”

“Really?” Mom gives me a look. “She can’t take off of work, either, and I doubt you’d want to bring Cash along.”

“Well, what about Alice?”

Before my parents can even process my words, my sister comes flying into the room. I *knew* she was listening.

“No,” she snaps. “I’m not taking a leave of absence to babysit.”

“It’s not *babysitting*,” I say. “I’m two years younger than you. And you don’t need to take a leave of absence. Your winter break literally starts next week.”

“Break is *me* time,” she says, folding her arms. “I need to hang out with my friends.”

“You can do that *anytime*. Come on, Alice. I’ve never asked you for anything.”

“That’s a lie.” She rolls her eyes. “How many times did I have to take you driving before you *finally* passed the driver’s test?”

“That’s different.” My face burns. I only failed the test twice because I kept getting anxious. People would beep at me or the DMV representative would remind me to do something, and I’d completely stop breathing.

“I don’t have to go just because you asked,” she says, as if I’d never said anything. “What do you expect me to do the entire time? Follow you around and knit?”

“I just need—”

“If you keep this up, y’all ain’t going nowhere,” Mom snaps. Both of us go silent. “I can’t even hear myself think.”

Alice’s lips are twisted into a frown. I bet she doesn’t want to come just because *I* brought it up. If Mom or Dad had asked, she would’ve complained but gone along with it. After all, it’s not

like I'm asking her to poke her eyes out. I'm asking her to go on a trip with me. It's not the worst thing in the world.

"If you make sure to stay focused on your schoolwork," Dad says, choosing his words slowly, eyes locked on our mother. "And if you can convince Alice to go with you . . . I don't see why we can't make this work."

I turn back to my sister. She's still frowning.

"Alice." I settle for sticking out my lower lip. "*Please?* You'll get to go to New York and L.A., and I promise we'll go wherever you want. I'll do your chores for a year."

"I'm not here most of the year."

I groan, tossing back my head.

"Alice," Mom says, "you don't have to go if you don't want to. But it would be a nice thing to do for your sister."

Alice bites her lip. I resist the urge to pump my fist in the air. Mom's endorsement is better than anything I could ever promise.

"Well," she finally says, heaving a great and weary sigh. The twitching corners of her mouth give her away. "I *have* always wanted to go to Los Angeles. And if I get to meet—"

I yelp, tossing my arms around her. Alice usually isn't one for hugs. The limp hands at her sides prove that. I'm just so happy I can't resist. Dad laughs, but Mom bangs on the table, grabbing our attention.

"But as soon as you get back, you are focusing on *college*," Mom says, pointing a finger. I rise up on my toes. Nothing she can say will ruin this for me. "And I want phone calls. *Phone calls, not texts*. I'm talking every hour. You understand?"

I can't hear anything else she says because I'm too busy screaming and pulling her in for a hug.

THAT WEEKEND



"Deliciously twisted."

—KAREN M. MCMANUS,
#1 *New York Times*
bestselling author of
One of Us Is Lying

There's no coming back

KARA THOMAS

GO BACK
TO QUIZ!

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . .

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thomas, Kara, author.

Title: That weekend / Kara Thomas.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, [2021] | Audience: Ages 14+ |

Audience: Grades 10-12. | Summary: After Claire wakes up alone on a mountain with no memory of how she got there, she learns her best friend Kat and

Kat's boyfriend are missing and Kat's past is full of secrets.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020025002 (print) | LCCN 2020025003 (ebook) |

ISBN 978-1-5247-1836-7 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-5247-1839-8 (paperback) |

ISBN 978-1-5247-1837-4 (library binding) | ISBN 978-1-5247-1838-1 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Missing persons—Fiction. | Amnesia—Fiction. |

Secrets—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T46 Th 2021 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.T46 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Apollo MT.

Interior design by Ken Crossland

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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THAT WEEKEND

KARA THOMAS

DELACORTE PRESS

PART ONE

THE MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER ONE

NOW

Earth, cold and rocky, pressing against my cheek. Tree roots digging into my body like hardened veins. I open my eyes to an assault of sunlight, wincing at the pain it sends radiating through my skull.

In my ear, panting, presumably what pulled me out of whatever state I was in. Unconsciousness? I don't want to think about that word or what it means because I don't know where I am or whose tongue is an inch from my ear—

I turn my head in the direction of shouting. A woman's voice, annoyed: "Tucker! Get over here!"

I blink until the face of an enormous black Lab, inches from mine, comes into focus. When I prop myself up on my elbows, the dog takes off, barking, running small semicircles in the area around me.

The woman shouts again. "Damn it, Tucker!"

"Help." My voice scrapes my throat, like I haven't used it in some time. I lick my lips, find they're cold as stones.

Footsteps, grinding twigs into the ground. The owner of the voice emerges from a cluster of trees to my right.

"Good Lord." The woman's silver hair falls in curls down

past her shoulders. Tucker gallops over to her and sits at her feet as she sets aside her hiking poles and digs a Poland Spring from her pack.

She uncaps the bottle of water and hands it to me. "What's your name?"

"Claire," I say.

"My name is Sunshine," the woman says. "Are you alone out here?"

"I don't know." I swallow down a knot of dread as my brain orients itself. It's prom weekend. I don't know why this is the detail I latch on to, but it's the one thing I know for sure. "Where are we?"

"Bobcat Mountain," Sunshine says. I hold the water bottle to my lips, watching Sunshine's face cloud with concern. Tucker trots over to me, his nose bumping the back of my hand and leaving a trail of doggy nose drool. I lean on my free hand, pushing myself up to get away from him. Pain shoots from my neck to my eyes.

I roll onto my side and gag up the sip of water. Sunshine's voice cuts through the ringing in my ears. "What hurts?"

"My head." *Hurts* is an understatement. My skull is being cleaved in two. I blink away the spots of light clouding my vision to see Sunshine standing up. She brushes some dirt from the knees of her pants. "You could have a serious injury. I'm going to hike to the ranger station to call an ambulance."

A tsunami of panic rises in me. I don't know where the ranger station is or how long it will take Sunshine to get there and back. "Please don't leave me."

"I promise I'll be back as soon as I can."

She's gone, the crunch of her feet on the trail fading with each passing moment. Tucker nudges my ear with his nose before taking off after Sunshine, and I'm alone again.

I squeeze my eyelids shut until they oscillate with the threat of tears. I don't know where I am or why I'm alone. I know nothing except for the fact it's prom weekend.

It's prom weekend. My nails are scarlet to match my dress, a boat neck with a high-low skirt.

I am not on Fire Island, where I told my parents I was going after prom, and I'm hurt. My parents are going to know both of these things very soon.

I will the last few days into focus in my brain. I see my scarlet dress, which cost an entire paycheck. I was honestly relieved when I returned it to Macy's Friday morning and thought of the money going back into my checking account.

I turn a trembling hand over; the past forty-eight hours coming back in a steady *drip-drip*.

It's prom weekend, but I didn't go. I never got my nails done; they shouldn't match the dress I never got to wear.

The cut bisects my right palm, an angry fish gill crusted with blood. It doesn't hurt, except when I flex my hand.

How did it happen? A pulse of pain radiates from my brain. *Too much. Give us a simpler question.*

How did I get here?

I'm in knit shorts, a ribbed tank. My go-to gym-class outfit. I don't remember putting it on, lacing up the sneakers squeezing my throbbing toes. Blisters, probably.

How long have I been here?

I don't know how much time has passed when Sunshine returns with two men. One is old and in a green uniform, the other young and wearing a blue shirt that says EMS. They circle me, murmuring assurances that make my eyes cloud up.

"Can you show us where you're hurt?"

I raise my bloodied left hand and the EMT produces a first-aid kit from a small duffel bag. While he tears open an alcohol wipe to clean my cut, the ranger says into a walkie-talkie, "Young female, possible head injury. Need to evacuate her."

"What does that mean?" I sit up, ignoring the sting of the alcohol on my cut.

Sunshine's hand is on my shoulder. "Claire, it's okay. You can't hike back down in your condition."

The men are gone, out of my line of vision. Tears pool hot in the corners of my eyes. "What are they going to do with me?"

"They're going to have to carry you down on a stretcher."

I'm trembling by the time the men are back with the stretcher. While one straps me in, the other lays a foil blanket over me. My stomach dips as I'm lifted from the ground. I close my eyes, the rocking motion pulling me toward sleep.

"Claire," one of the men says. "We need you to stay awake and answer some questions."

The missive my parents had me memorize every time we went somewhere we could get separated runs through my head.

When they ask my address and I tell them it's 32 Carmen Road, Brookport, the ranger asks, "Where is that?"

"Long Island, right?" the EMT says.

"Yeah." I swallow against the nausea swirling in me.

"You're a long way from home," the older guy says, and for some reason this is the thing that finally makes me cry.

We are at the bottom of the mountain, at the parking lot, which I only know because the ranger announces we're at the bottom of the mountain.

I'm loaded into the back of an ambulance, and the last thing I see before the doors shut in my face is Sunshine, frowning.

When the doors open again, I ask why we've stopped.

"We're at Sunfish Creek Hospital," the EMT says, pulling out the ramp and guiding my stretcher down it.

"Did someone call my parents?" I murmur.

The EMT frowns, pushing my stretcher toward the hospital entrance. "You gave us their number on the ride over. You don't remember me telling you they're on their way?"

I had an entire conversation I can't remember. It's unsettling, but not as much as the fact my parents are coming *here*. I said we were going to Fire Island, which is a short ferry ride from home, and not to my best friend Kat's grandmother's lake house in Sunfish Creek, three hours away, in the Catskill Mountains. I didn't lie because they would have said no; I lied because Kat's parents definitely would have said no.

Kat. I would not have gone hiking on that mountain without Kat—

"Where are they?" I'm shivering, despite the blanket.

"Where are who, Claire?"

"My friends. Kat and Jesse." The EMTs roll me through the hospital entrance; I'm not sure they've even heard me over the sounds of radios blipping, a siren behind us at the curb.

We stop in a white hallway, beneath a sign reading TRIAGE AREA. The older EMT grips my wrists with two fingers, counts my pulse. "You were hiking with friends?"

I close my eyes, reach back in my memory. There is nothing but Sunshine's face in mine, knitted up with concern. Kat, at the lake house last night, stowing hot dogs in the fridge. *For tomorrow*.

"We were supposed to go camping," I say as the EMT clips some sort of meter over my finger. "But I don't remember how we got to the mountain."

"Try to breathe," the EMT says, frowning as the contraption on my finger beeps. "Your heart rate is high."

I close my eyes. It's startling, how long it's been since I've felt pure, undiluted fear like this. I feel like I'm five years old again, wading through the crowd at the county fair, and I've lost my grip on my mother's hand.

"Will someone find them?" I ask.

"I'm going to call the ranger station right now and have them send someone up to the campsite." The EMT pats my shoulder. "It'll be okay. You're gonna be okay."

It's not until he disappears behind the sliding doors that I realize he's not coming back. His job here is done; he's off to rescue the next moron who got lost in the woods.

My stretcher begins to roll again. An orderly wheels me through the emergency room doors, past stretchers docked in every corner and along the walls, occupied by moaning bodies. A spindly woman is handcuffed to the railing of hers, despite her being unconscious. Somewhere in the distance, a man yells that he's shit himself.

As the orderly guides my stretcher behind a curtain, a woman in scrubs trots over to me and plops a plastic-wrapped gown at my feet. "You'll need to change into this."

The orderly disappears; the nurse draws the curtain and turns her attention to the cart she dragged over behind her. "Name and date of birth?"

I rattle off the information she needs and she types it into the machine on the cart; she prints a plastic ID bracelet and fastens it around my wrist, her eyes never meeting mine. My bladder is going to burst any second.

"Where's the bathroom?" I ask.

"Paramedics said you may have a head injury," she says. "You can't be going to the bathroom alone. I'll get an aide to bring you a bedpan."

Horror washes through me. "I have to pee right *here*?"

"Sure do. We need a urine sample anyway. The gown ties in the back." The nurse whisks away.

I peek around the curtain. A man in a hospital gown plods past me, toting an IV drip behind him, a cup of pee in his other hand.

I glance in the opposite direction, where my nurse is now bent over a computer.

The ache in my abdomen is so bad I'm sweating. Another five minutes and I'll probably piss myself.

Screw it. I get out of bed and make a right—the direction the man with the pee-cup came from. There's a bathroom at the

end of the row of curtains. I duck in, wriggle my shorts down, and plop on the toilet. The relief is so great I could cry.

I hobble over to the sink, plunge my hands below the tap. The water that swirls the drain is reddish pink. Trembling, I turn my palms up, but all that's left is a streak of dried blood extending from my thumb all the way up my forearm on my left hand.

The sight in the mirror over the sink startles me. I don't recognize that girl, her sunburned cheeks, the scrape on her forehead.

Who are you? I think. What happened to you?



CHAPTER TWO

THREE DAYS EARLIER WEDNESDAY

Eight people are piled into Anna Markey's six-person hot tub. Anna herself, the gracious hostess, made room for number eight by climbing onto my boyfriend's lap.

Ex-boyfriend? I'm not sure exactly. I haven't spoken to him since our statistics final this afternoon. Ben finished the test before me, but promised to wait for me outside the classroom because that's what you do when you've been dating for three months and five days.

Ben did wait for me, but when I finished the test, Anna Markey was with him. Anna Markey, his neighbor since kindergarten. Anna Markey, who calls him *Benny* and puts her head on his shoulder when I'm around, blue doe-eyes on me as if to say *you don't mind, right?*

After the test this afternoon, Anna was propped against Ben's locker, pouting through her signature Clinique Black Cherry lips: "I can't believe you're not coming to my beach house this weekend."

What I hoped he'd say: "There's nowhere I'd rather be than in Sunfish Creek, sexing up my girlfriend at her best friend's grandmother's lake house."

What Ben *did* say: "I know. It sucks."

He hadn't seen me standing in the classroom doorway. He didn't see me stalk off to my car in tears; when he texted *where'd u go??* I'd ignored it, plus his handful of follow-up messages.

Anyway. I came here to apologize, but I'm not sorry anymore.

Anna folds her hands behind her head. Stretches, lithe and catlike. Ben's gaze travels down over her shoulder. Noah McKenna, Ben's best friend, Most Likely to Drop Out of College by Christmas, splashes Shannon DiClemente in the face. Shannon shrieks, because now her flat-ironed hair is wet, and Anna crawls further up Ben to escape the splash.

They still haven't noticed me, standing at the edge of the patio, trembling hands jammed into the pocket of my SUNY Geneseo hoodie. I am back to how things were pre-Ben. Invisible. His friends, the village kids, only paid attention to me because Ben decided I was someone worth paying attention to.

A tug on my ponytail. Jamie Liu appears at my shoulder and takes a swill from the Solo cup in her hand. "What up, bitch?"

I point at the hot tub, and Jamie says, "Oh. Shit."

Jamie and I stand like that, side by side, watching the scene in the hot tub. She doesn't tell me Ben and Anna are only being playful and that I have nothing to worry about. Since elementary school, Jamie Liu has been the friend I go to when I need someone to be brutally honest about my breath or to talk me out of getting bangs.

After a few moments of silence, Jamie says, "What are you going to do?"

I don't know. I need time to think. "Wanna go inside?"

Jamie glances down into her empty cup. "Sure."

Inside the house is considerably quieter. We wander into the kitchen, where Jamie grabs a bottle of Bacardi from the libations Anna has set out. She pours a few inches of rum into a cup and tops it off with a splash of Coke. Hands it to me. "Let's turn this night around."

Or, more likely, upside down.

We clink rims. The first sip of Jamie's death concoction is so foul I almost gag; there's no choice but to treat it like a shot. I drain the cup in a fluid motion. A shudder passes through me, followed by warmth.

"Woo," I say. "Wow. Make another."

Jamie obeys, more than happy to help me board the train to Sloppy Town. My muscles tighten, and suddenly my head is clearer.

Kat, my best friend, says I hate confrontation. If she were here, she'd remind me just how much I hate confrontation, but she'd still march right up to Ben for me and say something to make him evacuate his bowels in the hot tub.

Kat is not here, though.

I need to be a big girl and not leave without handling this. I knock back another drink, make a third, and follow Jamie into the living room. We nestle into a free corner of the couch; the World Cup soccer match, and reason for this party, is on Anna's television, which is approximately Dad-Owns-a-Chain-of-Ford-Dealerships inches big.

My eyelids feel like they weigh a thousand pounds. During a commercial for Buffalo Wild Wings, Jamie puts a hand on my knee. "Can we go be mean to Ben now?"

When I shake my head, the room does a full tilt. I shut my eyes and chug the rest of my drink.

"I'm going to Mom you now." Jamie reaches over and guides the cup away from my mouth. "No blacking out on me."

"Okay." My body gives a twitch and a shudder. "I'm ready to talk to Ben."

Jamie is at my heels like a cat as I pick my way around the crowd gathering in Anna's living room. Through the kitchen, out the sunroom, and onto the deck, my heartbeat mimicking a terrier's.

I stop short of the hot tub. The spot Anna and Ben had been occupying is empty. Noah McKenna, reaching for a beer on the ledge of the tub, spots Jamie and me. Freezes.

"Where's Ben?" I ask.

"Hey. When did you get here?" His eyes ferret around, avoiding mine. "Uh, I think Ben went to get a refill?"

"Huh. We were just in the kitchen," Jamie says. "It's so weird we didn't see him."

I'm already making my way back toward the house, taking the deck steps two at a time. The patio doorway is jammed with underclassmen—friends of the younger Markeys, there are three—and I lose Jamie to them.

The brief excursion into the hot June night has made my skin clammy; a bead of sweat rolls down my chest, and I can feel the hair at my crown frizzing. I swallow an acidic burp. Scan the kitchen. No Ben.

I step through the dining room, into the living room. *Where the hell are you?*

My gaze locks on the top of the stairs. On Anna, a towel wrapped around her waist. Ben, following her.

I say his name. I don't know how anyone can hear it over the TV, but Anna does.

Her head swivels toward me. She stops short on the stairs. Reaches for Ben's hand and gives it a panicked tug.

He shouts for me to wait, but I'm already halfway to the front door. I stumble on the last step and roll my ankle. *Home. I need to go home.*

I can't drive, obviously. If I call my house, one of my parents will be here in five minutes to pick me up, and even though I won't get in trouble for the drinking, I don't think I can stomach the humiliation of telling them what happened with Ben.

The shame levels me; I sink so I'm sitting on the curb outside Anna's. Stupid, stupid. Stupid for drinking that much—stupid for thinking I could ever fit in with Ben Filipoff's friends. There are only two people who don't make me feel like a fool and they're not here right now because they're together.

I dig out my phone. It slips through my fingers and clatters to the pavement. Someday the screen is going to decide it's had

enough and shatter on me. For now, it's intact. I fumble for my favorites.

Kat sounds worried when she answers. "Claire? Are you okay?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Are you home?"

"We're at Jesse's."

"Can you come get me?"

A pause. "Where are you?"

"Anna Markey's. I think I'm gonna throw up."

"Okay. Stay where you are. We'll be there in five minutes."

The thought of Jesse Salpietro seeing me like this is the cherry-shaped turd on top of this absolute shit sundae of a day.

"Claire." Ben's voice reaches me, breaking through the clouding in my brain. "Wait."

"Leave me alone." I stand up off the curb.

"Claire." Ben grabs my arm.

I yank it back and slap him across the face with my opposite hand. He blinks at me, stunned. Commotion by Anna's backyard gate—some laughing, Noah bleating, *Damn, wish I got that on video*, followed by a girl shouting, *That's not funny!*

Ben puts his palm to his cheek. "I was just—I didn't want you to step into the road without looking."

Someone says my name. I turn around; Jesse Salpietro is at the foot of Anna's driveway. "What's going on?"

Off to my side, Ben says, "I'm taking Claire home."

"No, you're not," I growl.

"I've got it from here," Jesse says to Ben.

"Of course you do." Ben shakes his head. Tosses his hands up and steps away from me. "Have fun. She's all yours."

Of course you do. What does he mean? By the time I compose myself enough to ask him what the hell he meant, Ben is gone, and Kat Marcotte is standing next to Jesse. She's in a loose denim button-down shirt, crisp white shorts. Gold-streaked, beachy waves that can withstand the swampiest of June nights.

I buckle over and vomit on Anna's lawn.

Kat loops an arm through mine. "Babe, help me get her."

Jesse's familiar smell—grapefruit shampoo, and the hint of Febreze he sprays on his clothes to cover up the cigarette stench from his aunt and uncle's house. I close my eyes, fighting off tears. One hand on the small of my back, Jesse guides me into the backseat of his car. Instead of slamming the door behind me, Kat squeezes in. Lifts my legs and lays them across her lap so we both fit.

"I'm sorry," I say. The adrenaline is gone from my body, and I'm crashing, my anger replaced by the crush of shame.

"Why are you apologizing?" Jesse asks.

"I threw up."

Kat shifts under me. "You missed. You should have aimed for Ben. *Exorcist*-style, right in his stupid face."

"I slapped him," I mumble.

The world around me swirls. I catch pieces of their conversation:

Can't take her home like this—

Can't bring her to my house, my mom will call hers—

"My car," I mumble. "I can't leave it."

"We'll get it in the morning," Kat says.

"I slapped Ben," I repeat.

"Good." Kat strokes a piece of hair off my forehead. "I'm sure he deserved it."

"I love you," I say.

The satisfied smile on her face is the last thing I see before everything spins to a halt.



CHAPTER THREE

TWO DAYS EARLIER THURSDAY

When I wake up, I'm staring at Carlos Santana.

I close my eyes in an attempt to ward off the jackhammering in my brain. *Santana poster, twin bed.* I'm not in my room.

I blink until a black electric guitar propped up in the corner comes into focus; a Les Paul, found on eBay last year after his old Fender strat was stolen from a show. Kat and I pooled our money for his birthday so we could buy him a new guitar.

Jesse is at his desk, his back to me, watching a Marvel movie trailer on YouTube, headphones in.

"Jesse," I say, but he doesn't move. I lob his pillow at him.

He swivels in his chair so he's facing me and tugs out his earbuds. "She lives."

I scramble into an upright position, the back of my skull knocking on the headboard. "What time is it? I have work at noon."

"It's ten-ish. You're good." Jesse moves toward the bed, eyeing me like a dog that might bite. He perches at the edge, leaving a safe two feet of space between us. On his carpet, I spot a pillow and a lump of a blanket.

"You didn't have to sleep on the floor," I say, even though

we both know that's not true. His bed is a twin, and Jesse Salpietro would not leave a drunk girl to sleep on the floor.

"It's fine," he says around a yawn.

I prop myself up against the headboard. When I close my eyes, I see Ben, following Anna Markey up those stairs.

I think I might puke again. "Do you know what happened to my phone?"

Jesse tosses it to me. "We texted your parents saying you were staying at Kat's."

Scrolling through my phone is a brief reprieve from the awkward silence. No calls or texts from Ben. The only new message is a reply from my mom. *Tell Kat hi.*

I set my phone down, swallowing hard and praying I won't cry in front of Jesse.

He is watching me, carefully, as if he wants to say something.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing." Jesse swivels in his chair so he's facing away from me, a little too quickly. "I can take you to get your car whenever you're ready."

My stomach curls like ash, and a horrifying thought rises up in me. Me, babbling to Kat about how much I love her.

I am not religious, but I say a silent prayer to whoever that after I professed my undying love for Kat, I had the presence of mind to keep my goddamn mouth shut about how I feel about her boyfriend.

Anna Markey's car isn't in her driveway, saving me the humiliation of being spotted picking up my car looking like a sewer rat in last night's clothes. Jesse idles at the curb.

"Thanks." I pause, my hand on the door.

What would it cost me to say it? *I miss you. I miss how things were.*

Jesse moved into town in the sixth grade. The first day of

school, I picked a seat by the front of the bus for the afternoon ride home, squashed to the window and hoping Noah McKenna wouldn't sit next to me, because he sat behind me in social studies the year before and snapped my training bra strap every day.

When he plopped down next to me, Jesse's long, dark eyelashes were clumped together. For a moment, I thought it was the rain outside, but his cheeks were splotchy.

I couldn't remember ever seeing a boy cry at school, in front of people, since kindergarten. "Are you okay?" I'd asked.

He shook his head. "I forgot my key. I have to wait outside until my mom gets home at six."

"Can you go to one of your neighbors? Or call your mom at work?" I asked.

He shook his head—just barely, careful not to disturb the tears welling in the corners of his eyes. I took the hint and stuck in my earbuds. It was hard to look away from him. The birthmark at the corner of his right eye. Soft, brown curls. The Oreo dirt under his fingernails.

The next afternoon, while I was smashed up against the window of the front seat, I saw him getting onto the bus. I held my breath. Scrambled for my headphones, praying I looked convincingly absorbed in untangling the wires.

Someone plopped into the seat next to me. "Hi."

I tamped down the urge to put a hand to my lips, to cover the dopey smile blooming there. "Hi."

"What are you listening to?" Jesse asked.

I handed him one of my earbuds, and we listened together. I'd been listening to "American Girl" by Tom Petty, my favorite song, and I'd been hoping he'd ask because I wanted Jesse Salpietro to know everything about me.

He told me he played the guitar; I'd just watched my favorite movie, *Almost Famous*, for the first time that year, and I told him it was my dream to write for *Rolling Stone* one day.

“Good,” he’d said. “You can write about how awesome my band’s music is.”

We spent the next few years making crazy plans like that. On the bus, at the merry-go-round at the marina playground.

“Claire,” Jesse says, bringing me back. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” I unbuckle my seat belt and climb out of the car without looking back at him. “Thanks for the ride.”

My parents are at work when I get home. Mom is a psychotherapist who sees patients from an office forty minutes from our house, Dad is a librarian with a rotating schedule, and I work at a restaurant, which means the three of us are rarely home and awake at the same time.

I shower and take a twenty-minute nap that makes me feel even worse before dragging myself to Stellato’s Italian Table.

I’ve had a job there since I was fifteen, first as a busser and then a waitress. Serg, the owner, has been letting me hostess for the past month or so, since the last girl quit and no one inquired about the Help Wanted sign in the door.

No one wants to work these days, he always grumbles. Really, no one wants to work for his wife, who is a nightmare of a human being. The kitchen staff is a revolving door.

Serg’s wife has sent me home crying a handful of times, and I think about quitting once every two weeks, but I’m too comfortable to ever go through with it. Comfortable with the regulars, who slip me an extra twenty around the holidays. Comfortable knowing exactly where everything is and never having to ask.

I slip through the kitchen entrance, where Carlos, the chef, is stirring a stock pot of Bolognese. The smell makes bile rise up in my throat. When I cover my mouth, Carlos says something to the dishwasher—a boy I don’t know—in Spanish, and they laugh.

“Stop making fun of me,” I say.

“How do you know we’re making fun of you?”

I scowl. “What does *resaca* mean?”

“Didn’t pay attention in Spanish class?” Carlos clicks his tongue, shakes his head.

“All we ever did was watch movies,” I tell him. “The only thing I know how to say is ‘¿Dónde está Nemo?’”

The dishwasher boy laughs again as a girl’s voice says to my back: “He’s saying you’re hungover.”

I turn. Kat is standing in the kitchen entrance. Carlos keeps the door propped open to make stepping out for his hourly chain-smoke easier. Kat’s golden retriever, Elmo, is tied to the fence post behind her, his nose in the air.

I look at Carlos, then at Kat. “You know Spanish too?”

Kat took French, and she speaks near-perfect Italian, a by-product of living on the Aviano Air Base in Italy for three years.

Kat shrugs. “I mean, it’s obvious he’s calling you hungover.”

“She’s right.” Carlos whisks past us, headed for the back lot, cigarette between his lips. He gives Elmo a pat on the head; when the dog sees me, he begins to whine and paw at the gravel.

“He misses you,” Kat says.

I step forward and rub Elmo’s ears with my thumbs. “He just thinks I have food for him.”

The Marcottes live around the corner from the restaurant. Kat passes it on her dog-walking route. She knows I could get in trouble for this, so she only ever does it when she sees Serg’s truck missing from the back lot. It’s been weeks since she’s come by.

We both know things are weird, because Kat wouldn’t have stopped coming to see me at work unless she knew things were weird.

I guess the weirdness became a tangible thing when college admissions letters went out in April.

Kat got into Boston College and NYU, her dream schools. I was too embarrassed to tell her I got rejected from mine—Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism. So, I lied and told her that I’d changed mine and hadn’t bothered applying to Northwestern since I wouldn’t get in anyway.

Now, Kat glances at the patio seating area. The empty tables I have to set up before we open at noon. “Want help?”

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll be right back.”

I duck into the linen closet at the back of the kitchen and grab a stack of tablecloths. Kat’s waiting on the patio when I return. She watches how I arrange one of the tables before grabbing a tablecloth from the stack.

“Have you talked to Ben?” she asks.

“No,” I say, shaking a tablecloth open.

“Are you going to?”

“No.”

There’s nothing more to say; dating Ben Filipoff was a failed experiment. But that’s not why she’s really here. This is a recon mission: How will my breakup affect our weekend plans?

I try and fail twice to lay the tablecloth on evenly before Kat is at my side, grabbing the other end.

“I don’t know if I should go with you guys,” I say, looking up at her when the tablecloth is finally on straight.

Kat’s face falls. “*Claire.*”

We’ve had our plans in place for weeks. Unlike the rest of our classmates who will be vomiting Smirnoff slushies into toilets in beach houses in the Hamptons or on Fire Island, Kat, Jesse, Ben, and I were going to spend the weekend upstate, at Kat’s grandma’s lake house in Sunfish Creek, just the four of us.

I was going to pretend to like all that outdoor shit—hiking, canoeing—so Ben would think I’m cool like Kat, who has skied the Dolomites in Italy and hiked the fjords in Norway. Epcot is the closest I’ve ever been to leaving the country.

“Ben was supposed to drive me up there,” I say.

Kat chews the inside of her lower lip. She and Jesse aren’t

going to prom; that's how this all started. They said they *didn't want to*, but it's obvious the real reason is because Jesse can't afford it. The tickets alone were a hundred bucks each this year. I thought about saying screw it too and blowing off the dance to be with Kat and Jesse, but I could tell Ben cared about getting the cheesy pictures and drinking watered-down Diet Cokes and fist-pumping to "Mr. Brightside." So, the two of us were going to go to the dance and then drive up to meet Kat and Jesse after.

"I mean, you could obviously just drive up with Jesse and me tomorrow afternoon," Kat says. "Unless you're still planning to go to prom?"

I stare at Kat. "Alone? That would be even more awkward than being your third wheel."

Kat's face falls. "Claire. You're still coming."

I don't say anything. I have no defense that will betray the real reason I don't want to be alone with Kat and Jesse.

"Please," Kat says. "I want you there."

I nod, a bobblehead, powerless around her as always. It's impossible to win against Kat. The summer before sophomore year, she made a PowerPoint presentation to argue to her mother why our local high school was just as good as the Catholic school she'd gone to for ninth grade.

The world bends the way Kat Marcotte wants it to, and it's not just because she's beautiful.

The fact that she's beautiful is almost an afterthought, a genetic bonus. She has a volleyball spike that makes girls in the next county nervous. Kat makes even the most burned-out, jaded teachers write *amazing job* on her work. She's seen more places in seventeen years than I probably will for the rest of my life. She's been everywhere, while I live only in my head.

So why was I still surprised that Jesse fell in love with *her*?

CHAPTER FOUR

ONE DAY EARLIER FRIDAY

My mom read an adolescent development book when I was ten about letting kids make their own decisions, even shitty ones. It has been the gospel in my house ever since. The only rules are don't drink too much, don't get into a car with anyone who has been drinking, and don't lie about where I'm going.

The third rule presents a problem for this weekend, because if I'd told my parents about the lake house, they'd want to clear it with the Marcottes, who absolutely do not know we're going to Sunfish Creek. Kat's parents are a thousand times stricter than mine; her mom didn't even want to let her spend the weekend at Anna Markey's beach house on Fire Island.

Anyway, that's why my parents, Kat's parents, and Jesse's aunt and uncle all think we're going to Fire Island.

My parents didn't seem to care when I told them I was skipping the dance. My mom seemed quietly ecstatic I'd finally dumped Ben Filipoff, and when I mentioned returning my prom dress, my dad said something like, "Think of all the books you can buy with that hundred and fifty dollars," because he's a dork.

Kat arrives at my house at 4:00 p.m. in her new Infiniti

SUV, an early graduation gift from her grandmother. We swing by Dolce Vita Bakery to pick up Jesse as he's finishing his shift.

By the time we get to the expressway, Jesse is propped against the back-seat window, the Yankees cap he'd tilted to shield his eyes from the setting sun sliding down and covering most of his face.

"Would you rather have tiny sloth claws for hands," Kat says, "or goat hooves for feet?"

It's a game we've played since we were kids; my mom taught it to us on the car ride home from Montauk one summer, Kat and I sunburned and turning crabby as traffic slowed to a stop on Sunrise Highway.

"Hooves," Jesse murmurs, stirring in the backseat.

Kat lifts her eyes to the rear mirror. "Why?"

"I couldn't play the guitar with sloth hands."

"And you already basically have hooves for feet," I say.

Kat snorts and Jesse kicks the back of my seat, and in this moment my universe is realigned. It feels like it used to—the three of us. Not the two of them plus me.

"She's right," Kat says. "I've never seen arches like yours, babe."

And there it is, as fast as an elastic snapping against my skin. The reminder that it can never really be the three of us again.

I humor Kat's insistence on What Would You Rather until we reach the bridges that will take us off Long Island. Jesse hasn't responded to my latest: Would you rather have every hair on your body plucked out with a tweezer, or eat an entire block of moldy cheese?

I glance in the side mirror; behind me, Jesse is slumped against the window, eyes closed, lips parted slightly.

"Claire," Kat says quietly. "We're cool, right?"

I suspect it has nothing to do with what might have happened after I blacked out in her lap the other night, and everything to do with the person in the backseat and the Boston College T-shirt under her hoodie.

“Yeah.” I tilt my head to the window, cheek nested in the crook of my seat-belt strap.

“I’m happy you came,” she says.

For some reason, I say, “You wanted me here.”

I stare at my reflection in the side mirror. Trace a finger over my bottom lip, imagine letting the words slip out. *Sometimes it’s hard watching you get everything you want.*

I awake to Kat shaking my arm. I blink the sleep out of my eyes until the time on the dash comes into focus. Eight-forty-five.

“Where are we?” I yawn.

“Technically, we’re lost.” Kat’s voice is sharp with annoyance. “The GPS signal crapped out. Can you get internet on your phone?”

I fish my phone out of my hoodie pocket, swipe a finger across the screen. One bar of cell service, and no internet connection. “No.”

“Well, shit,” Kat says, pulling over onto the shoulder, the SUV struggling over the rocky, uneven terrain. She throws the car into park, flips on the hazard lights, and covers her face. These are the only times I don’t envy being Kat: when something goes wrong. Every event that occurs outside of her control is a mini-crisis.

It’s got to be exhausting.

“It’s fine,” I say lightly. “Let’s just stop somewhere and ask for directions.”

“There’s nowhere *to* stop.” Kat inhales, pinches the area between her eyes. “Even if we find somewhere that’s open, the house is on a private drive. I doubt anyone has heard of it.”

“Okay,” I say, my patience beginning to expire. I glance at Jesse, still out cold in the backseat. *Wake up and help me manage her, please?* “Let’s just stay on this road—maybe there’s a store or something with Wi-Fi and we can look directions up.”

I half expect her to argue it’s a shitty idea, but Kat puts the

car into drive, eases back onto the main road. After five minutes, a gas station appears on the right. She slows and pulls in alongside one of the two pumps. The mini-mart attached to it is dark—the light is coming from the adjacent building, a squat brown box with a sign outside reading THE MERRY MACKEREL.

“There,” I say.

“Claire, that place is totally sketchy.”

“Yeah,” I say, “but unless there’s a convent full of friendly nuns nearby, we don’t have a choice.”

Kat eyes the Merry Mackerel, then her useless cell phone, nestled in the cupholder.

“I’m just asking for directions,” I say. “Not looking for a dude to bring home.”

Kat sighs. She rolls closer to the building and brakes so I can get out. “Still. Be careful.”

I hop out of the car, rubbing my arms at the chill in the mountain air.

The door of the Merry Mackerel is propped open with a rock and I step into a dimly lit, carpeted bar housing a pool table and a single arcade game. My heartbeat picks up as the man and woman playing pool lower their cues and glance at me.

I avoid their eyes and pull out my phone, searching for a Wi-Fi network to join. There’s one, password protected and named NOT4CUSTOMERS.

What a charming little establishment. I stuff my phone back in my jeans pocket, step down into the bar area. The woman behind the bar is busy counting singles out of the cash register. I hover at the edge until she notices me and gives me a look: *Well?*

“I’m looking for Quarry View Drive,” I say. “My GPS lost signal.”

The woman pushes a heavy sigh through her lips. “Give me a minute, okay?”

I move to take out my phone, ready to text Kat that I might be a couple minutes and not to send in the federal guard.

The man at the pool table—red chinstrap beard and thinning hair to match—raises his beer bottle to his lips, his eyes raking over me. He's wearing a shirt with a Confederate flag on the front and a faded pair of jeans that sink low on his bony hips.

I look away, my cheeks hot, before his female companion can catch me staring. She looks like she would crush me like a grape if she thought I were checking her man out.

The bartender returns and hands me a napkin with directions scribbled on it.

"Thank you so much," I say.

"Mm-hmm." Her back is already to me. I don't turn around again, but I can feel the redhead's gaze on me all the way out the door.

In the parking lot, I open the passenger door and fold myself into the Infiniti as Kat asks, "Any luck?"

I pass her the napkin wordlessly, my eyes on the side mirror. Jesse is awake now, his face illuminated by the glow of his phone screen.

Kat holds up the napkin with two fingers. "This probably has hepatitis crawling on it."

I push away the image of the creepy redhead by the pool table, the bartender's withering you're-not-from-here stare. Maybe it's the lingering effects of my hangover or the toll of the emotional whiplash of the last forty-eight hours, but suddenly, I'm sick of being around Kat.

"They were actually really nice in there," I say.

It's a lie, and a pointless one, but it feels good, having power over her for a moment.

Kat clamps her mouth shut and keeps her eyes straight ahead as she starts the engine.

The bartender's directions are solid; we find Quarry View Drive within five minutes of leaving the Merry Mackerel.

Quarry View is a private road, so narrow that only one car can travel it at a time. The houses are all behind iron gates. Even when I was a kid, I found it hard to reconcile the wealth on Quarry View with the shabbiness of the town of Sunfish Creek.

Kat rolls up to the gate and punches in a key code. The doors open; the SUV creeps up the driveway, a motion light springing on.

A cluster of moths hover around the light that springs on over the front door. I sling my backpack over my shoulder and follow Kat and Jesse up the steps.

The first floor is a sprawling open concept living room and kitchen, a full bathroom, and a spare bedroom.

“You guys can go unpack,” Kat says, shrugging her duffel bag off her shoulder. “I’m gonna turn the water and AC on.”

Kat laid out the sleeping arrangements in the car; I swatted away her offer to take the master suite, jacuzzi tub included, as some sort of consolation prize for getting dumped. I opted for the second bedroom upstairs, which has a queen bed, instead of the one downstairs with two twins where Kat and I used to sleep as kids.

Jesse and I stop at the foot of the stairs; he sweeps his arms in an awkward after-you gesture and I hightail it up the steps like something is chasing me.

I slip into the bedroom next to the master. Fumble for the light switch and toss my backpack onto the bed. I flop onto my back, on top of the comforter, and shut my eyes, press my fingertips to my lids.

We leave Sunday morning. That’s less than forty-eight hours of trying to dodge being left in a room alone with Jesse. Tomorrow, when we go hiking and camping on Bobcat Mountain, I won’t have to worry about Kat slipping away and leaving me alone with him, even if it means going off to pee in the woods at the same time as her.

I open my eyes at the same moment a peal of laughter sounds from the other side of the wall. I picture her flopping onto the bed next to him, him reaching out to pull her body closer to his—

My skin is itchy, and it's too hot. There's no way I can sleep up here.

I knock on the half-open door to the master suite and call inside: "Hey, I'm gonna take the room downstairs."

I hurry down the staircase, the carpet on the steps absorbing the pounding of my feet. I shut myself in the spare room and deposit my backpack on one of the twin beds, sit down beside it. Cup my hands over my nose and mouth.

Why did I think I could handle being here, with them, without Ben as a distraction? Do I hate myself that much, or had I really deluded myself into thinking I was over Jesse?

I had my chance to tell him. I had several chances. All those late-night chats on Messenger, long before Kat moved home from Italy, before Jesse's mom died and some invisible gate seemed to shut between him and me.

I thought about doing it for real last spring—before Kat started working at Dolce Vita for the summer, before they showed up holding hands at the Fourth of July fireworks show at the marina, both of them smiling sheepishly as if to say, *What did you expect?*

Footsteps in the hall, some cabinet door-banging in the kitchen adjacent my room. I draw my hands away from my face. No way through it but through it, as my mother likes to say. No way out of this except to endure the next forty-eight hours, and with a smile on my face, because if there's one thing that will set Kat off, it's the fear I'm not having fun.

In the kitchen, Kat's back is to me as she empties groceries from a canvas Whole Foods tote. I sidle up to her, root through the bag for something I can stuff my face with while Kat sticks a sleeve of hot dogs in the fridge.

“For tomorrow,” she says, resting a bag of buns on the counter.

“How much do I owe you for all this?” I pass over a bottle of Moscato in favor of a block of sharp cheddar.

Kat stretches on the balls of her feet, roots around in the cabinet next to the microwave, and emerges with a cutting board. “Just get dinner tonight.”

I know not to press further, even though I don’t like feeling like I owe anyone anything. But Kat gets awkward whenever the topic turns to money. Even if Kat’s family lives in a small house in the village and Kat shops at American Eagle like the rest of us, she’ll never have to worry about money. Her grandmother is paying for her to go to Boston College; Jesse’s uncle stole the cash from Jesse’s first paycheck in order to pay the cable bill.

“Are we talking about dinner?” Jesse is in the kitchen archway, hair plastered to his forehead. He’s in mesh basketball shorts and a white T-shirt.

Kat leans back against the counter, hooks one ankle over her opposite foot. “What do you guys want to order?”

“Anything,” Jesse says. “I’m starving.”

My own stomach is about to riot; in a bid to prevent Kat from launching into a dissertation about our options, I tug down the Domino’s menu stuck to the side of the fridge. “Pizza. Cinnasticks. Done.”

“They don’t deliver out here,” Kat says, and I’m too hungry to engage in further debate. I select a paring knife from the butcher block on the counter and stab open the package of cheddar cheese.

“I’ll go pick it up,” Jesse says. He looks between Kat and me; I shrug and slice a piece of cheese, popping it into my mouth.

“Are you sure?” Kat says. “I don’t mind going.”

“Nope. Gives you more girl time.” Jesse bends and kisses Kat on the shoulder, grabs Kat’s keys from the kitchen island.

Twirls the enamel pineapple key chain over a tanned hand. "I'll be back soon."

My cheeks fill with heat, even though Kat's shoulders are covered, and the kiss was chaste. The way she and Jesse are with each other is the opposite of the hormone-soaked couples making out in the art wing hallways.

It's the most intimate thing I've ever seen.

"There's crackers in here somewhere." Kat bows her head over the tote bag, an attempt to hide the flush in her cheeks.

I keep my eyes on the chef's knife sliding through the cheese block, on the blade that slips dangerously close to my fingers.

Domino's is called in, the cheddar is sliced and arranged on crackers, and our provisions for tomorrow's hiking and camping trip stored in the fridge. I tuck myself into the corner of the enormous leather sectional in the living room, picking at the plate of cheese while I text my parents that I'm alive and well and about to take a moonlit stroll on the beach with Kat and Jesse.

Kat wanders into the living room, carrying two stemless glasses of Moscato. I groan as she moves to set a glass on the coffee table for me.

"Do not make me drink alone, Claire."

"Dude, I threw up in the shower yesterday," I say. "And we're hiking tomorrow."

"It's Moscato. Practically apple juice." Kat pries my hand open, attempting to wrap it around the glass until I relent.

Some hemming and hawing about how to pass the time until Jesse is back with the pizza; we don't want to start a movie without him, and there's no cable for mindless background noise. The silence swells between us until Kat drains her wine glass and announces, "People have probably posted prom pics by now. Let's hate on their outfits."

Kat grabs her phone and pulls up Instagram. I scoot closer to her.

“Ben looks miserable,” she says.

I yank the phone out of her hand so I can see for myself. Ben, seated at a table, flipping off the camera, Shannon DiClemente hovering over his shoulder.

Kat grabs the phone back. “Oh my God, look at Shannon’s eyeshadow. Did she blend with a broom?”

My cackling halts when Kat scrolls over to the next photo: Anna Markey in floor-length white silk, strawberry-blond hair in a side-swept chignon. A literal goddess.

“Boring.” Kat keeps scrolling. “Like her face.”

Anna Markey is beautiful—the type of beautiful that caused panicked murmurs among the senior class girls before she even set foot in Brookport High School for the first time—but Kat wants me to feel better.

And this is why, no matter how weird things may have become between us, I am still best friends with Kat Marcotte. Some days I wonder why she even picked me to be her best friend when Kat has a coveted Brookport Village address—the common denominator among the wealthiest, most popular kids at school. But that’s never mattered to her. Kat has always chosen me, even when I’m the least appealing option.

No matter how far I stray, I know I’ll always have a home to come back to in Kat.

Kat and I are giggly-tipsy by the time Jesse gets back with the pizza.

“I’m not even hungry,” I announce as I pour myself into a dining room chair. “I ate half a block of cheese.”

Jesse stares at Kat, who is struggling with the chair across from me. “And you?”

“I ate the other half.”

“Wow,” Jesse says. “Love that I drove all that way for thirty dollars of pizza and Cinnasticks.”

Despite his bitching, Jesse winds up eating almost an entire pizza by himself; while I wrap up the leftovers, Kat sets up a movie on Netflix in the living room.

Jesse is asleep by the halfway point, and when the credits are rolling, I realize I have no idea how the movie ended. I blink the sleep out of my eyes until they come into focus on the couch. Kat curled against Jesse, fast asleep on his chest, their hands intertwined.

I get up quietly and brush my teeth before heading into the bedroom.

Kat and I would sleep in this very room when we were kids. Facing each other in the twin beds, staying up late into the night talking about nonsense until Mrs. Marcotte had to knock on the door and tell us to cut it out or we’d be overtired in the morning.

I flip off the light and crawl into one of the beds. Toss and turn for a good bit. The thick quilt is too noisy on my skin. I kick it off; overhead, the blades of the fan rotate with a dull hum, but the air doesn’t reach me.

My buzz is wearing off, my wine-warmed veins now thrumming with unrest. When I close my eyes, I can see only them, Kat curled against Jesse’s body like she was made to fit there.

Kat and Jesse are in love, and even though they’ve been together almost a year it’s hard for me to look at them and not take a trip to What-If Land, a place I don’t like going to.

What if. What if.

Jesse and I were a few weeks away from starting freshman year when he asked if I could meet him at the playground by the marina at the end of my road. I knew something was seriously, horribly wrong when I got there and he was sitting on the merry-go-round, staring at the chain-link fence, hands resting on his knees.

I couldn’t even get the words out—*what happened*—before

he grabbed me and threw his shaking arms around me. I patted his back awkwardly. We'd never hugged, ever, and it was the first I'd seen him cry since that day on the bus in sixth grade.

Ovarian cancer. His mom went to the emergency room thinking she had appendicitis and returned home with a prognosis of four months to live.

I told him I was sorry and he put his head on my shoulder and said it in my ear: *I love you.*

My body was still numb with shock when he started sobbing again. I sat there, arms around him, until he pulled away and mumbled that he had to go home.

I've replayed that moment a million times, my skin tingling, trying to convince myself I'd heard him wrong. And then that he hadn't meant it like *that*. Or that he *had* meant it like that and simply regretted the words the second they left his mouth.

Because we never talked about what he said on the merry-go-round ever again. Jesse seemed to want to forget it ever happened, and I played along because I knew he needed me to. He needed a best friend, not a girlfriend.

His mom died six weeks later, despite her prognosis.

Even though we still talked every night on Messenger, high school changed things. Jesse made friends with some of the upperclassmen and started to play guitar in their band, hitching rides home with them instead of taking the afternoon bus with me. When I heard that Jesse had hooked up with some girl from Westhampton Beach after Battle of the Bands, I pretended I didn't care.

Last summer, when he shrugged and said that he and Kat just *kind of happened*, even though I hadn't asked, I pretended I didn't care. But I'm starting to think there's only so much pretending a person can do before it all becomes too much.

I kick the blanket off me and climb out of bed.

The living room couch is empty, the blanket folded neatly where Jesse and Kat had been sleeping just a few hours ago.

The bay window overlooks the lake; the moon, glinting off the surface of the water, lights up the room.

I unlock the back door and tiptoe outside, triggering a motion light.

I follow the light the path carves to the lake. Deposit myself in an Adirondack chair on the dock and draw my knees to my chest. After a beat, the motion light below the deck goes out, leaving me in the glow of the moon.

I need to let it go. He loves her, she loves him, and I love both of them. If I don't let this go, I'll lose them both.

If I'd just asked him, before it was too late, what he meant on the merry-go-round, I would have been able to get over it years ago. Get over *him*.

Wood creaking. Footsteps on the dock behind me. I jolt, nearly tipping my chair backward and into the lake below. A tall, sleepy figure in a white tee and basketball shorts emerges. Jesse scratches the back of his neck, eyeing me curiously.

"Jesus, Jesse," I say. "You scared the shit out of me."

He lowers himself into the Adirondack chair beside me. "What are you doing out here?"

A breeze drifts over us. I rub my bare kneecaps. "I couldn't sleep."

Jesse drags his chair a couple inches closer to mine. "Me neither."

Why? I wonder. He's closing the physical distance between us, but he still can't meet my eyes. I don't have to be a body language expert to be able to tell he's wrestling with something he wants to say to me.

That stab of paranoia is back. Does his not being able to sleep have anything to do with my behavior while I was black-out drunk the other night?

"I would have thought you guys would be taking advantage of that master bed." I slap away a phantom mosquito from my leg so I don't have to look at him as I say it.

"We don't just have sex all the time, Claire."

Hearing my name stings; to Jesse, I am always *dude*. He only ever uses my real name when he's annoyed.

"Sorry," I say. And then, because I can't help myself: "Sore subject?"

Jesse taps his fingers against the arm of his chair, in tempo with a song only he can hear. He's always doing it, and he doesn't even realize it half the time. After a moment, his fingers go still. "We haven't done it."

I draw my knees up to my chest and pull my sweatshirt over them. "Seriously? You've been together a year."

"Why are you so shocked?" There is just enough moonlight for me to see color creep into Jesse's cheeks. "Sex is a big deal."

"It doesn't *have* to be a big deal." I shrug. "Ben turned out to be an asshole, but I don't regret that he was my first."

"*Turned out* to be? I thought the entire reason you liked him was because he was an asshole."

I take off my flip-flop and lob it at him. It bounces off the base of his chair as Jesse laughs. He goes quiet, tilts his head. I have to look away.

"What?" I ask.

"Ben was your first?"

Blood flows to my cheeks. "Yes. Who the hell else would I have slept with?"

"I don't know—I thought you and Amos, maybe."

"No. Ew, Jesse."

"Really?" He catches himself. "Didn't you have a thing for him?"

"You think I just have sex with every guy I have a thing for?"

"That's not what I said, Claire." Jesse nudges one leg of my chair. "What's your deal?"

"What do you mean?" I hug my knees closer to my chest, against my accelerating heartbeat.

"You're different," Jesse says quietly. "Half the time I feel like you can't stand me."

That's not the problem; it's never been the problem.

If I'd just asked him, I would have been able to get over it.

"Do you remember when you found out your mom was sick?" I ask.

"I mean, I don't love doing that. But yeah."

There's no sound out here; nothing except for the metallic trill of crickets in the distance, and my own heart thwacking violently in my chest.

If I just ask him, I can finally get over it.

I breathe in, out. "Do you remember what you said to me that day, on the merry-go-round?"

Jesse doesn't reply. When I tear my eyes away from him, I can feel that he's looking at me. It hits me that he's not saying anything because what could he possibly say right now that wouldn't crush me?

I stand and swat a gnat away from my ear. "Well. I'm going back to bed."

"Claire," Jesse says.

"Don't. Forget I said anything." I break his gaze, unable to stand the pity in his eyes. "Jesse. Please forget that this conversation ever happened."

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lim, Elizabeth, author.

Title: Six crimson cranes / Elizabeth Lim.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, [2021] |

Audience: Ages 12 & up. | Audience: Grades 7–9. | Summary: The exiled Princess Shiori must unravel the curse that turned her six brothers into cranes, and she is assisted by her spurned betrothed, a capricious dragon, and a paper bird brought to life by her own magic.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020043183 (print) | LCCN 2020043184 (ebook) | ISBN 978-0-593-30091-6 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-0-593-30092-3 (library binding) | ISBN 978-0-593-30093-0 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Princesses—Fiction. | Brothers and sisters—Fiction. | Blessing and cursing—Fiction. | Cranes (Birds)—Fiction. | Betrothal—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.L5523 Si 2021 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.L5523 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 11.25-point Sabon MT Pro.
Interior design by Andrea Lau

Printed in the United States of America

July 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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SIX CRIMSON CRANES

ELIZABETH LIM



Alfred A. Knopf
New York



CHAPTER ONE

The bottom of the lake tasted like mud, salt, and regret. The water was so thick it was agony keeping my eyes open, but thank the great gods I did. Otherwise, I would have missed the dragon.

He was smaller than I'd imagined one to be. About the size of a rowboat, with glittering ruby eyes and scales green as the purest jade. Not at all like the village-sized beasts the legends claimed dragons to be, large enough to swallow entire warships.

He swam nearer until his round red eyes were so close they reflected my own.

He was watching me drown.

Help, I pleaded. I was out of air, and I had barely a second of life left before my world folded into itself.

The dragon regarded me, lifting a feathery eyebrow. For an instant, I dared hope he might help. But his tail wrapped around my neck, squeezing out the last of my breath.

And all went dark.



In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have told my maids I was going to jump into the Sacred Lake. I only said it because the heat this morning was insufferable. Even the chrysanthemum bushes outside had wilted, and the kitebirds soaring above the citrus trees were too parched to sing. Not to mention, diving into the lake seemed like a perfectly sensible alternative to attending my betrothal ceremony—or, as I liked to call it, the dismal end of my future.

Unfortunately, my maids believed me, and word traveled faster than demonfire to Father. Within minutes, he sent one of my brothers—along with a retinue of stern-faced guards—to fetch me.

So here I was, being shepherded through the palace's catacomb of corridors, on the hottest day of the year. To the dismal end of my future.

As I followed my brother down yet another sun-soaked hall, I fidgeted with my sleeve, pretending to cover a yawn as I peeked inside.

“Stop yawning,” Hasho chided.

I dropped my arm and yawned again. “If I let them all out now, I won't have to do it in front of Father.”

“Shiori . . .”

“You try being woken up at dawn to have your hair brushed a thousand times,” I countered. “You try walking in a god's ransom of silk.” I lifted my arms, but my sleeves were so heavy I could barely keep them raised. “Look at all

these layers. I could outfit a ship with enough sails to cross the sea!”

The trace of a smile touched Hasho’s mouth. “The gods are listening, dear sister. You keep complaining like that, and your betrothed will have a pockmark for each time you dishonor them.”

My betrothed. Any mention of him went in one ear and out the other, as my mind drifted to more pleasant thoughts, like cajoling the palace chef for his red bean paste recipe—or better yet, stowing away on a ship and voyaging across the Taijin Sea.

Being the emperor’s only daughter, I’d never been allowed to go anywhere, let alone journey outside of Gindara, the capital. In a year, I’d be too old for such an escapade. And too married.

The indignity of it all made me sigh aloud. “Then I’m doomed. He’ll be hideous.”

My brother chuckled and nudged me forward. “Come on, no more complaining. We’re nearly there.”

I rolled my eyes. Hasho was starting to sound like he was seventy, not seventeen. Of my six brothers I liked him most—he was the only one with wits as clever as mine. But ever since he started taking being a prince so seriously and wasting those wits on chess games instead of mischief, there were certain things I couldn’t tell him anymore.

Like what I was keeping inside my sleeve.

A tickle crawled up my arm, and I scratched my elbow.

Just to be safe, I pinched the wide opening of my sleeve

shut. If Hasho knew what I was hiding under its folds, I'd never hear the end of it.

From him, or from Father.

"Shiori," Hasho whispered. "What's the matter with your dress?"

"I thought I smudged the silk," I lied, pretending to rub at a spot on my sleeve. "It's so hot today." I made a show of looking out at the mountains and the lake. "Don't you wish we were outside swimming instead of going to some boring ceremony?"

Hasho eyed me suspiciously. "Shiori, don't change the topic."

I bowed my head, doing my best to look remorseful—and covertly adjusted my sleeves. "You're right, brother. It's time I grew up. Thank you for . . . for . . ."

Another tickle brushed my arm, and I clapped my elbow to muffle the sound. My secret was growing restless, making the fabric of my robes ripple.

"For escorting me to meet my betrothed," I finished quickly.

I hastened toward the audience chamber, but Hasho caught my sleeve, raised it high, and gave it a good shake.

Out darted a paper bird the size of a dragonfly, and just as fast. From afar, she looked like a small sparrow, with an inky red dot on her head, and she flitted from my arm to my brother's head, wildly beating her slender wings as she hovered in front of his face.

Hasho's jaw dropped, his eyes widening with shock.

“Kiki!” I whispered urgently, opening my sleeve. “Come back inside!”

Kiki didn’t obey. She perched on Hasho’s nose and stroked it with a wing to show affection. My shoulders relaxed; animals always liked Hasho, and I was certain she would charm him the way she’d charmed me.

Then my brother swooped his hands over his face to catch her.

“Don’t hurt her!” I cried.

Up Kiki flew, narrowly avoiding his clutches. She bounced against the wooden shutters on the windows, seeking one that was open as she darted farther and farther down the hall.

I started after her, but Hasho grabbed me, holding fast until my slippers skidded against the whispery wood.

“Let it go,” he said into my ear. “We’ll talk about this later.”

The guards flung open the doors and one of Father’s ministers announced me: “Princess Shiori’anma, the youngest child, the only daughter of Emperor Hanariho and the late Empress—”

Inside, my father and his consort, my stepmother, sat at the head of the cavernous chamber. The air hummed with impatience, courtiers folding and refolding their damp handkerchiefs to wipe their perspiring temples. I saw the backs of Lord Bushian and his son—my betrothed—kneeling before the emperor. Only my stepmother noticed me, frozen at the threshold. She tilted her head, her pale eyes locking onto mine.

A chill shivered down my spine. I had a sudden fear that if I went through with the ceremony, I'd become like her: cold and sad and lonely. Worse, if I didn't find Kiki, someone else might, and my secret would get back to Father . . .

My secret: that I'd conjured a paper bird to life with magic.

Forbidden magic.

I spun away from the door and pushed past Hasho, who was too startled to stop me.

"Princess Shiori!" the guards yelled. "Princess!"

I shed my ceremonial jacket as I ran after Kiki. The embroidery alone weighed as much as a sentinel's armor, and freeing my shoulders and arms of its heft was like growing wings. I left the pool of silk in the middle of the hall and jumped out a window into the garden.

The sun's glare was strong, and I squinted to keep my eyes on Kiki. She wove through the orchard of cherry trees, then past the citrus ones, where her frenzied flight caused the kite-birds to explode from the branches.

I'd intended to leave Kiki in my room, tucked away in a jewelry box, but she had flapped her wings and knocked against her prison so vigorously I was afraid a servant might find her while I was at the ceremony.

Best to keep her with me, I thought.

"Promise to be good?" I'd said.

Kiki bobbed her head, which I'd taken as a yes.

Wrong.

Demons take me—I had to be the biggest idiot in Kiata!

But I wouldn't blame myself for having a heart, even for a paper bird.

Kiki was *my* paper bird. With my brothers growing older and always occupied with princely duties, I had been lonely. But Kiki listened to me and kept my secrets, and she made me laugh. Every day, she became more alive. She was my friend.

I had to get her back.

My paper bird landed in the middle of the Sacred Lake, floating on its still waters with unflappable repose—as if she hadn't just upended my entire morning.

I was panting by the time I reached her. Even without the outer layer, my dress was so heavy I could hardly catch my breath.

“Kiki!” I tossed a pebble into the water to get her attention, but she merely floated farther away. “This isn't the time to play.”

What was I going to do? If it was discovered I had a talent for magic, no matter how small, I'd be sent away from Kiata forever—a fate far worse than having to marry some faceless lord of the third rank.

Hurrying, I kicked off my slippers, not even bothering to shed my robes.

I jumped into the lake.

For a girl forced to stay indoors practicing calligraphy and playing the zither, I was a strong swimmer. I had my brothers to thank for that; before they all grew up, we used to sneak to this very lake for summer-evening dips. I knew these waters.

I kicked toward Kiki, the sun's heat prickling against my

back, but she was sinking deeper into the water. The folds of my dress wrapped around me tight, and my skirts clung to my legs every time I kicked. I began to tire, and the sky vanished as the lake pulled me down.

Choking, I flailed for the surface. The more I struggled, the faster I sank. Whorls of my long black hair floated around me like a storm. Terror rioted in my gut, and my throat burned, my pulse thudding madly in my ears.

I undid the gold sash over my robes and yanked at my skirts, but their weight brought me down and down, until the sun was but a faint pearl of light glimmering far above me.

Finally I ripped my skirts free and propelled myself up, but I was too deep. There was no way I would make it back to the surface before I ran out of breath.

I was going to die.

Kicking furiously, I fought for air, but it was no use. I tried not to panic. Panicking would only make me sink faster.

Lord Sharima'en, the god of death, was coming for me. He'd numb the burning soreness in my muscles, and the pain swelling in my throat. My blood began to chill, my eyelids began to close—

That was when I saw the dragon.

I thought him a snake at first. No one had seen a dragon in centuries, and from afar, he looked like one of my stepmother's pets. At least until I saw the claws.

He glided toward me, coming so close that I could have touched his whiskers, long and thin like strokes of silver.

His claw was extended, and on his palm, pinched between two talons, was Kiki.

For an instant, I bubbled to life. I kicked, trying to reach out. But I had no strength left. No breath. My world was shrinking, all color washed out.

With a mischievous glint in his eye, the dragon closed his fist. His tail swept over me from behind and encircled my neck.

And my heart gave one final thud.



CHAPTER TWO

“A . . . a snake,” I heard Hasho stammer. He wasn’t a very good liar. “She saw a snake.”

“So she ran all the way to the lake? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Well—” Hasho faltered. “You know how much she hates snakes. She thought it might bite her.”

My head hurt like a thunderstorm, but I blinked an eye half-open, spying my two eldest brothers Andahai and Benkai at my bedside. Hasho hung in the back, chewing on his lip.

I closed my eye. Maybe if they thought I was still asleep, they’d all go away.

But, curse him, Hasho noticed. “Look, she’s stirring.”

“Shiori,” Andahai said sternly, his long face looming over me. He shook my shoulders. “We know you’re awake. Shiori!”

I coughed, my body scrunching up with pain.

“Enough, Andahai,” said Benkai. “Enough!”

My lungs still burned, greedy for air, and my mouth tasted

of dirt and salt. I gulped the water Hasho offered, then forced a smile at my brothers.

None smiled back.

“You missed your betrothal ceremony,” Andahai chided. “We found you on the banks, half-drowned.”

Only my oldest brother would scold me for almost dying.

Almost dying, I repeated, my fingers flying to my neck. The dragon had wrapped his tail around it, as if to choke me. But I felt no bruises, no bandages, either. Had he saved me? The last thing I remembered was two ruby eyes and a crooked grin. I didn’t remember coming up to the surface, and I couldn’t have floated up on my own. . . .

Wings fluttered against my thumb, and I became suddenly aware of my other hand, hidden under my blankets.

Kiki! Thank the Eternal Courts, she was a little soggy, like me. But alive.

“What happened, Shiori?” Andahai prodded.

“Give her a moment,” said Benkai. He crouched beside my bed, patting my back as I drank. Ever gentle and patient, he would have been my favorite brother if only I didn’t see so little of him. Father was training him to be the commander of Kiata’s army, while Andahai was the heir to the throne.

“You worried us, sister. Come, tell old Benben what you remember.”

I leaned my head back, resting against my bed’s rosewood frame. Hasho had already told them I’d run off because I saw a snake. Should I endorse such an atrocious lie?

No, Andahai and Benkai will only ask more questions

if I lie, I quickly reasoned. Then again, I can't tell them the truth—they can't find out about Kiki.

The answer was simple. When a lie wouldn't work, a diversion would.

"A dragon saved me," I replied.

The corners of Andahai's lips slid into a frown. "A dragon. Really."

"He was small for a dragon," I went on, "but I'm guessing that's because he's young. He had clever eyes, though. They were even sharper than Hasho's."

I grinned playfully, hoping to lighten everyone's mood, but my brothers' frowns only deepened.

"I don't have time for tall tales, Shiori," Andahai said crisply. He was the least imaginative of my brothers, and he crossed his arms, his long sleeves as stiff as his waxed black hair. "Of all the days to run off to the lake . . . you missed your ceremony with Lord Bushian's son!"

I'd completely forgotten my betrothed. Guilt bubbled to my chest, my grin quickly fading. Father must be furious with me.

"Father is on his way to see you now," Andahai continued. "I wouldn't count on your being his favorite to get you out of this one."

"Stop being so hard on her," said Benkai. He lowered his voice. "For all we know, it might have been an attack."

Now I frowned, too. "An attack?"

"There's word of uprisings," explained my second-eldest brother. "Many of the lords oppose your marriage to

Lord Bushian's son. They fear his family will become too powerful."

"I wasn't attacked," I assured them. "I saw a dragon, and it saved me."

Andahai's face reddened with exasperation. "Enough lying, Shiori. Because of you, Lord Bushian and his son have left Gindara, utterly shamed."

For once, I wasn't lying. "It's the truth," I swore. "I saw a dragon."

"Is that what you're going to tell Father?"

"Tell Father what?" boomed a voice, resonating around the room.

I hadn't heard my doors slide open, but they rattled now as my father and my stepmother strode into my chambers. My brothers bowed deeply, and I lowered my head until it almost touched my knees.

Andahai was the first to rise. "Father, Shiori is—"

Father silenced him with a gesture. I'd never seen him look so angry. Usually, a smile from me was all it took to melt the sternness of his eyes, but not today.

"Your nurse has informed us that you are unharmed," he said. "That, I am relieved to hear. But what you have done today is utterly inexcusable."

His voice, so low the wooden frame of my bed hummed, shook with fury—and disappointment. I kept my head bowed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"You will prepare a proper apology to Lord Bushian and his son," he interrupted. "Your stepmother has proposed

that you embroider a tapestry to reverse the shame you have brought to his family.”

Now I looked up. “But, Father! That could take months.”

“Have you somewhere else to be?”

“What about my lessons?” I asked, desperate. “My duties, my afternoon prayers at the temple—”

Father was unmoved. “You have never once given a care about your duties before. They will be suspended until you have finished the tapestry. You will begin work on it immediately, under your stepmother’s supervision, and you will not leave the palace until it is complete.”

“But—” I saw Hasho shaking his head. I hesitated, knowing he was right. I shouldn’t argue, shouldn’t protest. . . . Unwisely the words spilled from my lips anyway: “But the Summer Festival is in two weeks—”

One of my brothers nudged me from behind. This time, the warning worked. I clamped my mouth shut.

For an instant, Father’s eyes softened, but when he spoke, his voice was hard. “The Summer Festival comes every year, Shiori. It would do you good to learn the consequences of your behavior.”

“Yes, Father,” I whispered through the ache in my chest.

It was true that the Summer Festival came every year, but this would be the last with my brothers before I turned seventeen and was married—no, *cast off* to live with my future husband.

And I’d ruined it.

Father observed my silence, waiting for me to beg for leni-

ency, to make excuses and do my best to change his mind. But Kiki's fluttering wings under my palm compelled me to stay silent. I knew what the consequences would be if she were found out, and they were far worse than missing the festival.

"I have been too soft on you, Shiori," Father said quietly. "Because you are the youngest of my children, I have given you many liberties and let you run wild among your brothers. But you are no longer a child. You are a princess of Kiata, the *only* princess of the realm. It is time you behaved like a lady worthy of your title. Your stepmother has agreed to help you."

Dread curdled in my stomach as my eyes flew to my stepmother, who hadn't moved from her position in front of the windows. I'd forgotten she was there, which seemed impossible once I looked at her.

Her beauty was extraordinary, the kind that poets immortalized into legend. My own mother had been acknowledged the most beautiful woman in Kiata, and from the paintings that I'd seen of her, that was no exaggeration. But my stepmother was quite possibly the most beautiful woman in the world.

Striking opalescent eyes, a rosebud mouth, and ebony hair so lustrous it fell in a long satin sheet against her back. But what made her truly memorable was the diagonal scar across her face. On anyone else, it might have looked alarming, and anyone else might have tried to hide it. Not my stepmother, and somehow that added to her allure. She did not even powder her face, as was the fashion, or put wax in her hair to

make it shine. Though her maids grumbled that she never wore cosmetics, no one could disagree that my stepmother's natural beauty was radiant.

"Raikama," everyone called her behind her back. *The Nameless Queen*. She'd had a name once, back in her home south of Kiata, but only Father and a handful of his most trusted officials knew it. She never spoke of it or of the life she'd led before becoming the emperor's consort.

I avoided her gaze and stared at my hands. "I am truly sorry if I have shamed you, Father. And you, Stepmother. It was not my intent."

Father touched my shoulder. "I don't want you going near the lake again. The physician says you nearly drowned. What were you thinking, running off outside the palace in the first place?"

"I . . ." My mouth went dry. Kiki fluttered under my palm, as if warning me not to tell the truth. "Yes, I . . . thought I saw a sna—"

"She said she saw a dragon inside," Andahai said in a tone that made it clear that he didn't believe me.

"Not inside the palace," I cried. "In the Sacred Lake."

My stepmother, who had been so still and silent until now, suddenly stiffened. "You saw a dragon?"

I blinked, startled by her curiosity. "I . . . yes, yes I did."

"What did it look like?"

Something about her pale, stony eyes made it hard for me, a natural liar, to lie. "He was small," I began, "with emerald scales and eyes like the red sun." The next words were hard for me to utter: "I'm sure I imagined it."

Ever so slightly, Raikama's shoulders dropped, and she withdrew her hand. A careful composure settled over her face again, like a mask that she'd inadvertently taken off for an instant.

She offered me a pinched smile. "Your father is right, Shiori. You'd do well to spend more time indoors, and not to confuse fantasy and reality."

"Yes, Stepmother," I mumbled.

My response was enough to satisfy Father, who murmured something to her and then left. But my stepmother remained.

She was the one person I could not read. Flecks of gold rimmed her eyes, eyes that ensnared me with their coldness. I couldn't tell whether their depths were hollow, or brimming with an untold story.

When my brothers teased me for being afraid of her, I would say, "only of her snake eyes." But deep down, I knew it was more than that.

Though she never said it or showed it, I knew Raikama hated me.

I didn't know why. I used to think it was because I reminded Father of my mother—the light that made his lantern shine, he would say—the empress of his heart. When she died, he'd had a temple erected in her name, and went there every morning to pray. It would make sense that my stepmother resented me for reminding him of her, a rival beyond her grasp.

Yet I didn't think that was the reason. Never once did she complain when my father paid homage to my mother; never once had she asked to be named empress instead of consort.

She seemed to prefer being left alone, and often I wondered if she would have favored being called the Nameless Queen to her official form of address, Her Radiance, a nod to her beauty and title.

“What is that under your hand?” my stepmother asked. My bird had crawled almost to the edge of my bed, and I only now realized how awkward I looked still trying to cover her.

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

“Then put your hands on your lap, as is proper for a princess of Kiata.”

She waited, and there was nothing I could do but obey.

Stay still, Kiki. Please.

As I lifted my hand, Raikama plucked Kiki from atop my blanket. To my relief, Kiki didn’t move. To anyone who didn’t know, she was only a piece of paper.

“What’s this?”

I bolted up. “It’s nothing. Just a bird that I folded—please, give her back.”

A mistake.

Raikama raised an eyebrow. Now she knew Kiki meant something to me.

“Your father dotes on you. He spoils you. But you are a princess, not a village girl. And you are far too old to be playing with paper birds. It is time you learned the importance of duty, Shiori.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” I said quietly. “It won’t happen again.”

Raikama held Kiki out. Hope flared in my chest, and I reached to retrieve her. But instead of handing her over, my stepmother ripped her in half.

“No!” I cried, lunging for Kiki, but Andahai and Benkai held me still.

My brothers were strong. I didn’t wrestle against them as a sob wracked my chest. My grief was overwhelming. To anyone who didn’t know what Kiki meant to me, it might seem *too* much.

Raikama regarded me with an indecipherable expression: her lips pursed, those cold eyes narrowing into slits. Without another word, she tossed Kiki’s remains onto the floor and left.

Andahai and Benkai followed, but Hasho stayed.

He waited until the doors were closed, then he sat beside me on the edge of my bed.

“Could you do it again?” he asked in a low voice. “Could you re-enchant the bird to fly?”

I’d never meant to bring Kiki to life. All I was trying to do was make paper birds—cranes, since they were my family cres—so the gods might hear me. It was a legend all Kiatans knew: if you made a thousand birds—out of paper or cloth or even wood—they could carry a message up to the heavens.

For weeks I’d labored alone—not even asking my brother Wandei, who was best at all sorts of puzzles and constructions, for help coming up with the folds to make a paper crane. Kiki was the first bird I’d succeeded in folding, though to be honest, she looked more like a crow with a long neck than a crane. I had set her on my lap and painted a red spot on her head—so she’d look more like the cranes embroidered on my robes, and said:

“What a waste to have wings that cannot fly.”

Her paper wings had begun to flutter, and slowly, hesitantly, she lifted into the air, with the uncertainty of a nestling just learning to fly. In the weeks that followed, I helped her practice in secret, when my lessons were done and my brothers were too busy to see me. I took her out to the garden to fly among the pruned trees and stone sanctuaries, and at night, I told her stories.

I'd been so happy to have a friend I didn't worry about the implications of having magic.

And now she was gone.

"No," I whispered, finally replying to Hasho's question. "I don't know how."

He drew a deep breath. "Then it's for the best. You shouldn't be dabbling in magic you can't control. If anyone finds out, you'll be sent away from Kiata for good."

Hasho lifted my chin to wipe away my tears. "And if you're sent away, far from home, who will watch out for you, little sister? Who will keep your secrets safe and make excuses for your mischief? Not I." He smiled at me, a small sad smile. "So be good. Please?"

"I'm already going to be sent far away," I replied, twisting away from him.

Falling to my knees, I picked up the scraps of paper my stepmother had flung onto the floor. I held Kiki close to my heart, as if that would bring her back to life. "She was my friend."

"She was a piece of paper."

"I was going to wish her into a real crane." My voice fal-

tered, my throat swelling as I glanced at the pile of birds I'd folded. Almost two hundred, but none had come alive like Kiki.

"Don't tell me you believe the legends, Shiori," said Hasho gently. "If everyone who folded a thousand birds got a wish, then every person would spend their days making paper sparrows and owls and gulls—wishing for mountains of rice and wealth and good harvest."

I said nothing. Hasho didn't understand. He had changed. All my brothers had changed.

My brother sighed. "I'll speak to Father about your coming out to the Summer Festival when he's in a better mood. Would that make you feel better?"

Nothing could make me feel better about Kiki, but I gave a small nod.

Hasho squeezed my shoulder. "Maybe these next few weeks with Stepmother will be good for you."

I shrugged him away. Everyone always sided with her. Even the servants, though they might call her Raikama behind her back, never had anything ill to say about her. Nor did my brothers. Or Father. *Especially* Father.

"I'll never forgive her for this. Never."

"Shiori . . . our stepmother isn't to blame for what happened."

You are, I could almost hear him saying, though Hasho was too wise to let the words slip.

He was right, but I wouldn't admit it. Something about the way she'd looked when she'd heard I met a dragon left me cold.

“It can’t be easy for her, being so far from her home. She has no friends here. No family.”

“She has Father.”

“You know what I mean.” My brother sat beside me, cross-legged. “Make peace with her, all right? If anything, it’ll make things easier when I ask Father to let you out for the festival.”

I gritted my teeth. “Fine, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to talk to her.”

“Must you be so petulant?” Hasho prodded. “She cares for you.”

I faced my brother, taking in his creased brow, the twitch of his left eye. All signs he was truly exasperated with me. Quietly, I said, “You don’t believe me, do you? About the dragon.”

Hasho waited too long before answering. “Of course I do.”

“You don’t. I’m sixteen, not a child. I know what I saw.”

“Whatever you saw, forget it,” he urged. “Forget Kiki, forget the dragon, forget whatever it is you did to make all this happen.”

“I didn’t *make* it happen. It just happened.”

“Make peace with our stepmother,” Hasho said again. “She is our mother.”

“Not mine,” I replied, but my words trembled.

I had thought of her as my mother, once. Years ago, I’d been the first to accept Raikama when Father brought her home, and back then, she had been fond of me. I used to follow her everywhere she went—she was so mysterious I wanted to learn everything about her.

“Where is your scar from?” I had asked her one day. “Why won’t you pick a name?”

She’d smiled, patted my head, and straightened the sash around my waist, tying it into a neat, tight bow. “We all have our secrets. One day, Shiori, you’ll have your own.”

Magic. Magic was my secret.

What was hers?



CHAPTER THREE

I hated sewing. Hated the monotony of it, hated the needles, the thread, the stitching, everything. Not to mention, I pricked myself so many times the maids kept having to wrap my fingers until they were thick as dumplings. I almost missed my lessons. Almost.

The days crawled by, slower than the snails that clustered outside the papered window screens. I embroidered crane after crane, so many that they began to haunt my dreams. They'd peck at my toes, their cinder-black eyes glittering; then suddenly they'd turn into dragons with pointed teeth and mischievous smiles.

I couldn't stop thinking about the dragon—and the expression that crossed Raikama's face when Andahai had mentioned him. Like she wished I had drowned in the lake.

Who knew what went on in my stepmother's head? Like me, she had little talent for embroidery, but *unlike* me, she could sit and sew for hours. Sometimes I'd catch her staring

vacantly at the sky. I wondered what she thought about all day. *If* she had any thoughts.

I ignored her as best as I could, but when I made mistakes in my tapestry, she'd come to me and say, "Your stitches are uneven, Shiori. You'd best redo them."

Or, "That crane is missing an eye. Lady Bushian will notice."

Bless the Eternal Courts, her remarks never required a response, at least until today. Today she visited me with a strange request:

"The gold sash Lord Yuji gifted you to wear for your betrothal ceremony—do you know where it is?"

I shrugged. "It must have fallen into the lake with me."

My answer didn't please Raikama. She didn't glower or frown, but I could tell from the way her shoulders squared that it wasn't the answer she'd wanted.

"When you find it, bring it to me."

I lied that I would. Then she left, and I promptly forgot about the sash.



The morning of the Summer Festival, adults and children alike sauntered along the imperial promenade, clutching kites of every shape and color.

I longed to go. Today was the only day that Andahai let loose, that Benkai wasn't busy training to be a commander, and Reiji and Hasho weren't stuck studying with their tutors.

Even the twins Wandei and Yotan, who were different as the sun and moon and always argued about everything—never argued on festival day. They came together to design and construct the most brilliant kite. All seven of us would help, and when we flew it across the sky it would be the envy of everyone at court.

And all the food I'd miss: rabbit-shaped cookies filled with sweet red beans, skewers of rice cake stuffed with fresh peaches or melon paste, the sugar candies shaped into tigers and bears. How unfair it was that I had to stay inside and sew with Raikama!

Finally, when my stomach couldn't take it any longer, I worked up the courage to ask: "Stepmother, the festival is beginning. May I go? Please?"

"You may leave when your embroidery is finished."

I wouldn't be finished for another month. "It'll be over by then."

"Do not sulk, Shiori. It is unbecoming." My stepmother didn't look up as her needle swam in and out of the cloth. "We had an agreement with your father."

I crossed my arms, indignant. I wasn't *sulking*. "Don't you want to go?"

She turned and opened her sewing chest. Inside were hundreds of neatly wrapped balls of thread, yarn, and embroidery floss.

Raikama started putting away her threads. "I have never enjoyed such things. I attend only out of duty."

Outside the window, drums pounded and laughter

bounced. Smoke from the grills spiraled into the sky, children danced in their brightest clothes, and the first kites of the morning flitted high against the clouds.

How could anyone *not* enjoy such things?

I sat back in my corner, resigned to my fate. My brothers would bring me some of the best food, I was sure. But I wouldn't get a chance to talk to the visiting cooks or watch them at work. The only dish I had mastered was my mother's fish soup, but I expected to cook more—or at least supervise the kitchen once I had to move to the North, region of the blandest cuisine.

I was so busy wishing I were at the festival that I didn't hear my father enter the room. When I saw him, my heart skipped. "Father!"

"I have come to invite my consort to attend the festival with me," he said, pretending not to notice me. "Is she ready?"

My stepmother stood, holding her embroidery chest. "Just a moment. Allow me to put this away."

When she disappeared into the adjacent chamber, Father turned to me. His expression was stern, and I put on my best apologetic face, hoping he'd take pity on me.

It worked, though what he said surprised me: "Your stepmother says you've made good progress on the tapestry."

"She does?"

"You think she does not like you," Father said observantly. His eyes, near mirrors of my own, held my gaze.

He sighed when I said nothing.

“Your stepmother has suffered many hardships, and it pains her to speak of them. It would gladden me greatly to see you think well of her, Shiori.”

“Yes, Father. I will do my best.”

“Good,” he replied. “Lord Bushian and his son will return in the autumn for Andahai’s wedding. You will present your apology to them then. Now go and enjoy the festival.”

My eyes lit. “Really?”

“I’d hoped staying inside would calm your restless spirit, but I can see nothing will tame you.” He touched my cheek, tracing the dimple that appeared whenever I was happy. “You look more and more like your mother every day, Shiori.”

I disagreed. My face was too round, my nose too sharp, and my smile more impish than kind. I was no beauty, not like Mother.

Yet every time Father spoke of her, his eyes misted and I yearned to hear more. There rarely was more. With a quiet exhale, he drew back his hand and said, “Go.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. Like a bird that had finally been released from her cage, I flew out to find my brothers.



The Summer Festival was packed with hundreds of revelers by the time I arrived, but I found my brothers easily. They were lounging in the park, away from the manicured pavilions, the vermilion gates, and white sand squares. The twins had crafted a brilliant turtle kite this year, and my other brothers were helping to paint the finishing touches.

The turtle's four legs jutted out of its shell, which was patched together with scraps from old silk scarves and jackets. Against the clear blue of the afternoon, it would look like it was swimming in the imperial garden's azure ponds.

I hurried to join them. Every year since we were children, we'd flown a family kite together during the Summer Festival. My brothers were all of marriageable age now, Andahai already engaged and the rest soon to be. It was our last time doing this together.

"You've outdone yourselves this year, brothers," I greeted.

"Shiori!" Wandei spared me a brief glance, a measuring string in his hands as he checked the kite's final dimensions. "You made it. Just in time, too. Yotan was about to eat all the food we saved for you."

"Only so it wouldn't go to waste!" Yotan wiped the green paint from his hands. "You make me sound like a glutton."

"Shiori's the glutton. You're just the one with the big belly."

Yotan harrumphed. "It's only these ears that are big. Same as yours." He tugged at his twin's—which, like his, did stick out a little more than everyone else's.

I stifled a giggle. "Is there anything good left?"

Yotan waved at a tray of food they'd carried from the stalls. "All the best dishes are nearly gone." He winked and leaned close, letting me in on the stash of glutinous rice cakes under his cloak. "Shh, don't show the others. I had to bribe the vendor just to get this last plate."

Winking back, I popped a rice cake into my mouth. My shoulders melted as my tongue savored the chewiness of the

rice dough, the powdered sugar dusting my lips with just enough sweetness. Greedily, I reached for another before Yotan hid the stash again.

“Save some for the rest of us!” Reiji complained.

“I just got here,” I said, snatching another cake. “You’ve had all day to enjoy the food.”

“Some of us have been working on the kite,” he replied testily. As usual, my third brother’s nostrils were flared with discontent. “Besides, there’s not much to enjoy. No monkey-cakes stall, no grilled fishballs. Even the sugar artist isn’t as good as last year’s.”

“Let her eat,” said Benkai. “You always have something to complain about.”

While my brothers bickered and I feasted, my attention wandered toward the lake, behind the magnolia trees—where I’d almost drowned. Where I’d seen the dragon.

Part of me itched to go and look for him.

“Come, let’s go before the best food is gone,” said Hasho.

“Pick up more grilled fish, will you?” Yotan called to us. My other brothers decided to stay back and help the twins with the kite. The competition started in half an hour, just enough time for Hasho and me to explore.

Children in masks squeezed between us, squealing as they ran toward the gaming tents to win porcelain dolls and silver-finned fish in glass jars. Back when I was their age, the games were what excited me most too. Now it was the food.

I inhaled, taking in the aroma of fried mackerel skewers and tea-boiled eggs, of battered shrimp and pickled bamboo

shoots, and glass noodles dipped in peanut sauce. For a so-called glutton like me, heaven.

“Princess Shiori,” the vendors exclaimed, one after another, “what an honor it is for my humble stall to be graced by your presence.”

“Don’t you think we should head back?” Hasho said after I’d gobbled up a plate of noodles and battered shrimp. “The competition’s starting soon.”

Father and Raikama were already strolling toward the central courtyard, where the kite competition would be held. On his way to join the emperor, Lord Yuji waved to Hasho and me.

“My, my, you’re looking more like your mother every day,” he greeted me pleasantly. “Young Bushi’an Takkan is fortunate indeed.”

“Is he, now?” said Hasho. “Her looks are one thing, but her manners . . .”

I elbowed my brother. “Hush.”

The warlord let out a throaty laugh. He had always reminded me of a fox, with sharp shoulders, little teeth, and an easy smile. “The North could use some of Princess Shiori’s famous troublemaking.” He clasped his hands, then gestured at my dress, plain compared to his opulent robes. “I heard you fell into the Sacred Lake not long ago and lost your father a fortune in silk.”

“So I did,” I said, and my tone took a tighter turn. “I’m afraid I also lost the sash you sent. I’m made to think it was quite valuable, given how it distressed my stepmother.”

“Did it, now?” Lord Yuji said. “That is news to me, but worry not, Your Highness. Sashes are easily replaced, and my sons and I only thank the gods you were found and returned home safely.” He leaned close. “Though, between us, I am expecting a shipment of silk from my A’landan friends shortly—I am told red is your favorite color?”

“It is the color the gods notice most,” I replied cheekily. “If I’m to be sent North, I will need all the attention they can spare.”

He laughed again. “May the luck of the dragons be with you, then. Red it shall be.”

As he left, I let out a sigh. Lord Yuji was generous and wealthy, and more importantly, his castle was just outside Gindara. Sometimes I wished I were betrothed to one of his sons instead of Lord Bushian’s. If I *had* to be forced into marriage, at least I’d be closer to home—and not promised to some barbarian lord of the third rank.

“Alliances must be made,” Father said whenever I dared complain. “One day, you will understand.”

No, I’d never understand. Even now, the inequity of it made my stomach roil, and I stuffed my last rice cake into my mouth.

“You’re eating so fast you’re going to get indigestion,” said Hasho.

“If I slow down, all the food will be gone,” I replied between mouthfuls. “Besides, sewing takes up energy. Go on back—I know you’re itching to watch Wandei test out the kite. I’m still hungry.”

Without waiting for him, I traipsed down the aisles, heading for the rice cakes.

A fresh batch awaited me, neatly decorated in a large wooden bowl.

“Specially made for the Princess Shiori,” said the vendor.

I scooped it into my arms and grabbed a helping of sweet potatoes too, tucking the little sack under my arm. I made it halfway back to my brothers when I spotted a boy in a dragon mask lurking behind the grilled-fish stall.

His robes looked outdated, the sash too wide by a generation, and his sandals mismatched. He was too tall to be a child, but he darted about the festival like one—or rather, like someone who wasn’t supposed to be here. Oddest of all was his hair, streaked with green.

The kite competition would begin soon, and my brothers were waiting. But I wanted a better look at the boy’s mask.

It was blue, with silver whiskers and scarlet horns. He was fast, darting about like a lizard, and even greedier than I was when it came to the food.

Everything in the vendors’ stalls was free, offered by the craftsmen to advertise their wares, but it wasn’t polite to take more than one or two plates at a time. This boy was taking at least five. How he managed to balance it on his arm was impressive, but if he kept up like this, the vendors would ban him from seeking more. And now he was going after the fried lotus.

I shook my head. *Novice.*

“I suggest you skip the lotus,” I said, going up to him. “Everyone knows it’s the worst dish at the festival.”

I thought I'd surprised him, but he merely winked, a pair of red eyes glittering behind his mask. "Then I'll take yours."

Before I could respond to his audacity, Hasho reappeared at my side, finally finding me. "Shiori, are you coming back? It's nearly time for the kite cere—"

The boy's foot suddenly shot out, tripping my brother before he could finish.

Hasho stumbled. As he fell forward, grabbing me to steady his balance, a green sleeve whirled across my side and snatched the bag of sweet potatoes from under my arm.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Thief! Thief—"

The words barely made it past my lips. Hasho and I toppled over each other, my half-eaten plates scattering across the street.

"Your Highnesses!" people cried. Hands outstretched to help Hasho and me up, a crowd gathering to make sure we weren't hurt.

I barely noticed. My attention was on the masked boy.

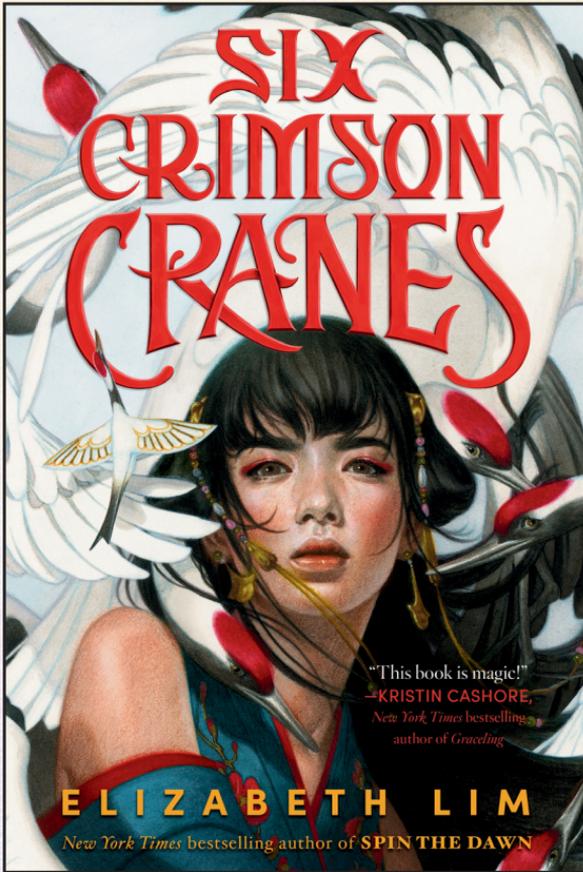
"You're not getting away so easily," I muttered, scanning past the onlookers. I spotted him edging along the outskirts of the gaming tents, then disappearing into the bushes. He moved even faster than Benkai, his steps so light they left no imprint on the soft summer grass. I started after him, but Hasho grabbed my wrist.

"Shiori, where are you—"

"I'll be back in time for the competition," I said, wriggling my hand away.

Ignoring Hasho's protests, I rushed after the boy in the dragon mask.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lee, Victoria (Author of young adult fantasy), author.

Title: A lesson in vengeance / Victoria Lee.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, [2021] |

Audience: Ages 14 and up. | Audience: Grades 10–12. |

Summary: Felicity Morrow returns to the Dalloway School after her girlfriend's tragic death, only to meet Ellis Haley—a new student and a teenage literary prodigy—who enlists Felicity's help in researching the school's bloody, occult history for her new book.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020039421 (print) | LCCN 2020039422 (ebook) |

ISBN 978-0-593-30582-9 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-0-593-30584-3 (library binding) |

ISBN 978-0-593-30583-6 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Witchcraft—Fiction. | Lesbians—Fiction. |

Boarding schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.L438 Le 2021 (print) |

LCC PZ7.1.L438 (ebook) | DDC dc23

The text of this book is set in 11.75-point Adobe Garamond Pro.

Interior design by Andrea Lau

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A
LESSON
IN
VENGEANCE



VICTORIA LEE

DELACORTE PRESS





CHAPTER ONE

Dalloway School rises from the Catskill foothills like a crown upon an auburn head. Accessible only by gravel road and flanked by a mirror-glass lake to the east, its brick-faced buildings stand with their backs turned to the gate and their windows shuttered. My mother is silent in the front seat; we haven't spoken since New Paltz, when she remarked on how flat the land could be so close to the mountains.

That was an hour ago. I should be glad, I suppose, that she came at all. But, to be honest, I prefer the mutual indifference that endured between me and the hired driver who met me at the airport every year before this one. The driver had her own problems, ones that didn't involve me.

The same cannot be said for my mother.

We park in front of Sybil Hall and hand the keys to a valet, who will take care of the luggage. This is the downside to arriving at school four days early: we have to meet the dean of students in her office and then tramp across campus together, my mother and the dean chatting six steps ahead and me trailing behind. The lake glitters like a silver coin, visible in the gap between

hills. I keep my gaze fixed on the dean's wrist, on the bronze key that dangles from a string around that wrist: the key to Godwin House.

Godwin House is isolated from the rest of campus by a copse of balsam firs, up a sharply pitched road and perched atop a small ridge—unevenly, as the house was built three hundred years ago on the remains of an ancient avalanche. And as the ground settled, the house did too: crookedly. Inside, the floors slope noticeably along an east-west axis, cracks gaping beneath doors and the kitchen table wobbling under weight. Since I arrived at Dalloway five years ago, there have been two attempts to have the building condemned, or at the very least renovated down to the bones, but we, the inhabitants, protested vociferously enough that the school abandoned its plans both times. And why shouldn't we protest? Godwin House belongs to us, to the literary effete of Dalloway, self-presumed natural heirs to Emily Dickinson—who had stayed here once while visiting a friend in Woodstock—and we like our house as is. Including its gnarled skeleton.

“You can take your meals at the faculty dining hall for now,” Dean Marriott informs me once she has deposited me in my room. It's the same room I always stayed in, before. The same water stain on the ceiling, the same yellowing curtains drifting in the breeze from the open window.

I wonder if they kept it empty for me, or if my mother browbeat the school into kicking some other girl out when I remartrulated.

“Miss MacDonald should be back by now,” the dean goes on. “She's the housemistress for Godwin again this year. You can

go by her office sometime this afternoon, let her know you've arrived."

The dean gives me her personal number, too. A liability thing, most likely: After all, what if I have a breakdown on campus? What if, beneath the tailored skirt and tennis sweater, I'm one lonely night away from stripping off my clothes and hurtling naked through the woods like some delirious maenad?

Better to play it safe.

I take the number and slip it into my skirt pocket. I clench it in my fist until the paper's an inky nugget against my palm.

Once the dean is gone, my mother turns to look at the room properly, her cool gaze taking in the shabby rug and the mahogany dresser with its chipped corners. I imagine she wonders what becomes of the sixty thousand she pays in tuition each year.

"Perhaps," she says after a long moment, "I should stay the night in town, let you settle in. . . ."

It's not a real offer, and when I shake my head she looks relieved. She can fly back to Aspen this afternoon and be drinking cabernet in her study by nightfall.

"All right, then. All right. Well." She considers me, her shell-pink fingernails pressing in against opposite arms. "You have the dean's number."

"Yes."

"Right. Yes. Hopefully you won't need it."

She embraces me, my face buried against the crook of her neck, where everything smells like *Acqua di Parma* and airplane sweat.

I watch her retreat down the path until she vanishes around

the curve, past the balsams—just to make sure she’s really gone. Then I drag my suitcases up onto the bed and start unpacking.

I hang my dresses in the closet, arranged by color and fabric—gauzy white cotton, cool-water cream silk—and pretend not to remember the spot where I’d pried the baseboard loose from the wall last year and concealed my version of contraband: tarot cards, long taper candles, herbs hidden in empty mint tins. I used to arrange them atop my dresser in a neat row the way another girl might arrange her makeup.

This time I stack my dresser with jewelry instead. When I look up I catch my own gaze in the mirror: blond hair tied back with a ribbon, politely neutral lipstick smudging my lips.

I scrub it off against my wrist. After all, there’s no one around to impress.

Even with nothing to distract me from the task, unpacking still takes the better part of three hours. And when I’ve kicked the empty suitcases under my bed and turned to survey the final product, I realize I hadn’t thought past this point. It’s still early afternoon, the distant lake now glittering golden outside my window, and I don’t know what to do next.

By the middle of my first attempt at a senior year, I’d accrued such a collection of books in my room here that they were spilling off my shelves, the overflow stacked up on my floor and the corner of my dresser, littering the foot of my bed to get shoved out of the way in my sleep. They all had to be moved out when I didn’t come back for spring semester last year. The few books I was able to fit in my suitcases this year are a poor replacement: a

single shelf not even completely filled, the last two books tipped forlornly against the wood siding.

I decide to go down to the common room. It's a better reading atmosphere anyway; me and Alex used to sprawl out on the Persian carpet amid a fortress of books—teacups at our elbows and jazz playing off Alex's Bluetooth speaker.

Alex.

The memory lances through me like a thrown dart. It's unexpected enough to steal my breath away, and for a moment I'm standing there dizzy in my own doorway as the house tilts and spins.

I'd known it would be worse, coming back here. Dr. Ortega had explained it to me before I left, her voice placid and reassuring: how grief would tie itself to the small things, that I'd be living my life as normal and then a bit of music or the cut of a girl's smile would remind me of her and it would all flood back in.

I understand the concept of sense memory. But understanding isn't preparation.

All at once I want nothing more than to dart out of Godwin House and run down the hill, onto the quad, where the white sunshine will blot out any ghosts.

Except that's weakness, and I refuse to be weak.

This is why I'm here, I tell myself. I came early so I'd have time to adjust. *Well, then. Let's adjust.*

I suck in a lungful of air and make myself go into the hall, down two flights of stairs to the ground floor. I find some tea in

the house kitchen cabinet—probably left over from last year—boil some water, and carry the mug with me into the common room while it brews.

The common room is the largest space in the house. It claims the entire western wall, its massive windows gazing out toward the woods, and is therefore dark even at midafternoon. Shadows hang like drapes from the ceiling, until I flick on a few of the lamps and amber light brightens the deep corners.

No ghosts here.

Godwin House was built in the early eighteenth century, the first construction of Dalloway School. Within ten years of its founding, it saw five violent deaths. Sometimes I still smell blood on the air, as if Godwin's macabre history is buried in its uneven foundations alongside Margery Lemont's bones.

I take the armchair by the window: my favorite, soft and burgundy with a seat cushion that sinks when I sit, as if the chair wants to devour its occupant. I settle in with a Harriet Vane mystery and lock myself in Oxford of the 1930s, in a tangled mess of murderous notes and scholarly dinners and threats exchanged over cakes and cigarettes.

The house feels so different like this. A year ago, midsemester, the halls were raucous with girls' shouting voices and the clatter of shoes on hardwood, empty teacups scattered across flat surfaces and long hairs clinging to velvet upholstery. All that has been swallowed up by the passage of time. My friends graduated last year. When classes start, Godwin will be home to a brand-new crop of students: third- and fourth-years with bright eyes and souls they sold to literature. Girls who might prefer Oates to

Shelley, Alcott to Allende. Girls who know nothing of blood and smoke, of the darker kinds of magic.

And I will slide into their group, the last relic of a bygone era, old machinery everyone is anxiously waiting to replace.

My mother wanted me to transfer to Exeter for my final year. Exeter—as if I could survive that any better than being back here. Not that I expected her to understand. *But all your friends are gone*, she'd said.

I didn't know how to explain to her that being friendless at Dalloway was better than being friendless anywhere else. At least here the walls know me, the floors, the soil. I am rooted at Dalloway. Dalloway is mine.

Thump.

The sound startles me enough that I drop my book, gaze flicking toward the ceiling. I taste iron in my mouth.

It's nothing. It's an old house, settling deeper into unsteady land.

I retrieve my book and flip through the pages to find my lost place. I've never been afraid of being alone, and I'm not about to start now.

Thump.

This time I'm half expecting it, tension having drawn my spine straight and my free hand into a fist. I put the book aside and slip out of my chair with an unsteady drum beating in my chest. Surely Dean Marriott wouldn't have let anyone else in the house, right? Unless . . . It's probably maintenance. They must have someone coming by to clean out the mothballs and change the air filters.

In fact, that makes a lot of sense. The semester will commence at the end of the weekend; now should be peak cleaning time. Probably I can expect a significant amount of traffic in and out of Godwin, staff scrubbing the floors and throwing open windows.

Only the house was already clean when I arrived.

As I creep up the stairs, I realize the air has gone frigid, a cold that curls in the marrow of my bones. A slow dread rises in my blood. And I know, without having to guess, where that sound came from.

Alex's bedroom was the third door down on the right, second floor—directly below my room. I used to stomp on the floor when she played her music too loud. She'd rap back with the handle of a broom.

Four raps: *Shut. The. Hell. Up.*

This is stupid. This is . . . ridiculous, and irrational, but knowing that does little to quell the seasick feeling beneath my ribs.

I stand in front of the closed door, one hand braced against the wood.

Open it. I should open it.

The wood is cold, cold, cold. A white noise buzzes between my ears, and suddenly I can't stop envisioning Alex on the other side: decayed and gray, with filmy eyes staring out from a desiccated skull.

Open it.

I can't open it.

I spin on my heel and dart back down the hall and all the

way to the common room. I drag the armchair closer to the tall window and huddle there on its cushion, with Sayers clutched in both hands, staring at the doorway I came through and waiting for a slim figure to drift in from the stairs, dragging dusk like a cloak in her wake.

Nothing comes. Of course it doesn't. I'm just—

It's paranoia. It's the same strain of fear that used to send me lurching awake in the middle of the night with my throat torn raw. It's guilt reaching long fingers into the soft underbelly of my mind and letting the guts spill out.

I don't know how long it is before I can open my book again and turn my gaze away from the door and to the words instead. No doubt reading murder books alone in an old house is half my problem. Impossible not to startle at every creak and bump when you're half buried in a story that heavily features *library crimes*.

The afternoon slips toward evening; I have to turn on more lights and refill my tea in the kitchen, but I finish the book.

I've just turned the final page when it happens again:

Thump.

And then, almost immediately after, the slow drag of something heavy across the floor above my head.

This time I don't hesitate.

I take the stairs up to the second floor two at a time, and I'm halfway down the hall when I realize Alex's bedroom door is open. Bile surges up my throat, and no . . . *no*—

But when I come to a stop in front of Alex's room, there's no ghost.

A girl sits at Alex's desk, slim and black-haired with fountain pen in hand. She's wearing an oversized glen check blazer and silver cuff links. I've never seen her before in my life.

She glances up from her writing, and our eyes meet. Hers are gray, the color of the sky at midwinter.

"Who are you?" The words tumble out of me all at once, sharp and aggressive. "What are you doing here?"

The room isn't empty. The bed has sheets on it. There are houseplants on the windowsill. Books pile atop the dresser.

This girl isn't Alex, but she's in Alex's room. She's in *Alex's* room, and looking at me like I just walked in off the street dripping with garbage.

She sets down her pen and says, "I live here." Her voice is low, accent like molasses.

For a moment we stare at each other, static humming in my chest. The girl is as calm and motionless as lake water. It's unnerving. I keep expecting her to ask *Why are you here?*—to turn the question back around on me, the intruder—but she never does.

She's waiting for me to speak. All the niceties are close at hand: introductions, small talk, polite questions about origin and interests. But my jaw is wired shut, and I say nothing.

At last she rises from her seat, chair legs scraping against the hardwood, and shuts the door in my face.



CHAPTER TWO

The girl in Alex's room isn't a ghost, but she might as well be.

A day passes without us speaking again; the door to Alex's room remains shut, the only sign of the new occupant's presence the occasional creak of a floorboard or a dirty coffee cup left out on the kitchen counter. At noon I spot her out on the porch, sitting in a rocking chair with a cigarette in one hand and *Oryx and Crake* in the other, dressed in a seersucker suit.

I split my time between my bedroom and the common room, venturing once to the faculty dining hall to load up a box of food and abscond with it back to Godwin House; nothing seems worse to me than the prospect of trying to eat while all the English faculty wander up to me to remind me how sorry they are, how difficult it must be, how brave I am to come back here after everything.

If I keep moving—bedroom, common room; common room, bedroom—then maybe the cold won't catch up to me.

That's what I tell myself, at least. But in the end I can't outrun it.

I'm in the reading nook when it happens. I've curled up

lodged on the window seat at the end of the ground-floor hallway, shoes kicked off and sock feet tucked between the cushions, the books from Dr. Wyatt's summer reading list stacked on the floor by my hip. My eyelids are heavy, sinking low no matter how hard I fight to keep my gaze fixed on the page. I've lit candles even though it's still late afternoon; the flames flicker and spit, reflecting off the window glass.

A moment, I think. I'll just close my eyes for a moment.

Sleep swells around me like groundwater. The dark pulls me under.

And then I'm back on that mountain, hands numb in my gloves as I cling to that meager ledge. The storm is unrelenting, sleet battering the nape of my neck. I keep thinking about dark water rising in my lungs. About Alex's body broken on the rocks.

The snow beneath me isn't shifting anymore. I perch light on its back, light like an insect, motionless. If I move, the mountain will shiver and swat me away.

If I don't move, I will die here.

"Then die," Alex says, and I snap awake.

The hall has gone dark. The tall windows gaze out into the black woods, and the candles have blown out. My breath is the only thing I can hear, heavy and arrhythmic. It bursts out of me in gasps—painful, like I'm at altitude, like I'm still so far above the earth.

I feel her fingers at the back of my neck, nails like shards of ice. I jerk around, but there's no one there. Shadows stretch out through the empty halls of Godwin House, unseen eyes gazing down from the tall corners. Once upon a time I found it so easy

to forget the stories about Godwin House and the five Dallo-way witches who lived here three hundred years ago, their blood in our dirt, their bones hanging from our trees. If this place is haunted, it's haunted by the legacy of murder and magic—not by Alex Haywood.

Alex was the brightest thing in these halls. Alex kept the night at bay.

I need to turn on the lights. But I can't move from this spot against the window, can't stop gripping my own knees with both hands.

She isn't here. She's gone. She's gone.

I lurch up and stagger to the nearest floor lamp, yank the chain to switch on the light. The bulb glares white; and I turn to face the hall again, to prove to myself it's empty. And of course it is. God, what time is it? *3:03 a.m.* says my overly bright phone screen. It's too late for the girl in Alex's room to still be awake.

I turn on every light between there and my bedroom, pulse stammering as I keep climbing the stairs past the second floor—*Don't look, don't look*—and up to the third.

In my room I shut the door and crouch down on the rug. If this were last year I might have cast a spell, a circle of light my protection against the dark. Tonight my hands shake so badly I break three matches before I manage to strike a flame. I don't make a circle. *Magic doesn't exist.* I don't cast a spell. I just light three candles and hunch forward over their heat.

Practice mindfulness, Dr. Ortega would say. Focus on the flame. Focus on something real.

If anything supernatural wanders these halls, it doesn't answer; the candle flames flicker in the dim light and cast shifting shadows against the wall.

"No one's there," I whisper, and no sooner have the words left my lips than someone knocks.

I startle violently enough that I knock over a candle. The silk rug catches almost instantly, yellow fire eating a quick path across the antique pattern. I'm still stamping out sparks when someone says, "What are you doing?"

I look up. Alex's replacement stands in my doorway. And although it's past three in the morning, she's dressed as if she's about to walk into a law school interview. She's even wearing collar studs.

"Summoning the devil. What does it look like?" I answer, but the heat burning in my cheeks betrays me; I'm humiliated. I want to kick the rest of the candles over and burn the whole house down so no one knows I got caught like this.

One of the girl's brows lifts.

I've never been able to do that. Even after ages staring at myself in the mirror, I've only ever been able to muster a constipated sort of grimace.

I expect a witty comeback, something sharp and bladed and befitting this strange girl with all her unexpected edges. But she just says, "You left all the lights on."

"I'll turn them off."

"Thank you." She turns to go, presumably to vanish back downstairs and from my life for another few days.

"Wait," I say, and she glances back, the candlelight flickering

across her face and casting odd shadows beneath her cheekbones. I step gingerly over the remaining flames, but I still feel the heat as my legs cross over. I hold out my hand. "I'm Felicity. Felicity Morrow."

She eyes my hand for a moment before she finally reaches out and shakes it. Her palm is cool, her grasp strong. "Ellis."

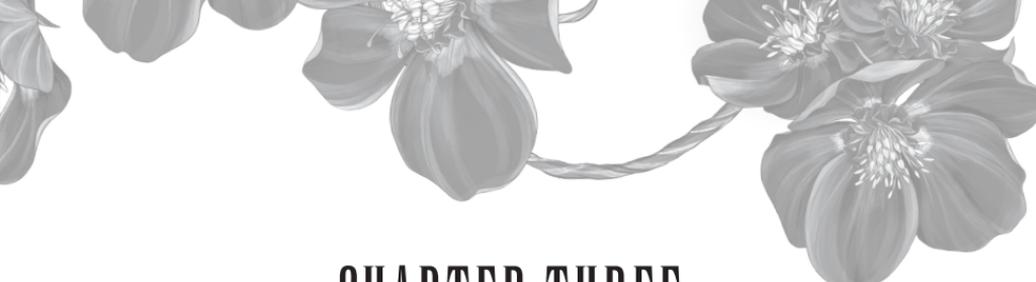
"Is that a first or a last name?"

She laughs and drops my hand and doesn't answer. I stand there in the doorway, watching her head back down the hall. Her hips don't sway when she walks. She just goes, hands in her trouser pockets and the motion of her body straight and sure.

I don't know why she's here early. I don't know why she won't tell me her name. I don't know why she never speaks to me, or who she is.

But I want to find a loose thread on the collar of her shirt and tug.

I want to unravel her.



CHAPTER THREE

Everyone returns two days later, the Saturday before classes commence. Not in a trickle, but in hordes: the front lot is a hive of cars, the quad flooded with new and returning students and their families—often dragging younger siblings to gaze through the looking glass at their own potential future. Four hundred girls: a small school by most standards, all of us students divvied up into even smaller living communities. Even so, I can't quite bring myself to go downstairs while the new residents of Godwin House are moving in. But I do leave my door open. From my position on my bed, curled up with a book, I watch the figures crossing back and forth in the third-floor hall.

Godwin House is the smallest on campus—only large enough to fit five students in addition to Housemistress MacDonald, who sleeps on the first floor, and reserved exclusively for upperclassmen. Expanding Godwin to fit more students was another cause we fought against. Just imagine this place with its rickety stairs and slanted floors appended to a modernized glass-and-concrete parasite of an extension, wood and marble giving way to carpet and formica, Godwin no longer the home of Dickinson

and witches but a monstrous chimera designed to maximize residential density.

No. We've been able to keep Godwin the way it is, the way it *was* three hundred years ago, when this school was founded. You can still feel history in these halls. At any moment you might turn the corner and find yourself face to face with a ghost from the past.

There are two others assigned to this floor with me: a brown-skinned girl with long black hair, wearing an expression of perpetual boredom, and a pallid, pinch-faced redhead, whom I glimpse from time to time half-hidden behind a worn paperback of *The Enchanted April*. If they notice me in my room, perched on my bed with my laptop on my knees, they don't say anything. I watch them direct hired help to carry boxes and suitcases up the stairs, sipping iced coffees while other people sweat for them.

The first time I spot the redhead, a flash of hair vanishing around a corner like sudden flame, I almost think she's Alex.

She isn't Alex.

If my mother were here, she would urge me up off this bed and force me into a common space. I'd be shepherded from girl to girl until I'd introduced myself to them all. I'd offer to make tea, a gesture calculated to endear myself to them. I wouldn't be late for supper, a chance to congregate with the rest of the Godwin girls in the house dining room, to trade summer anecdotes and pass the salt.

I accomplish none of those things, and I do not go to supper at all.

I feel as if the next year has just opened up in front of me, a great and yawning void that consumes all light. What will emerge

from that darkness? What ghosts will reach from the shadows to close their fingers around my neck?

A year ago, Alex and I let something evil into this house. What if it never left?

I shut myself in my room and pace from the window to the door and back again, twisting my hands in front of my stomach. *Magic isn't real*, I tell myself once again. *Ghosts aren't real*.

And if ghosts and magic aren't real, curses aren't real, either.

But the *tap-tap* of the oak tree branches against my window reminds me of bony fingertips on glass, and I can't get Alex's voice out of my head.

Tarot isn't magic, I decide. It's fortune-telling. It's a historical practice. It's . . . it's essentially a card game. Therefore, there's no risk courting old habits when I crouch in the closet and peel the baseboard away from the wall, reaching past herbs and candles and old stones to find the familiar metal tin that holds my Smith-Waite deck.

I shove the rest of those dark materials back in place and scuttle out of the closet on my hands, breath coming sharp and shallow. *Magic isn't real*. There's nothing to be afraid of.

I carry the box to my bed, shuffle the cards, and ask my questions: Will I fit in with these girls? Will I make friends here?

Will Godwin House be anything like what I remember?

I lay out three cards: past, present, future.

Past: the Six of Cups, which represents freedom, happiness. It's the card of childhood and innocence. Which, I suppose, is why it falls in my past.

Present: the Nine of Wands, reversed. Hesitation. Paranoia. That sounds about right.

And my future: the Devil.

I frown down at my cards, then sweep them back into the deck. I never know what to make of the major arcana. Besides, tarot doesn't predict the future, or so said Dr. Ortega, anyway. Tarot only means as much as your interpretation tells you about yourself.

There's no point in agonizing over the cards right now. Instead I check my reflection in the mirror, tying my hair back and applying a fresh coat of lipstick, then go downstairs to meet the rest of them.

I find the new students in the common room. They're all gathered around the coffee table, seemingly fixated on a chess game being played between Ellis and the redhead. A rose-scented candle burns, classical music playing on vinyl.

Even though I know nothing about chess, I can tell Ellis is winning. The center of the board is controlled by her pawns, the other girl's pieces pushed off to the flanks and battling to regain lost ground.

"Hi," I say.

All eyes swing round to fix on me. It's so abrupt—a single movement, as if synchronized—that I'm left feeling suddenly off balance. My smile is tentative on my mouth.

I'm never tentative. I'm Felicity Morrow.

But these girls don't know that.

All their gazes turn to Ellis next, as if asking *her* for permission to speak to me. Ellis sweeps a white pawn off the board and sits back. Drapes a wrist over her knee, says: "That's Felicity."

As if I can't introduce myself. And of course it's too late now; what am I supposed to say? I can't just say hi again. I'm certainly not going to agree with her: *Yes indeed, my name is Felicity, you are quite correct.*

Ellis met these girls a few hours ago, and already she's established herself as their center of gravity.

One of them—a Black girl with a halo of tight coils, wearing a cardigan I recognize as this season's Vivienne Westwood—takes pity on me. “Leonie Schuyler.”

It's enough to prompt the others to speak, at least.

“Kajal Mehta,” says the thin, bored-looking girl from my floor.

“Clara Kennedy.” The red-haired girl, her attention already turned back to the chess game.

And it appears that concludes the conversation. Not that they return to whatever they'd been talking about before; now that I am here, the room has fallen silent, except for the click of Clara's knight against the board and the sound of a match striking as Ellis lights a cigarette.

Indoors. And not only does no one tell her to put it out, MacDonald fails to preternaturally manifest the way she would had it been me and Alex smoking in the common room: *Books are flammable, girls!*

Well. I'm hardly going to leave just because they so clearly want me to. In fact . . . I belong here as much as they do. *More* than they do. I was a resident of Godwin House when they were still first-years begging for directions to the dining hall.

I sit down in an empty armchair and pull out my phone, scrolling through my email while Clara and Kajal exchange incredulous looks—like they've never seen someone text before. And maybe they haven't. They're all dressed as if they've just emerged from the 1960s: tweed skirts and Peter Pan collars and scarlet lipstick.

Ellis finishes the chess game in eight moves—a quick and

brutal destruction of Clara's army—and conversation resumes, albeit stiltedly, as if they're all trying to forget I'm here. I learn that Leonie spent the summer at her family's cottage in Nantucket, and Kajal has a pet cat named Birdie.

I don't learn anything I want to know—and frankly, nothing I didn't know already. Leonie's family, the Schuylers, are old money; and I'd seen Leonie around school before, I realize, although she had straight hair then, and she certainly hadn't been wearing that massive antique signet ring. The surnames Mehta and Kennedy are equally storied, their wielders frequent guests at my mother's holiday home in Venice.

I *want* to know why they chose Godwin . . . or Dalloway altogether. I want to know if they were drawn here, as I was, by the allure of its literary past. Or if perhaps their interest goes back further, paging through the years to the eighteenth century, to dead girls and dark magic.

"What do you think of Dalloway so far?" Leonie asks. Asks *Ellis*, that is.

Ellis taps the ash from her cigarette into an empty teacup. "It's fine. Much smaller than I expected."

"You get used to it," Clara says with a silly little giggle. More and more I dislike her; perhaps because she reminds me too much of Alex, and yet not enough of her, either. Clara and Alex look alike, but that's where the similarities end. "You're lucky to be in Godwin. It's the best house."

"Yes, I know about Dickinson," says Ellis.

"Not just that," Leonie says. "Godwin might be the smallest house on campus, but it's also the oldest. It was here before

the rest of the school was even built. Deliverance Lemont—the founder—lived here with her daughter.”

“Margery Lemont,” Ellis says, and I am frozen in the armchair, ice water in my veins. “I read about what happened,” she adds.

I should have gone upstairs when I had the chance.

“Creepy, right?” Clara says. She’s smiling. I can’t help but stare at her. *Creepy*: the word fails to encapsulate what Margery Lemont had been. I can think of better terms: *Wealthy. Daring. Killer. Witch.*

“Oh, please,” Kajal says, waving a dismissive hand. “No one really believes in that nonsense.”

“The deaths were real. That much is a historical fact.” Leonie’s tone is almost pedagogic; I wonder if her thesis involves archival work.

“Yes, but witchcraft? Ritual murder?” Kajal shakes her head. “More likely the Dalloway Five were just girls who were too bold for their time, and they were killed for it. Like what happened in Salem.”

The Dalloway Five.

Flora Grayfriar, who was murdered first, by the girls she’d thought were friends.

Tamsyn Penhaligon, hanged from a tree.

Beatrix Walker, her body broken on a stone floor.

Cordelia Darling, drowned.

And . . . Margery Lemont, buried alive.

Before last year, I had planned to write my thesis on the intersection of witchcraft and misogyny in literature. Dalloway seemed like the perfect place for it, the very walls steeped in dark history. I had studied the Dalloway witches like an academic, paging through the stories of their lives and deaths with scholarly

detachment—until the past reached out from parchment and ink to close its fingers around my throat.

“You’re lucky you got accepted to Godwin your first year at Dalloway,” Leonie says to Ellis, deftly guiding the conversation out of choppy waters. “It’s so competitive; most people don’t get accepted until they’re seniors.”

“*I’m* a junior,” Clara points out, to general disregard.

I resist the urge to retort: *I was, too.*

“Didn’t they say all the witches died here at Godwin House?” Ellis says, lighting a fresh cigarette. The smell of her smoke curls through the air, acrid as burning flesh.

I can’t be here.

I shove back my chair and stand. “I think I’ll head to bed now. It was lovely meeting all of you.”

They’re staring at me, so I force a smile: *polite, good girl, from a good family.* Ellis exhales her smoke toward the ceiling.

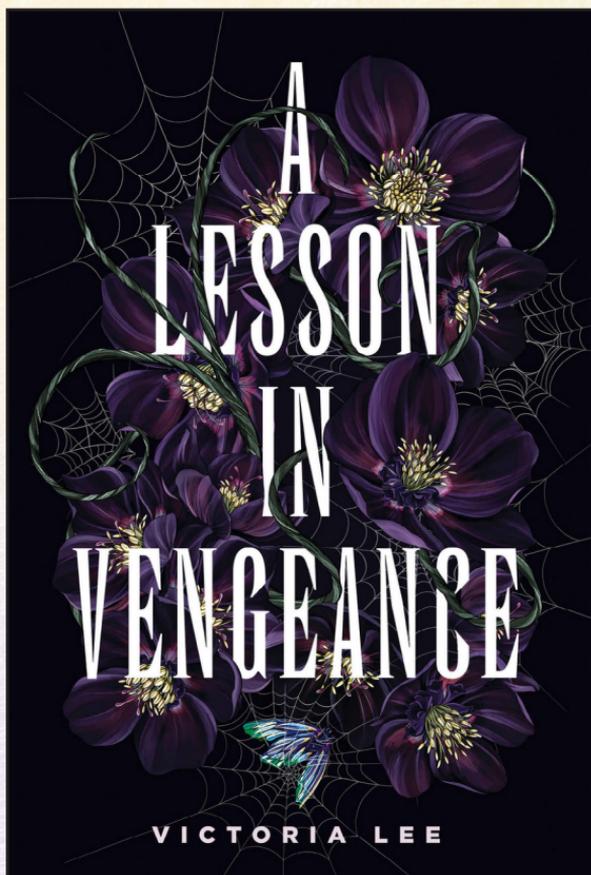
By the time I make it upstairs to my dark room and its old familiar shapes, I’ve identified the feeling in my chest: defeat.

The tarot cards are still on my bed. I grab the deck and shove it back into the hole it came from, push the baseboard into place.

Ridiculous. I’m ridiculous. I should never have used them again. Tarot isn’t magic, but it’s close enough; I can practically hear Dr. Ortega’s voice in my head, murmuring about fixed delusions and grief. But magic isn’t real, I’m not crazy, and I’m not grieving.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zentner, Jeff, author.

Title: In the wild light / Jeff Zentner.

Description: First edition. | New York : Crown, 2021. | Audience: Ages 14 & up. | Audience: Grades 10–12. | Summary: Attending an elite prep school in Connecticut on scholarship with his best friend (and secret love) science genius Delaney Doyle, sixteen-year-old Cash Pruitt, from a small town in East Tennessee, deals with emotional pain and loss by writing poetry.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020038100 (print) | LCCN 2020038101 (ebook) | ISBN 978-1-5247-2024-7 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-5247-2025-4 (library binding) | ISBN 978-1-5247-2026-1 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Best friends—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | Grief—Fiction. | Loss (Psychology)—Fiction. | Boarding schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.Z46 In 2021 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.Z46 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Dante MT Pro.

Interior design by Andrea Lau

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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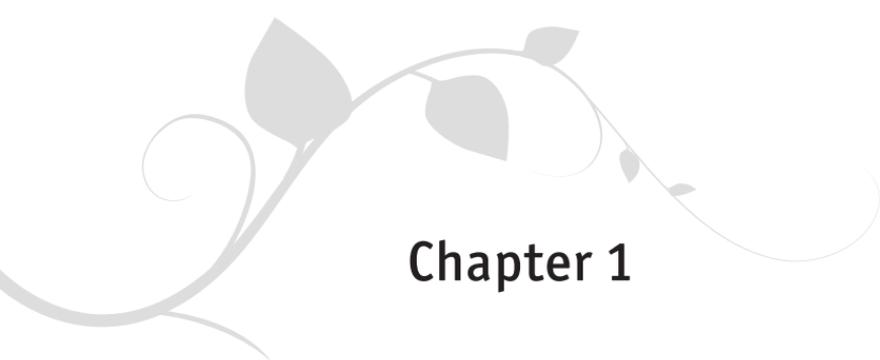
JEFF ZENTNER



CROWN
NEW YORK

SUMMER





Chapter 1

The human eye can discern more shades of green than of any other color. My friend Delaney told me that. She said it's an adaptation from when ancient humans lived in forests. Our eyes evolved that way as a survival mechanism to spot predators hiding in the vegetation.

There are as many tinges of understanding as there are hues of green in a forest.

Some things are easy to understand. There's a natural logic, a clear cause and effect. Like how an engine works. When I was eleven, my papaw pulled the engine out of his Chevy pickup and took it apart, letting me help him rebuild it. He laid the pieces out—reeking of dark oil and scorched steel—on a torn and greasy sheet, like the bones of an unearthed dinosaur. As we worked, he explained the function of each piece and what it contributed to make the engine run. It made sense, how he said it.

He wasn't sick then. Later, when he was, I understood that when he used to say *Don't nobody live forever* when accepting another piece of his sister Betsy's chess pie, that wasn't just a phrase he used. That was when he still had an appetite.

Now his appetite has moved to his lungs, which are always starved for air. His breathing has the keening note of the wind blowing over something sharp. It's always there, which means

he has something sharp inside him. People can't live long with sharp things in them. I understand this.

Some things I understand without understanding them. Like how the Pigeon River moves and pulses like a living creature, never the same twice when I'm on it, which is as often as I can be. Or how sometimes you can stand in a quiet parking lot on a hot afternoon and perfectly envision what it would have looked like there before humankind existed. I do this often. It brings me comfort but I don't understand why.

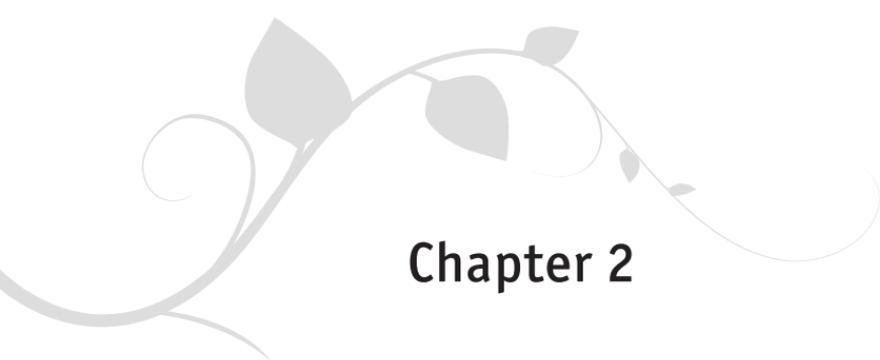
Other things I don't understand at all.

How Delaney Doyle's mind works, for example. Trying to comprehend it is like trying to form a coherent thought in a dream. Every time you think you're there, it blurs.

You'll be talking with her and she'll abruptly disappear into herself. She'll go to that place where the world makes sense to her. Where she sees fractals in the growth of honeysuckle bushes and elegant patterns in the seemingly aimless drift of clouds and the meandering fall of snowflakes. Substance in the dark part of flames. Equations in the dust from moths' wings. The logic of winds. Signs and symbols. An invisible order to the world. Complex things make sense to her and simple things don't.

She's tried to explain how her mind functions, without success. How do you tell someone what salt tastes like? Sometimes you just know the things you know. It's not her fault we don't get it. People still treat her like she's to blame.

Some aren't okay with not understanding everything. But I'm not afraid of a world filled with mystery. It's why I can be best friends with Delaney Doyle.



Chapter 2

A carload of girls from my high school is trying to exit out the entrance of the Dairy Queen. I pause to let them. Then I pull in, my lawn mower rattling in the back of my pickup—the same truck whose engine my papaw and I rebuilt.

The early evening July sun blazes like bonfirelight on the hills behind the Dairy Queen. They're a soft green, as if painted in watercolor. Gleaming soap-sud clouds tower behind them. Delaney told me once that the mountains of East Tennessee are among the oldest in the world, but time has beaten them down. Sounds about right.

Delaney stands outside, her shadow long and spindly against the side of the building. She's wearing her work uniform—a blue baseball cap, blue polo shirt, and black pants—and holds a cup with a spoon sticking out of it. With her other hand, she twists her auburn ponytail and presses her thumb on the end, tufted like the tip of a paintbrush. It's one of her many nervous tics.

The expression on her face is one she often has—her eyes appear ancient and able to see all things at once, unbound through time and space. It's what I imagine God's face looked like before summoning the world out of the ether.

If God were wearing a Dairy Queen baseball cap, I guess.

I'm in no hurry, so I wait, out of curiosity. It takes longer than you'd think for her to notice I'm there.

"It's fine. I had no plans for my Saturday night but waiting in the DQ parking lot," I say out my open window as she finally approaches. I try to play it straight-faced, but I never manage with her.

She gets in, giving me the cup to hold while she buckles up. "You're late."

"By like two minutes." I go to hand her back the cup.

She refuses it. "That's for you. Started melting because you were late. Your punishment."

"Based on how close you were watching for me, you were obviously deeply concerned. Oreo Blizzard?"

"Your favorite."

"Nice." I take a bite and study her face for a moment. "How was work?"

"You smell like gasoline and cut grass. Did you know the scent of mown grass is a distress signal?"

"For real?"

"It's from green leaf volatiles. They help the plant form new cells to heal faster and stop infection. Scientists think it's a type of chemical language between plants. So you're covered in the liquid screams of grass you've massacred."

"I could've showered off all this grass blood before picking you up, but then I'd've been even more late."

"Didn't say I minded," she murmurs, not making eye contact. "Plant screams smell nice."

"You reek like french fries," I say, leaning toward her and taking an exaggerated whiff. "The smell of french fries? Potatoes shrieking for their babies."

"I'll slaughter some potatoes. I don't care."

"You just gonna pretend I didn't ask how work was?" I put my truck in gear and back out.

She twists the end of her ponytail. "The Phantom Shitter struck again."

"*The Phantom Shitter?*"

"Some dude who comes in once a week or so and absolutely wrecks the men's room. No one ever sees him come or go. We've even checked security tapes. It's a pooping ghost."

"Imagine dying and haunting the Earth and making it your mission to befoul the Sawyer Dairy Queen."

"*Befoul*. Where'd you get that word?"

"Dunno. Besides the Phantom Shitter, how was work?"

"Got in trouble."

"Why?"

"Did an interview with NPR on my break and it went long."

"Damn, Red, getting even more famous."

"You too," Delaney says with an impish smile.

"What?" I ask around a spoonful of Blizzard.

"I mentioned you."

"Hell you did." I look at her, aghast.

She smiles again.

I shake my head. "I couldn't have made this discovery without Cash Pruitt.' That what you said? 'No one else on planet Earth could have paddled me out to a secret cave along the Pigeon River so I could find some bacteria—'"

"Mold."

"Whatever."

"Big difference biologically."

"Fine. 'Mold that kills the nastiest bacteria.'"

“Don’t forget driving me to Nashville to show my results to Dr. Srinivasan. Said that.”

“Oh, right. No one else could’ve done that.”

“No one else *did* do that. Anyway, yeah, that’s about what I said.”

I wipe my hand down my face. “Lord above.”

“Stop being dramatic.”

I raise my index finger. “What’s the one thing you know about me?”

“I know you asked me once if peanuts are a type of wood. No, they aren’t.”

“That I like to *earn* what I get.”

“Right. Cash Pruitt: famously a lover of earning.”

“So you’re out there telling people I did something without me earning it.”

“If it makes you happy, I still took credit for running the experiments and figuring out the mold’s antibiotic properties.”

I lower the visor against the sinking sun. A ray catches a crack in the windshield and illuminates it, a tiny comet. I’ve always loved when the light finds the broken spots in the world and makes them beautiful.

I glance over at Delaney. She’s turned inward, squinting her honey-colored eyes against the orange glare splashed across her pale skin, on the freckles that dot her nose and cheekbones like an atlas of stars. She brushes a stray piece of hair from her face.

“Seems like you could get a better job than DQ now that you’re in the news and doing interviews on the radio,” I say.

“It requires no mental energy, so I can think about other stuff and get paid for it.”

“Your life. Wanna ride around some, then go watch *Longmire* with Pep?”

“Can’t. Babysitting Braxton and Noah later,” Delaney says.

“He’ll be bummed.”

“Tell him I’m sorry and next time I come I’ll tell him about gypie gypie.”

“The hell is that?”

She always looks happiest right before she’s about to deliver some horrifying factoid about the natural world. She radiates pure joy now. “Australian shrub. Read about it last night. The leaves are covered in these little silica-tipped bristles—silica’s the stuff they make glass out of—and then these bristles deliver a neurotoxin that causes horrible pain for days, months, and even years. So if you brush up against it, the whiskers dig into your skin and the pain’ll be so intense it’ll make you puke.”

“Good *Lord*. That sounds like it came from outer space.”

“As long as the hairs stay in your skin, the pain continues. It feels like being burned alive. They’re hard to remove, too. Your whole lymphatic system swells up. Armpits. Throat. Groin. It’s a nightmare.”

“*Why* are you telling me about this?”

“You’re constantly waging war against the plant world. Thought you might like to know they have a revenge weapon.”

I point back over my shoulder at the lawn mower in my truck bed. “I mow lawns and trim shrubs. They grow the hell back. That’s like saying barbers are waging war on heads.”

“There’s an apocryphal story about someone wiping their ass with gypie gypie leaves and . . . it didn’t end well. Get it? End.”

“Please tell me *apocryphal* means ‘completely and entirely false.’”

She cackles. “The gypmie gypmie’s gonna find you,” she says in a singsong voice.

“Won’t.”

“It’s gonna crawl up your ass. Give you gypmie butt.”

“I’ll sleep with my lawn mower in my bed. If it tries, I’ll fire that up and mow the shit out of it. Be like, ‘Who’s in pain now, gypmie gypmie? Warn your friends.’”

“I wanna be the one to tell Pep about it. Don’t spoil it,” Delaney says.

“You think his life will improve knowing about this plant?”

“He loves my facts.”

“Don’t know why. You got time for me to stop for gas?”

“I don’t have to be to Noah and Braxton’s for a while.”

I pull into the RiteQuik, park, and start filling up my truck. Cicadas thrum like a thought that won’t leave your mind. The turpentine scent of sun-warm pine tar and distant grill smoke hangs thick in the air, mixing with the smell of gas and oil leaking on hot engines. In front of the store, two girls in neon bikini tops and Daisy Dukes sit in the back of a Jeep with the top removed, talking and laughing raucously, primping and taking selfies. The radio blares Florida Georgia Line.

The night has started to breathe its first cool breaths. They feel like river water on my face. The summer days here end like a kid who’s been running as fast as he can, then comes inside and falls asleep in front of a fan.

I go inside to pay. When I come out, the pulsing bass from a car stereo rattles my lungs and diaphragm. A purple Dodge

Challenger with ornate rims is parked behind me. It's an unwelcome sight. Jason Cloud. I loathe his kind—a dealer of weed, meth, heroin, fentanyl, Oxys, Lortabs, Valium, gabapentin, and whatever else people will buy to wake themselves up or put themselves to sleep. He's not the one who sold my mama the shit that killed her. But it was someone like him. Someone who will end lives for a purple Dodge Challenger with rims.

Cloud stands at the passenger window of my truck, talking with Delaney, pausing every couple of seconds to send a plume of vape smoke skyward. He's wearing an oversized white T-shirt, a thick gold chain, huge black shorts that go past his knees, and Nike sandals with socks pulled up almost to his knees. His bleached-blond hair is in cornrows, and his mouth glitters with a gold grille.

He only has a few years on me, but looks far older. His eyes are the shade of weapon gray that someone would pick out for themselves if God didn't have rattlesnake yellow in stock. No compassion or intelligence in them. Only cunning—and sizing you up for cracks. Underneath each eye is a crude teardrop tattoo the color of wash-faded denim. I've heard those mean you've killed someone.

I walk faster, anger scuttling up my throat from my chest.

"What don't you know, girl?" Cloud says to Delaney as I enter earshot of their conversation. "Ain't nothing *to* know."

Delaney stares forward, then turns and catches my eye. She looks afraid and relieved. *Help me*, her eyes say.

Cloud sees me approach and gives me a curt backward nod. "'Sup, mane."

I return the terse nod. "Everything good?"

Cloud pulls a drag off his dragon vape pen. The cords of his neck ripple underneath a tattoo of the face of Jared Leto's Joker character from *Suicide Squad*. He releases a gout of white, cherry-scented vapor in my direction. "We real good. Just having a private conversation."

"We gotta go," Delaney says, her voice taut.

"Won't take but a minute," Cloud drawls. His mouth smirks. His eyes don't follow.

"We're already late," I say in a low voice.

Cloud sidles toward me and spits. I can smell him as he nears—expensive cologne, weed, cherry vape smoke, and something stale and sour. "We're talking now."

I try to slip past him to get in my truck. He steps to cut me off, and I almost run smack into him. "Scuse me," I mutter. "I gotta—"

"You her daddy?" His tone is equal parts mocking and menace.

"No."

"Hmm? Boyfriend? Y'all smashin'?" He gives me a death's-head grin with his grille and humps the air a couple of times.

"Man, I don't want no trouble."

"Naw?" Cloud gets in my face, staring me down. "What's your name, mane?" He's near enough I can feel the sweat evaporating from his skin.

"Cash," I say, avoiding his eyes.

Cloud snickers. It sounds like a call from a buzzard to come feast on a carcass. "Cash. Sheeit." He lifts his heavy gold chain with both thumbs and lets it drop back down on his chest with a muted thud. "It's me should be named Cash. Look like the only cash you got is your name, bitch."

I look him dead in the eyes. I know the peril, but I do it anyway. “My name’s my name. Ain’t ashamed.”

I’m not afraid to fight him. I grew up having to fight, and it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve fought on Delaney’s behalf. But it would probably be the last. I would take him if I knew it would be just him and me, skin on skin. That we’d each take our hits and shake hands afterward. But there’d be tactical knives pulled out of pockets or Glockes pulled out of waistbands. And if I survived that, I’d have to *always* watch my back in this town, until he finally got himself killed or sent to prison.

I lower my gaze in surrender.

Cloud takes a long drag on his vape pen and spews vapor in my face, long and slow. “Cash Money. Better get to your girl.” Then he draws in close, until his lips tickle my ear. Intimate, but in the way of a wolf lapping blood from a deer’s throat. “You lean on her to say no to me, you’ll deadass regret it, mane. On God.”

With one last glower, he swaggers away, drops into the driver’s seat of his thumping, rattling car, and peels out of the parking lot in a haze of acrid, rubbery black smoke, the back end of his car fishtailing.

I’m shaking and nauseated by the time I’m back behind the wheel of my truck. I take a second to breathe down my sizzling adrenaline.

Delaney murmurs something. I don’t hear her at first.

“Hey.” Her voice finally reaches through my maelstrom of thoughts.

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“Why’s he hassling you?”

Delaney sighs and sags into her seat. “Something about *going into business* together. Real vague. Like if you thought cops were listening. He’s been on me ever since everything hit the news.”

A few seconds of tense silence tick past.

I shake my head. “What’s he think? After you save humanity from antibiotic-resistant bacteria, you’ll help him cook better meth and make fentanyl out of dish soap?”

“Said he’d make me rich. Piece of shit.”

I chuckle bitterly. “Oh, I *bet*. Guess we got this to look forward to next year.”

“Maybe not,” Delaney murmurs, studying the side of her left thumb, then lifting it to her mouth.

I reach over and put my hand on hers and gently pull it toward me. The side of her thumb is bleeding and ragged. Delaney diagnosed herself a while back with a “body-focused repetitive behavior.” She picks and chews at the skin around her thumbnails until it bleeds. It happens when she’s stressed or anxious. She can’t afford help for it, so my catching her is the best she’s got.

“Red,” I say quietly.

She quickly pulls her hand back and goes for her thumb.

I grab her hand again and lower it to her lap. “Delaney.”

She sighs and sits on her hand. “Happy?”

“Hate seeing you hurt yourself.”

“Can’t help it.”

“Do your breathing exercises.” She researched coping mechanisms. My job’s to remind her. “What’s going on? Cloud?”

“Not just him.”

“Well?”

“I said a second ago maybe we don’t have to deal with him next year?”

“You’re not gonna poison him, are you? Not that I’m opposed, necessarily.”

“Just replace his weed stash with gypmie gypmie.”

We both laugh.

“I wish,” I say. “But for real.”

“I got an offer to go to a boarding school up north.”

My heart plummets. With all the press she’s been getting, I knew this day would come.

I swallow, then nod for her to continue. “Oh wow.” The unease in my voice is obvious to my own ears even as the words leave my lips.

“Middleford Academy. In New Canaan, Connecticut.”

“Sounds fancy.” My head swims.

“It’s one of the top five prep schools in America. This lady from Alabama named Adriana Vu, who made hundreds of millions in biotech, went to Middleford. She donated a shitload of money to the school to fund this amazing lab and STEM program. She contacted me and said she’d talked to Middleford and she’d pay for me to go there.”

We let ourselves forget the inevitability of things. I guess it makes us feel in control over our lives. And I’d let myself forget that no one with a mind like Delaney Doyle’s stays in one place forever. Much less a place like Sawyer, Tennessee. The only thing worse than her leaving would be her staying.

She starts to put the side of her thumb to her mouth. Stops. Squeezes her eyes shut and sits on her hand again. “I told her I wouldn’t accept unless she could make it happen for you too. Said we’re a package deal. So she said okay, and so did Middleford.”

My brain replays her words, like when you’re watching

TV half-asleep and you're not sure you heard something right.
"What?"

"I told her I wouldn't go unless you could come with me. Said it would be too hard to go alone to a new boarding school junior year, where everyone's got their friends already. So she came through. Full scholarship. Just like mine. Middleford said okay too. You can come with me."

I scrutinize her face for some hint of a joke. But neither the timing nor the nature of the joke is her normal sense of humor.
"Come on."

"I wanted to pick a better time to tell you, but."

"Is this for real?"

Delaney looks away, out her window. Watching the people milling around in front of the store. "Yep."

"You're gonna go, right?"

"I don't want to go alone. That was true when I told her that."

"You saying that if I don't go, you won't?"

"I said I don't *want* to." Delaney toys with the end of her ponytail.

"That's what you meant when you said we might not have to worry about Cloud."

"Yeah."

I stare out the window for what feels like a long time. "You know my papaw's not good."

"Yeah," Delaney says quietly. "That would still be a thing if you stayed."

Silence falls between us like an axe sinking into wood.

"I didn't earn this," I murmur.

"Whatever," Delaney replies. "Without you I never could

have found that mold. You were as important as the microscope I looked through.”

“Is this even a thing? People who deserve scholarships getting them for friends who don’t?”

“Athletes do it. This hot-shit basketball player named DeMar DeRozan told USC he wouldn’t accept a scholarship unless they gave one to his best friend. So they did. It’s not like you don’t deserve to be there. You’ve gotten good grades.”

“At *Sawyer High*.”

“Still.”

“This was never *remotely* part of my plan.”

“You had a plan?”

“I mean . . . no.”

After our laughing subsides, I say, “Know what the farthest north I’ve ever been is? Bristol damn Virginia. Papaw took me to a NASCAR race when I was little.”

Delaney giggles. “Johnson City for me.”

A convoy of three black Dodge Sprinter vans pulls into the gas station. In the weeks since Delaney’s discovery was announced, Sawyer’s been crawling with rented vans full of men and women laden with caving gear. Can’t exactly patent something that grows in a cave, Delaney explained, so they’re all coming for their piece: The universities. The pharmaceutical companies. The Gates Foundation. Delaney told me the other day that she served a team of French biologists at DQ. They had no idea who she was.

“Don’t tell me you’re only going to do this if I do it. Don’t be telling me that,” I say.

Delaney eyes the people getting out of the vans. “They

should try boiled peanuts while they're here. Bet they don't have boiled peanuts wherever they're from."

"Red."

"Don't know what I'll do."

"Mr. Hotchkiss is a good science teacher, and he does his best, but you need more than a key to a high school lab where the teacher has to buy microscopes with his own money. You *need* to do this."

"So do you. There's a big world outside East Tennessee. You don't like it? You can always come back. Everything'll still be here. You know that."

"I'm happy here."

Sometimes Delaney looks at me like my skull is transparent and she can see the thoughts forming on my brain's surface. "There are ghosts here," she says quietly.

There are indeed.

I'm dazed, like I just woke up from one of those long Sunday afternoon naps, when it's a moment or two before you can remember where you are or even your own name. The light is waning. I glance at the time on my phone. "We better get you to Noah and Braxton's." I start my truck and jam it into gear. I pull out of the parking lot.

"You're pissed," Delaney murmurs. She starts to lift her thumb to her mouth, but we lock eyes and she grabs the end of her ponytail instead.

"Just don't know what to think."

"You still haven't thanked me," Delaney says after we drive for a while without talking.

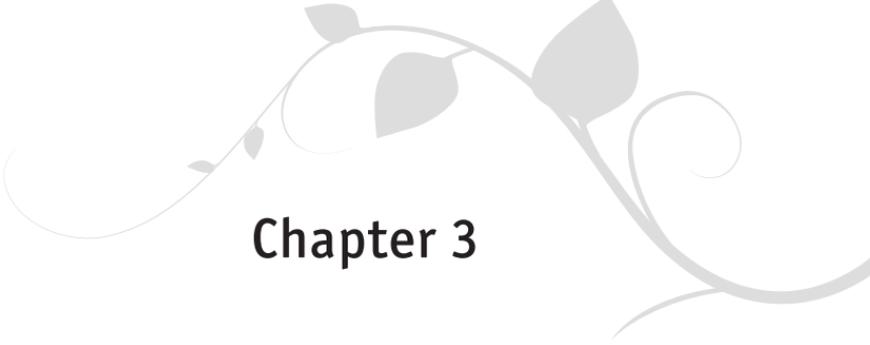
I shake my head, defeated. "Thanks. I think." None of this has

quite sunk in yet. I know this because I'm feeling numb, rather than completely panicking at the thought of possibly losing her.

Delaney stares forward with an unreadable expression.

I've always thought she had a strangely elegant beauty. Of something being pulled in each direction toward perfect and broken. I once saw a bird that had been run down in the road. It lay there, pulverized. But the wind caught two of its feathers and lifted them free of the destroyed body, breathing life back into them. I watched those feathers dancing in the wind for a long time, such unexpected grace amid ruin.

Delaney reminds me of that. Couldn't say why.



Chapter 3

We met at a Narateen meeting a few years ago. It wasn't the first time I'd ever seen her. We both went to Sawyer Middle School. She was considered a weirdo and a loner. No friends. Everyone vaguely understood that she was uncommonly intelligent. She wasn't known for getting amazing grades, but when she showed up for class, she would perform so well on tests that—as she later told me—teachers accused her of cheating. She certainly wasn't famous for her social skills or really much else, except spending a lot of time surfing the internet in the school library and hanging around the science lab. Rumor was she had a photographic memory (true). In another time, she'd probably have been called a witch (hell, maybe now too).

There were dark whispers that her mama was a user, and a bad one. Delaney's generally haphazard state of dress and put-togetherness and spotty school attendance gave us no reason to doubt. She had that old-beyond-her-years way of someone who's had to parent a parent. I recognized it from looking in the mirror. It made me not much more popular than her. None of the school's best-liked kids had to survive like we did, and they all avoided the stain of associating with us.

The basement at the First Baptist Church in downtown Sawyer smelled like a mix of the faintly medicinal, woody tang of

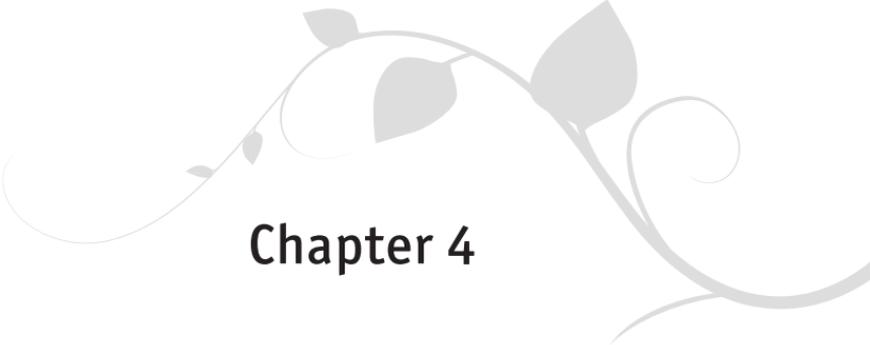
Pine-Sol and the cool, mildewed scent of old concrete, which can't keep out the hardest rains. I was glad to see that there was only one other kid there, seated in the semicircle of metal folding chairs. It was Delaney. This was as anonymous as a Narateen meeting in Sawyer would get. Me and a girl who never talked to anyone at school. I sat a few spaces away. Our eyes met briefly and we wince-smiled awkwardly.

We talked for the first time over stale Food Lion cookies and watery orange punch served from milk jugs. I told her my grandparents brought me. She'd come on her own. She pummeled me with facts about the science of drug addiction, talking like her mind was running from something. We found out our mamas were working Narcotics Anonymous together. My mama would later lose the battle. Her mama hasn't lost yet, but things don't look promising.

The next meeting, we sat beside each other. That week at school, we sat together at lunch.

Ever since I first became aware that the world contains mysteries and incomprehensible wonders, I've tried to live as a witness to them. As we came to know each other, I began to see something in Delaney that I'd never seen in another person. I can't name that thing. Maybe it has no name, the way fire has no shape. It was something ferocious and consuming, like fire.

And I wanted to be close to it, the way people want to stand near a fire.



Chapter 4

We pull up to Delaney's half brothers' dad's house. Their scarred gray pit bull, Duke, strains at the swing-set chain binding him to a sickly oak tree in the overgrown lawn, giving us a terse series of hostile barks. A rusting washing machine and dryer mold on the sagging front porch. An algae-scabbed aboveground pool slouches in a corner of the yard. It looks as fun to swim in as an unflushed toilet.

We both start talking at once.

"You go," Delaney says.

"Thank you," I say. "My hesitation isn't ingratitude."

"Okay."

"I'm not saying no yet."

"You're not saying yes yet."

"It's a lot to think about."

"You're smart. Start thinking," Delaney says.

We sit for a second, listening to the drone of the insect menagerie surrounding the house in the tall weeds. Pale neon-yellow fireflies dance their luminous evening waltz. Delaney explained to me once how they make light. I've forgotten. Occasionally, my mind lets me hold on to a fragile bit of magic in spite of practical explanations.

“Thanks again for the Blizzard,” I say.

Delaney opens her door. “Thanks for the ride. Bye, gympie ass.”

“You can’t just impose a new nickname on me. That’s not a thing. I reject it.”

“Watch me.” She starts to step down.

“Hey, Red?”

“What?” Delaney stops getting out and sits back in her seat.

“I always knew.”

“What?”

“You’d do something important.”

She looks happy. “Yeah?”

“You deserve all this. Your life is going to change so much.”

“Not the part about us being friends.”

“I’m not worried about that. But.” I didn’t know where I was going with what I was saying. It just felt like a thing that needed to be said.

“I mean,” she says, “it’ll be easier to stay in touch if we’re at the same school.”

I reach over and yank the bill of her Dairy Queen hat down over her eyes. “Go babysit.”

She pulls off her hat and smooths the wisps of her hair. Once more she makes to leave.

“Red?”

Again she pulls herself back into my truck.

I don’t know why I’m having such a hard time letting her go tonight. “How’d you know that mold would be in that cave?”

“You’ve never asked that before.”

“Been curious for a long time.”

“How’d I know?” She looks at me and then into the chirping, humming half-light, then back at me. “Because for every way the world tries to kill us, it gives us a way to survive. You just gotta find it.”



Chapter 5

I take the long way home to try to slow the orbit of my thoughts. It's almost full dark by the time I pull up our driveway, the gravel popping under my tires.

Most everyone calls Papaw "Pep"—short for Phillip Earl Pruitt. He's taking in the falling light on the porch, in one of the ramshackle hundred-year-old rocking chairs he restored. His wheeled oxygen tank is at his side. Our redbone, Punkin, sits by him.

Papaw gets lonely. Our house is on a hill overlooking the road, woods all around. He sits out on our front porch hoping someone driving by will stop in to shoot the breeze for a while. It happens rarely now, for a few reasons.

His politics didn't always used to be much of an obstacle to friendships. He and his fishing buddies could sit for hours at McDonald's, nursing cups of coffee, bullshitting, and having mostly good-natured political arguments that ended with everyone saying, *But I'm just an old hillbilly. What the hell do I know, anyhow?*

Things took a nasty turn, though, when Lamont Gardner, a black pastor and lawyer from Nashville, became governor of Tennessee. Papaw's buddies' hatred of Governor Gardner went beyond amiable differences into an uglier place. The racist

cartoons of Governor Gardner his buddies emailed around didn't sit well with Papaw, and he wasn't afraid to say it.

Andre Blount was the final straw. He was governor after Governor Gardner. He was from New York and got rich after moving to Nashville and starting a private prison company with money his dad had given him after a string of business failures. He promised to bring high-paying manufacturing jobs back to East Tennessee. But mostly he was concerned about being on TV and crudely insulting rivals on Twitter. Papaw considered him a snake oil salesman, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, who hadn't worked an honest day in his life, full of hot air, braggadocio, vain promises, and venom for everyone different from him. He saw the betrayal of all he knew to be right. That didn't sit well at all with him. And Papaw spoke his mind.

One by one, his friends stopped coming around.

He was popular at church—always with a story or joke ready. With his huge frame and bushy white beard, he was perfect to play Santa Claus at the annual Christmas potluck, a role he performed with gusto, telling kids he was going to bring them a hickory switch or a lump of coal instead of a “video-game doodad.” So for a while he still had the church crowd on his side.

But that didn't last either. He'd always taken a live-and-let-live and God-made-us-all attitude toward gay people, not much different from his general policy of nonjudgment and kindness toward others. This put him at odds with his fellow churchgoers, but not irreconcilably so.

Then his sister Betsy's grandson, Blake—his grandnephew—died in a car accident in Nashville. Aunt Betsy later learned from one of Blake's friends that Blake was gay. And that changed everything for Papaw. Not three weeks after Papaw found out, the

preacher started going off on how homosexuality is destroying America and how gay people are to blame for school shootings and terrorist attacks, because America's acceptance of them has called God's wrath down upon us.

I was sitting next to him. I could feel his sides pumping like a bellows as he breathed harder and harder. His face reddened. The anger radiated from him, a perilous warmth a few inches from his skin. If he could have jumped up, he would have. Instead, he pulled himself laboriously to his feet, knees cracking, easing up as fast as a back stiffened from a life of hard work would allow. And he walked out. Mamaw and I followed.

Papaw didn't hardly speak on the drive home. Finally said, "I been going to Bible study my whole life. Jesus talked about casting the first stone, not about who people loved." He was silent for a few minutes before he shook his head and murmured, "Blake never hurt nobody. Didn't do nothing but make this world a better place." We've never been back. People from church don't bring by casseroles when you leave like that.

Still, he sits and waits for someone to talk to.

I get out of my truck, and Papaw hails me with a lazy wave. The sort resulting from a constant state of exhaustion. Punkin bays in excitement and tries to lunge off the porch. Papaw catches him with his free hand.

"Lemme square away the mower," I call up to him. Lawn care equipment left out tends to disappear and get sold for pills where we live.

"I ain't going nowhere. Punkin, shush." The vocal exertion sends him into a red-faced coughing fit.

I lock up the mower in the shed and pass the chain-saw sculpture of a black bear Papaw carved out of a tree stump. Every

time I pass it, I can't help but think about how his disease has
sawn away at him, lessened him, transformed him. I ascend the
porch steps to where he sits.

Papaw gives me a look.

"What?"

"You forget something?"

"Did I?"

"Where's my Tess at? No *Longmire* tonight?" Tess is short for
Tesla, which is what he started calling Delaney after she told him
that Nikola Tesla was her favorite scientist. Before that, he called
her Einstein.

"Tending her half brothers."

"Y'all are like to have ruint my Saturday night."

"I'll watch with you." I sit in one of the rockers. Its weath-
ered wood is worn so smooth it feels like touching someone's
arm. I lean over to scratch Punkin.

Papaw reaches over with a rough hand, his nail beds blue
from oxygen deprivation, and grabs my upper arm. "Get over
here, Mickey Mouse." He pulls me out of the chair to him. He
was always affectionate, but he never misses a chance anymore
to hug me. Delaney studied up on emphysema, said it wasn't a
terminal diagnosis. Papaw's doctor said the same. Papaw doesn't
act so sure.

His former strength is faded, but he still finds enough to give
me a powerful embrace, kissing the top of my head. He smells
medicinal, like salves rubbed on aching muscles, with the sharp
menthol whine of Vicks VapoRub to open constricted breathing
passages. Beneath it is the dense aroma of pine oil and the vague
spice of unsmoked tobacco, even though he hasn't been able to

work with wood for some time and hasn't smoked in years. His plastic oxygen tube is artificial and cold against my cheek. I hear his wheezing, the deep rattle in his lungs.

"How was mowing?" he asks.

I sit down and push my ball cap back on my head. "Hot. But fine. Mamaw working?"

"Yep."

Mamaw manages the Little Caesars. She usually works Saturday nights to allow as many as possible of her mostly teenage staff to be young and free.

We sit quietly for a while. Our chairs creak and chirp as we rock gently. There's the periodic puff of Papaw's oxygen tank, the idling diesel-engine rumble of his breathing, and Punkin's own snuffly breathing as he dozes at Papaw's feet.

I've spent much of my life feeling unsafe, unsteady, and insecure. Sitting on Papaw's porch with him was always my fortress against the world.

Three deer step out of the woods onto our lawn, nibbling at the ground. We keep stone-still and watch until they move on.

"Speaking of Delaney," I say finally, my voice hushed as if the deer were still there. "She told me something interesting today."

"Girl's a damn encyclopedia." Whenever Delaney comes over to watch *Longmire* with him—one of their traditions—Papaw says, *Tess! Tell me something I don't know!* And she always does.

"This was different. She got into this fancy prep school up north with this millionaire gonna pay her way."

Papaw takes in the news and chuckles softly. "Tell you what. That girl wasn't long for this town. Always knew."

"Yeah."

“She gonna go? She best.”

“Looks like.” I rock for a couple of seconds, then say, “But that ain’t the funniest part.”

“What is?”

I squirm. I’m losing my nerve to tell him.

“Go on,” he presses.

I sigh, raise my hands, and drop them in my lap. “Apparently she told this millionaire lady that she’d only accept if *I* got a scholarship too.” I laugh to myself.

Papaw doesn’t laugh. He leans toward me and shakes his head like he’s trying to get water out of his ears. “Do *what*, now?” he asks softly.

“And the lady and the school both said yes.”

Papaw squints. “The *two* of you have a scholarship offer to—”

“Middle-something. Middleton? Middleford Academy? Can’t remember. It’s in Connecticut.”

Papaw sits slowly back, with a mixed expression of wonder and surprise. He whistles softly.

“It’s ridiculous, right? I don’t belong—”

Papaw raises his hand to halt me, his brow furrowed. “Just . . .”

“It’s nuts,” I murmur.

“*Full* scholarship?” He sounds optimistically skeptical.

“Sounded like.”

“Good school?”

“Apparently one of the best in America. That’s why I’m saying—”

“Hush, now.” He says it firmly but not unkindly, like he’s trying to tally something and I’m making him lose count.

After a safe amount of time, I say, “Obviously, I’m not gonna—”

“This ain’t the sort of opportunity that comes along ever’ day.”

“I know, but—”

“Sure ain’t the kind me and your mamaw could give you. Much as we’d’ve liked.”

“Never bothered me.”

“Well? What do you think about all this?”

I draw a deep breath. “Don’t know. I heard about it maybe two hours ago.”

A long pause. “Now, mind you, I ain’t got all the information. But I think you might oughtta do it.” His eyes are intense. Like how Moses would look after coming down from the mountain, having spoken with God. He nods to himself. “I think you might ought to,” he says softly, as if the opportunity is something he’s afraid to startle, like the deer.

I thought he’d laugh with me. *Who knows what goes on in Tess’s head?* he was supposed to say. *Tell her that that’s mighty kind of her but you’re needed at home.* He’d be the stalwart, sane balance to the erratic, staccato electricity of Delaney’s thinking, which causes her to do something as bewildering as what she did. Panic rises into my chest, into the back of my throat.

“I’m happy here,” I say unsteadily.

“I kindly believe you are. But ever’ so often, God opens a door.”

“I can’t go to a school like that.”

“Seems they beg to differ.”

“No, I mean I’m not like the kids who go there.”

“Now you listen. You’re pret’ near one of the smartest young men I ever knew.”

“Everyone’s papaw thinks that about them.”

Papaw coughs for a while and then continues. “You get good marks. Way you use words? Remember that essay you wrote for your English class about your mamaw? Made her cry. You started your own lawn business. Your best friend is the damn town genius. You think she’d run with you if you wasn’t bright?”

“I don’t know how she thinks.”

Papaw’s getting short of breath and wheezing. All this impassioned talk. He hacks and pauses to let a coughing fit subside. “That Tess is something special,” Papaw says, chewing on one of the homemade cinnamon toothpicks he’s started carrying around to help him quit smoking. He pulls it from his mouth and points at me with it. “I ever tell you she reminds me of your mama?” He returns it to his mouth.

“How?”

“Always asking questions. Trying to figure out how the world works.”

“Mama didn’t seem like that to me.”

“By then, the dope stole a lot of her. When she was a little girl, though? Shoot. Never without a book.”

“Where’d they go?”

Papaw shakes his head and looks down. “She sold them.” He rubs at a spot on the porch with his foot, like he’s buffing out a burr. “Ever’ last one. They wasn’t fancy books, and they wasn’t in great shape from being read so much. I don’t guess they fetched much.”

“I wish I could have known her before.”

“Me too,” he murmurs. He gazes off, his eyes clouding and

forlorn. He coughs. “You got your mama’s quick mind. It’s why you and Tess are Butch and Sundance.”

It breaks my heart how extraordinary he thinks I am. It’s worse than *being* ordinary. I flash to a vision of myself wearing my soiled, sweat-sodden lawn-mowing T-shirt and grass-stained jeans and boots, standing in a huge library. All around me are kids my age, dressed like celebrities, polished and gleaming. Their hands are uncallused, their eyes clear, their minds unburdened with worry. They stand in small groups, chatting breezily about lavish vacations—summer homes and beach homes and ski homes—their backs to me.

Their life stories have no chapters on mothers chasing that Cadillac high and succumbing to an overdose of heroin, fentanyl, and Valium mixed together. No fathers who ran off to work on an oil rig shortly before they were born. No slowly dying grandfathers on disability and exhausted grandmothers who work too hard at Little Caesars, to try to maintain some dignity and quality of life in aging and rebuild the nest egg that their addicted daughter decimated. No lawn mowers—used to make those grandparents’ lives easier—in the back of pickups that need to make it another year, always another year. No humiliating encounters with drug dealers in RiteQuik parking lots. None of it. They have lived free.

Life has given me little reason to feel large, but I see no need to make myself feel smaller.

A rising glow appears at the edge of our property, and a pair of headlights illuminate the driveway. Mamaw’s blue Chevy Malibu creeps up in a crunching of gravel.

“How about that timing,” Papaw says. “Let’s see what she thinks.”

I'm already heading down the steps to help Mamaw in with her things.

"Hello, lovin'," she says, rising slowly from the car, trying to balance a large pizza box.

"That everything?" I take the box and hug her and kiss her cheek. Her short gray hair smells like warm pizza crust and artificial roses. She's wearing a black polo shirt, similar to Delaney's, and khakis.

"Thank you, sweetie. I believe so. Y'all in the mood for pizza?"

I smile at her joke, like always. "Might could be."

She presses on her knees as she climbs the porch steps. She shuffles over to Papaw, bends down, and they give each other a peck on the lips.

"Pull up a chair, Donna Bird," Papaw says.

I grab a rocker from the other side of the porch and slide it over.

Mamaw sags into the rocker with an exhale, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. "Mmmmm, tell you what," she says, trailing off. That's how you know she's really tired. When she's only moderately tired, she finishes the sentence—*Tell you what. I am tuckered out.*

I hold the pizza box in my lap. After a couple of moments, her eyes snap back open with a start as if awakening from a dream. "Y'all eat. Pizza's getting cold."

She offers some to Papaw, but he waves her off. I hope he's eaten something tonight. His once-prodigious appetite is now a ghost of itself.

"What y'all been talking about?" Mamaw asks, like she's not expecting much. And she shouldn't, normally.

Papaw nods at me. “You wanna tell her, Mickey Mouse, or I will?”

“One of you,” Mamaw says.

I inhale deeply. It feels gluttonous to do that around Papaw. “Delaney got a scholarship offer from a prep school up north. And she got them to give me one too.”

Mamaw searches Papaw’s face for some hint of a joke, some glint in his eyes. He has no poker face with her, so he’d be caught quickly. He raises his eyebrows as if to say, *I know, but not this time*. He slaps at a mosquito.

Mamaw turns back to me. I tell her everything I told Papaw.

She sits quietly for a long time, Papaw’s oxygen tank punctuating the silence with whispering puffs. Finally, she asks, “So. What do you think?”

I shrug.

“Tell you what I told him,” Papaw says. “Said he ought to go.”

Mamaw sits still, staring at Papaw. She nods slightly. “I’m with you. I think he ought to.”

I start to speak, but Mamaw cuts me off. “Now, hang on and let me say my piece. We’ve tried to give you everything we could, and it hadn’t always been much. Now along comes a chance for you to have something that we could never give you. Falls right in your lap.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t deserve this.”

Mamaw sits forward in her chair, energized. The exhaustion has melted from her. “*No*, you didn’t deserve to lose your mama. Plenty’s fallen in your lap you didn’t deserve. This isn’t one of those things. Let the Lord bless you with one good thing to make up for all the rest.”

“What about y’all?” I ask.

“We’ll get by. Wasn’t you planning on college in a couple years anyhow?” Mamaw asks.

“East Tennessee State maybe.”

“There you go.”

“But ETSU is close. I love it here. I love the river. I love y’all.”

Papaw coughs and spits off the edge of the porch. “And you can still love all that while you see more of the world. If I’d had the chance? I would’ve. Donna Bird, wouldn’t you?”

“I would indeed.” Mamaw drums her fingers on her armrest for emphasis. “You know Aunt Betsy’s grandbaby, Blake? She moved him to Nashville so’s he could go to a good performing school.”

“That didn’t turn out well.”

Papaw says, “How about Tess? We ain’t talked about her yet.”

“Didn’t you say Delaney got you the scholarship offer?” Mamaw asks.

“That’s right.”

“I imagine she’s scared stiff to go to that school alone.”

“What if she don’t go because you don’t? Or she goes and can’t concentrate on her studies because she’s too lonely?” Papaw says. He takes a couple of moments to catch his breath. “That girl’ll cure cancer someday, she gets the chance. But that there’s the key.” He pauses to cough. “The *chance*. Sounds like she thinks she needs your support. Else she wouldn’t have wheeled and dealed for you.”

“Wouldn’t you miss her?” Mamaw asks.

“Absolutely.”

“You got an opportunity to do something great for yourself and your best friend,” Papaw says.

“I know,” I murmur. I stare off into the darkness.

“I can always tell when you’re thinking about something without saying it,” Papaw says after a long while.

“What about your situation?” I ask quietly.

He wheezes, coughs, and spits off the porch. “Something the matter with me?”

We laugh. But our laughter quickly subsides. “I need to be here,” I say.

“Cause I’ll live forever if you stay?”

“I owe you.”

He snorts. “For what?”

“Everything.”

“Tell you something, son.” He pauses to take a few shallow breaths. His voice is sober. “I love you. But I’ll be damned if I’m why you let a chance like this go.” Pause to breathe. Wheeze. Cough. “Death’s all around us. We live our whole lives in its shadow. It’ll do what it will. So we need to do what we will while we can.”

With that, our conversation dwindles.

I rock and feel on my face the caress of the cool evening air, scented by the damp green of broken vines and cut grass. Beside me, Mamaw and Papaw hold hands but don’t speak.

Above us is an immaculate chaos of white stars and drifting moonlit-silver clouds. I remember how I would sit under the sanctuary of the night sky, into the late hours, waiting for my mama to get home. Or to escape her dopesick moaning and thrashing. Or to avoid the red-rimmed, whiskey-fogged glare of a new boyfriend. Or because I needed to feel like there was something beautiful in this world that could never be taken from me.

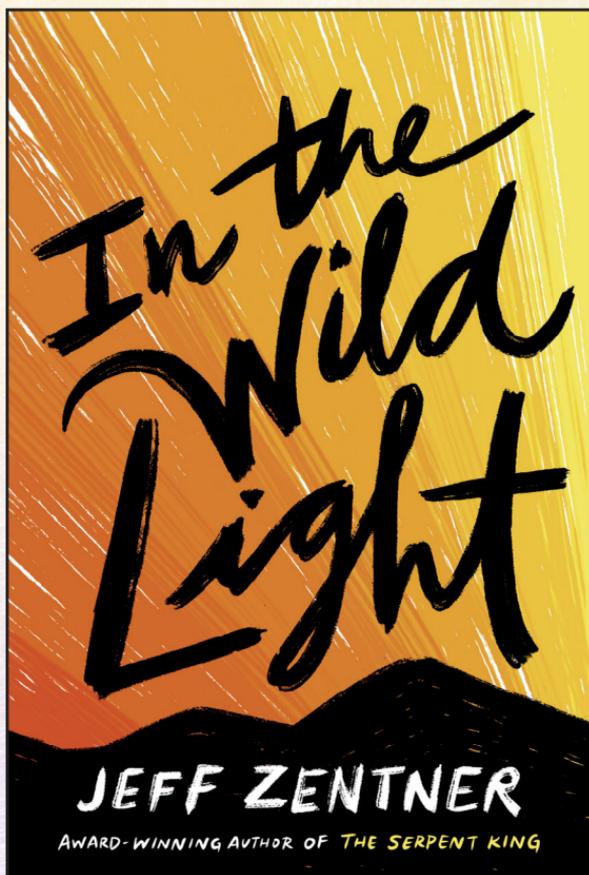
Papaw coughs and coughs. Eventually, he collects himself.

I listen to his shallow, uneven respiration. *Ask me to number the breaths I wish for you. One more. Ask me a thousand times. The answer will always be one more.*

For a while it seems like Papaw's about to say something, but he doesn't. Finally, he says, "Welp," and leans forward.

I help him out of his rocker and into bed.

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