

How the Light



Gets In

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Swoon READS
New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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I'll love you forever.

There is a crack, a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

—Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”



I



I never used to be the kind of girl who'd hotbox her bathroom.

Perched on the counter next to the porcelain sink, I lose myself in a haze that distorts the flower pattern dancing across the shower curtain. My bare feet bounce against the cabinet below. I absorb the staccato thumping until it permeates flesh and muscle, vibrating into my bones.

Pipe to mouth. Deep inhale. Hold the smoke until my chest sizzles. Exhale.

My junior year at North Seattle Prep ended today, and I've been drifting—a wisp of cotton in a summer breeze. The last day of school used to mean celebration. A break from the demands of private school: quadratic equations and chemical reactions and accessorizing my uniform just right. I used to spend summers with my sister, giggling over romance

novels, all brawny men and luscious women. We used to shop and swim. We used to eat grilled food and drink iced mochas with extra chocolate and stay up late, gazing at the stars.

This summer, I won't spend my mornings at the pool, panting through grueling sets, and I won't squander my afternoons in a lounge chair. Instead, I'll hide out in the house. I'll avoid my parents, and I'll avoid Isaac, who's due back from his freshman year at UCSD any day.

I'll avoid life.

Pipe to mouth. Deep inhale. Hold the smoke until my chest sizzles. Exhale.

That's what I'm doing when my dad comes knocking, a sharp rap that makes me jump.

Fanning the air, I slide from the counter and empty the bowl of my pipe into the toilet, mourning the loss while the water whirlpools away. I spray perfume, splash drops into my eyes, then peek reluctantly at my reflection in the mirror. My hair looks washed out, dry as wheat, and my eyes are sunken and shadowed.

The old me is so far gone, I hardly remember her.

Dad's face crumples when I open the bathroom door. He sees her, too—the hopeless girl who stared at me in the mirror a moment ago. I sigh; a family meeting is the unavoidable next step, another pseudointervention during which Dad will threaten me with therapy.

I went once, nearly a year ago, at his insistence.

It didn't help.

We sit in his office, where the air is clear, though I'm sufficiently blazed. He's in a navy version of the standard suit he wears daily to the University of Washington, where he teaches ancient Greece using the textbooks he spent the bulk of his adult life writing. He's seated in the

throne-like leather chair behind the mahogany desk, looking two parts disappointed, one part heartbroken. Mom is in the paisley wingback beside mine, her cooked-spaghetti hair held back by a thin plastic headband. She wears her favorite terry cloth robe. Once a deep crimson, now it's faded and dull, the color of rust.

Nearly a minute of silence drags by. Dad's gaze bores a hole through me. Mom picks a ragged cuticle, checked out as usual. I stare at the small cherry wood clock displayed prominently on the desk, a Father's Day gift personalized with a silver plaque. It's engraved with my dad's name—*Dr. Arthur Ryan*—and, smaller, *Love, Callie and Chloe*.

Chloe.

I concentrate on the chipped polish on my fingernails as a wave of sorrow rises in my chest. Pulling in a wheezy breath, I struggle to shove memories of my sister down.

I need out of this office, but Dad's watching me like a warden.

There are choices, and he presents them like gifts on a platter: Wild Expeditions, a Montana wilderness camp for troubled teens—*hostile, disobedient, performs below potential*, according to the glossy brochure—or Oregon with Aunt Lucy, Dad's younger sister who, early last year, bought a run-down Victorian that teeters on a coastal cliff. She's been working to renovate it into a bed-and-breakfast and, according to Dad, would love my help again this summer.

Choices.

"You've lost your motivation," he says, tapping the Wild Expeditions brochure. "I think you need distance to find it."

All at once I feel *too* stoned. Underwater, every movement slow and deliberate. Dad's muffled voice sloshes around in my head as I swallow the threat of a sob.

"That's it?" I say. "Montana or Oregon? Prison camp or indentured servitude?"

"Don't be dramatic, Calliope. Mom and I are trying to do what's best." He gestures between himself and my mom, who might as well be comatose. "You need a change of pace. Your grades have gone to hell, you've quit swimming, and more often than not, you're . . . *high*." He spits the word like it tastes rancid.

A petulant huff escapes me. "It's just weed."

Dad slams a fist down on the desk. "I won't tolerate it!"

A hand slips into mine. Cool, slender fingers, a ring with a diamond the size of a blueberry. Mom squeezes my palm; the gesture feels like solidarity, like she's worried about being sent away, too. For the first time in ages, I feel a kinship with her that extends beyond grief, beyond mutual substance abuse, beyond the crushing weight that accompanies failing Arthur Ryan.

"If you choose Montana," Dad says, "you'll fly out this weekend. If you choose to go to Lucy's—" His voice falters. He pauses until he's composed himself. "I'll drive you to Bell Cove tomorrow."

Bell Cove. A tiny Oregon beach town. I visited last summer with my sister, right after Lucy bought the Victorian she lovingly refers to as Stewart House. She'd gone through an ugly divorce the year before; her Los Angeles movie producer husband had trouble keeping his pants on, which resulted in a generous settlement, which turned Lucy into a homeowner. She invited Chloe and me to come, pitch in, swim, spend some time away from our parents, away from Seattle. We thought Lucy was glamorous, an enigma. We jumped at her invitation.

I can't go to Montana, but I can't go back to Oregon, either.

"Dad, *please*."

"I'm sorry." He glances at my glassy-eyed mom and sighs. "It's just too hard."

I get it—I do. It's torture for my parents, looking at me every day, an older, blonder version of the daughter who was taken from them. No wonder Dad's exhausted, losing weight, tense. No wonder Mom can't wade out of her merlot sea. They lost one daughter, but that doesn't mean they won't set the other loose for the family's greater good.

"There's got to be another way," I say, panic blooming in my chest. "Let me stay. I'll do whatever it takes!"

"Callie, you're not being punished," Dad says, his tone gentle now. "Mom and I love you, but something has to change. Think of this summer as an opportunity to work on yourself."

He rises from his chair and circles his desk, headed for the door. With a hand on the knob, he turns, looking far older than his forty-four years. He gives his head a sad shake. Sending me away might break him, but I know my dad—his convictions are unwavering.

"You'll let me know what you decide first thing in the morning," he says before walking out of the office.

Every night, I sneak into the memorial that was Chloe's room. I lie on her bed and pretend I can still detect her scent—clean lilac with a trace of swimming pool chlorine. I talk to her, though she doesn't talk back.

She's gone, an iridescent bubble, light and breezy, suddenly—carelessly—burst.

She doesn't talk back, but I pray for a noise, a sensation, a glimmer of light. An indication she's still with me. A sign that communicates, I forgive you.

I pull her crocheted blanket up and over my shoulders, the woolen yarn scratchy against my neck. If I close my eyes, I can almost convince myself that she's here, demanding I give her blanket back and then, ever so sweetly, begging me to take her out for mochas.

Her bedroom, frozen in time, has walls plastered with posters of Olympic swimmers showing off shiny medals. Its closet holds dozens of drag suits stored alongside a basket of swim caps and goggles, plus running leggings and a wealth of sneakers. Its bed is, charmingly, populated by a menagerie of stuffed animals. Her favorite, a threadbare pig called Piggy, shares the pillow on which my head rests.

"Dad thinks it's best I go away for the summer," I whisper. "He and Mom need room to be sad, to figure out how to go on. Dad thinks I do, too. Like a trip to Montana or Oregon will help me stop missing you."

At my mention of Oregon, a memory finds me: my sister and me last summer, in Bell Cove, not long after we arrived at Lucy's, before everything fell apart. We'd joined our aunt in her enormous bed, sharing a bowl of popcorn studded with M&M's, and a liter of Mountain Dew split between three tumblers. We were in the midst of an eighties movie marathon.

"I'm so glad you girls came down," Aunt Lucy said, picking a yellow M&M from the popcorn to toss into her mouth.

"So are we," Chloe said. "Bell Cove's got Seattle beat any day of the week."

I wasn't sure about that. I missed my swim team and my Acura and my boyfriend. But it *was* fun, being with my sister and my aunt. Refreshing to escape the city and its expectations.

Lucy paused the movie—one of her favorites: *Can't Buy Me Love*.

“Promise you’ll come back next summer,” she said. “I’d love to have you both here when I open the B&B.”

Chloe, eternally impulsive, was already nodding. She’d turned fifteen a few weeks prior, and sitting beside her on Lucy’s bed, I barely felt the year and a half that separated us. She’d matched my height months prior and filled out before that. Her hair was strawberry blond while mine is so pale it’s nearly white, but we were sometimes mistaken for twins.

“Let’s wait and see—” I started, but Lucy cut me off with a handful of popcorn to the face.

“I know summers are sacred,” she said, “but it’s not like I’m a tyrant when it comes to getting things done. You’ve had fun so far, right?”

“Right,” I allowed. “But next summer’s the one before my senior year. Who knows what I’ll have going on?”

“Nothing more important than your aunt and your sister,” Chloe said. Of course she was cool with committing to a second summer in Bell Cove. She could run and swim and bike anywhere. Plus, like me, she was romanced by the shabby, old house; the relaxed, oceanside way of life; and the almost absolute autonomy Lucy allowed us. We may have had a little home improvement to knock out in return, but compared with the rigors of school and swim team, Lucy’s was a vacation. Chloe thrust her tumbler in my direction, splashing soda onto the duvet. “Next summer,” she said. “Bell Cove. You and me and the B&B. Promise.”

“Fine,” I relented, because I’d been double-teamed by two of the most stubborn people in my world. I clanked my cup against my sister’s, then my aunt’s. “Next summer. Bell Cove it is.”

Chloe grinned, satisfied. Lucy restarted *Can’t Buy Me Love*.

An oath sworn over popcorn and Mountain Dew.

I'd keep my word regardless, but the reality is, a summer at my aunt's is a lesser evil than a summer in Montana, where I'd undoubtedly have my heart pried open and pored over by a bunch of well-intentioned strangers. The idea of stepping inside Stewart House again fills me with breathtaking anxiety, and there's no denying that Lucy and I aren't in the best place these days, but I'll go to Bell Cove.

Because she needs me.

Because my parents don't.

Because I made a promise to my sister.

Chloe was morning bedhead, races in the pool, petty arguments, and relentless laughter.

Sometimes, I'm desperate to remember, to *dissolve* into remembering. Sometimes, I want to light my memories on fire, so they burn until nothing's left but ash and despair.

Guilt is a vulture.

Guilt picks me apart.

Guilt never, ever flies away.



2



I can't remember the last time I spent three uninterrupted hours alone with my dad.

We left the Seattle skyline after a late lunch with Mom, who sat at the table rubbing her temples, nursing a hangover, no doubt. She teared up when she hugged me goodbye; I was so stunned by the uncharacteristic display of emotion, I hardly hugged her back.

Dad and I've been hurtling, meteorlike, toward Bell Cove since.

When we at last pull off the highway, he lowers the Tahoe's windows, as he did last summer, when he drove Chloe and me to Lucy's. Salty air billows through the cab, blowing my hair across my face as we roll into civilization.

Bell Cove—quaint, touristy, reeking of charm. I'd almost forgotten.

Dad, casual in khaki slacks and a white button-down, steers onto Sitka Street, Bell Cove's main drag. Chloe and I didn't spend much time

in the town itself, but I remember its clean sidewalks, lined with squat buildings, tawny-shingled facades and white trim. The street signs are hunks of weathered wood painted with names like Spruce, Douglas, Cypress, and Pine. There are two stoplights on Sitka, and no golden arches or Starbucks mermaids to be seen.

Delightful, I think, blowing out a weary breath.

"Cal," my dad says, interrupting the silence that's hovered like a storm cloud since we left Seattle. "It won't be so bad."

Cal. I can read his moods by the way he addresses me. Usually, I'm Callie, but it's my full name, Calliope, pronounced sternly, when I've done something to upset him. He saves Cal for the times he's feeling lighthearted, or when he's trying to force lightheartedness.

He gives me a strained smile. "It'll be a *good* summer. Maybe you'll make some friends."

I glance out the window. Gray-haired seniors stroll the sidewalks, along with moms and dads chasing children who scamper about. New friends? Doubtful, even if I was interested.

"Lucy's excited to have you back," Dad says. "I know she's looking forward to your company. Your help, too."

He's trying so hard to be conversational, and maybe I should attempt to do my part, but I wish he'd just button it.

Through a break in the storefronts, the vast Pacific Ocean comes into view. The beach is edged with dunes, and waves crash against the sandy shore. The sky blends with the shimmering water, camouflaging the horizon line.

Last year I thought this view was beautiful.

My dad eases his foot onto the brake for yet another stop sign. "Lots of people taking advantage of the sunshine," he says as a family of four

steps onto the crosswalk in front of us. They're coming in from the beach, flip-flopped feet dragging, lugging armfuls of colorful towels and plastic sand toys. They meander down Sitka. Father, mother, and two little girls, sisters, in matching swimsuits and floppy sun hats.

For a moment, my sorrow's too thick to breathe through.

Dad's noticed them, too. He grips the steering wheel so tightly the tendons in his hands go colorless. The car behind us gives a polite honk because we've been stopped too long, and he lets his foot off the brake, glancing at me with a reluctant smile.

"I wish it could be different," he says.

He wants so badly for Mom and me to take a stab at positivity. To make a go at reclaiming normalcy. To *get better*. But I don't know how to be anything but what I am: stuck. The therapist I was pushed into visiting last year spoke a lot about grief. She went on about how it's a process, an emotional journey people make at their own inconstant pace. Except, I'm not on a journey. I'm not moving at all.

Instead of traveling through grief, I've become it.

We pass the bookstore, a few art galleries, the Green Apple Grocery, and countless souvenir stores. Then the picturesque shops give way to a residential area. Manicured lawns, white picket fences, baskets of geraniums hanging from the eaves of front porches. An old man walks his well-groomed schnauzer down the sidewalk, stopping to give my father a smile and a wave as we roll past.

I slouch farther down, wary of being noticed and evaluated in my dark jeans, tar-colored tank, Black Currant nail polish, and ceaseless frown. It's only a matter of time before I'm pegged the newest, sulkiest resident of Bell Cove.

The Tahoe picks up speed as we continue south, following Sitka as

it ascends a hill that quickly becomes steep. Soon, Dad makes a turn into Lucy's driveway, a bumpy lane overlaid with gravel, and then, standing among towering evergreen trees and masses of overgrown shrubs, Stewart House looms.

"Victorian" paints pictures of gingerbread shingles, fanciful turrets, and ornate moldings. Pretentious. Lucy's house—a dusty blue with white trim—has those classic characteristics, but just like last summer, it looks shabby. Chipped and faded, broken spindles across the porch railing, a network of cracks spreading across one of the attic windows.

"Hasn't changed much," Dad says, pulling to a stop behind his sister's Range Rover. He unbuckles his seat belt and states the obvious: "You and Lucy have your work cut out for you."

The front door swings open, and there she is, Lucy, stepping onto the porch, squinting through the late-afternoon light. In her midthirties, she has so many freckles her skin appears perpetually tan. Her eyes shine even bluer than mine, and red corkscrew curls waterfall down her back. If she wasn't grinning and waving zealously, I'd say she looks like Medusa.

"Shall we?" Dad asks, pocketing his keys.

I leave the Tahoe for the gravel drive, wondering whether Lucy's done anything with the house's interior since I was last here. It's weird: Now's the first time I've felt remotely interested in anything—with the exception of smoking—for a significant stretch of time. The long dormant inquisitiveness quickly morphs into discomfort, though, like shoving my foot into a shoe I haven't worn in years.

I dread stepping into Stewart House.

Still, I reach into the back seat to retrieve my suitcase, operating on autopilot. Dad expects me to take my things from the Tahoe. He expects

me to move them into Stewart House. He expects me to help Lucy in all the ways that matter. He expects me to *try* to get better.

"Leave it," he says, nodding toward my bag. "I'll come back for it later."

I grab my backpack instead, which holds my laptop and a few other essentials, and force my feet to follow Dad's path through the overgrown grass leading to the house. Lucy's rocking black leggings and a yellow off-the-shoulder top. She bounds over and throws her arms around me. Her hug is warm, and her scent is familiar, lavender laced with nicotine.

"I'm so glad you're here," she murmurs, squeezing me tight. I almost smile before I remember myself and pull away.

Dad hugs her next. They're ten years apart, and while Lucy's never been geographically close, he looks out for her. In the months after her divorce, he called her all the time, and after they'd hang up, he'd have no shortage of disparaging remarks to grumble about her ex. Last summer, when she fled Seattle after Chloe's wake, hunkering down here in Bell Cove, supposedly tackling her remodel with renewed fervor, he was quick to excuse her. "This is rough for all of us," he'd say anytime I criticized her absence. "Everyone copes in their own way."

He's more gracious than I'll ever be.

"I fixed a light dinner," Lucy says now. "You'll stay, right, Arthur?"

"I suppose. I'm eager to see what this money pit looks like inside."

Lucy's grin reshapes itself into something smug. "You might be surprised." She opens the front door, white with two panels of colorful stained glass, with a flourish.

She's obviously left the outside of the house to wither over the last year, devoting her efforts to its interior. Last summer, the only rooms that

were livable were Lucy's master suite and the first-floor bedroom Chloe and I shared. The foyer had been a mess, the kitchen gutted, with only a dented fridge and a hot plate, and the parlor was a particleboard shell. The rooms upstairs, which are supposed to house eventual B&B guests, had been a combined dumping ground.

Now, the walls of the foyer are paneled in whitewashed wood, and the floor is covered in glossy planks. There's a rocking chair in the corner, draped with a patchwork quilt of faded reds, whites, and blues.

"I've done a lot downstairs," Lucy tells us. "But the second floor still needs some serious attention. Callie, that's where I'll need you."

It hurts physically, standing in this house without my sister, like a piece of my soul being slowly excised. Last year she shoved me out of the way before dashing toward our room at the back of the house, whooping, ready to snag the best bed and lay claim to the majority of the wardrobe's hanging space.

Now I'll get whichever bed I want. I'll use every hanger in the wardrobe. I'll get to spend the summer an only child, exactly as I've never wanted.

Light-headed and miserable, I touch the quilt, its fabrics frayed, its seams unraveling.

I remind myself to breathe.

"Let me show you the kitchen," Lucy says.

She pushes through the double doors, and I'm taken aback by the transformation: stainless steel appliances, clean white cabinets, and countertops of black granite. Lucy, quietly satisfied by our dropped jaws, points Dad and me to the table, reclaimed wood and artfully mismatched chairs, then takes plates loaded with sandwiches, pickles, and fruit out of the fridge.

I pick at my sandwich's crust while my dad and aunt dig in.

"I've had contractors and carpenters in and out of here for months," Lucy says. "They've done everything I can't—plumbing, electrical, heavy lifting." She turns to me, her attention snagging briefly on the blemish that mars the inside of my right forearm, a pearlescent scar zigzagging halfway to my elbow. She frowns, then adjusts her line of vision, her big hoop earrings swaying. "Everything that's left will be up to you and me, Callie."

"I'll do my best," I say.

Lucy nods and eyes my dad. "How's Susie?"

"She's well," he says, putting down his sandwich. I focus on my plate; good rarely follows talk of my mom.

"I'm glad. The last time I saw her, she . . . wasn't herself."

The last time Lucy saw my mom was the day Chloe was buried. Immediately after the service, Mom got fall-down drunk and ended up passing out even before our house was clear of company. "Wasn't herself" is the understatement of the century and, God, I want to say so, but Dad ignores Lucy's flaky comment so, begrudgingly, I do, too.

My aunt bites into her pickle, then presses again about Mom. "Why didn't she come to Bell Cove today? I would've loved to see her."

Dad blinks. He almost always gives his sister a free pass, but his tone is brusque when he says, "She wasn't up for the trip."

"Ah, I see."

I need Lucy to let it go—Mom's mental health is none of her business—but at the same time, I'd like to see Dad admit the truth. Because unless staring impassively at family photos, hyperventilating at the mention of my sister, and carting around a bottomless glass of wine beginning at lunchtime and ending whenever she happens to fall into bed are *well*, Mom's not.

Unfortunately, behavior-modifying summer camp isn't an option for a woman in her forties.

Dad pushes his plate back, takes a swig from his glass of iced tea, and stands. "It's getting late. I'll grab your suitcase, Callie, and then I need to get back on the road."

"So soon?" Lucy asks.

"I don't want to be away from Susannah for too long," he says, pounding the final nail into his coffin of failed deception.

"No, of course not," Lucy says. Softly, she adds, "I'm sorry, Arthur."

Dad nods once, then looks at me. "Finish up, Callie."

I'm being treated like I'm not old enough to participate in their conversation, but its underlying theme is clear: My family is broken and in need of fixing.



3



After retrieving my suitcase, Dad gives me a long hug, murmuring, “Please, Calliope, be safe,” before kissing the top of my head and climbing into the Tahoe.

Then he’s off.

I stand on the porch, watching the taillights until they disappear into the trees.

Alone in Bell Cove. No Dad, no Mom.

No Chloe.

There’s a tightness in my throat, one I know well. One that preludes tears.

I swallow, imagine my spine a rod of steel, and go back into the house.

Standing in the kitchen entryway, I watch Lucy line dishes in the dishwasher, then wipe down the countertops. She should’ve been present for my parents and me this last year. Instead, she holed up here, creating a

beautiful home for herself. I don't want to be bitter. She has reasons for behaving the way she does—rationally, I know as much—but shuttering my disappointment, my *hostility*, away feels like an enormous task.

By the time she finishes lighting the jarred candle on the island and turns to face me, I've regained a fragile hold on my emotions.

She smiles. "Let me show you to your room."

It's a gratuitous offer, because I know exactly where my room is, but I don't hate the notion of her walking me down the hall, opening the door, and leading me inside.

It's different.

Where there used to be two twin beds, one is now the room's focal point, a four-poster queen dressed with a fluffy down comforter. The standing mirror I last saw in shards scattered across the floor has been replaced by a wall-mounted version, framed in filigree. There's a small writing desk, new, with a vase of flowers: tulips and daisies, baby pink roses. The wardrobe has been moved into the far corner. Maybe Narnia lies beyond its carved doors; I make a mental note to check later. Through the pair of windows, there's a wide-open view of the ocean and the slowly sinking sun.

"You have Wi-Fi, and there are fresh towels in the bathroom," Lucy tells me, turning on the lamp that sits on the nightstand. She doesn't mention the changes, the adjustments she must've made to save me the grief of remembering this room as it was when Chloe was alive.

"Okay."

"Will you be comfortable in here?"

"I think so," I say, and then I catch an unfortunate glimpse of myself in the mirror. I look rumpled and unkempt. Wasted.

I move past the lone bed to one of the windows. The glass is droopy,

the view distorted: the blue plane of the ocean warped, the sharp edge of the cliff at the far end of the yard wavy. I run my fingertips over the surface, mesmerized by bubbles that look like trapped crystals.

Last summer, I was too busy to notice them.

"Windows were made differently a hundred years ago," Lucy says, stepping closer. She taps the glass with a finger. "Some consider the bubbles flaws, but I like them."

I nod, curiosity overriding my reticence. "This house is a hundred years old?"

"Nearly a hundred and twenty. Built in 1902."

A quiet mewing drifts into the room. Lucy's face lights up. "That's my Daisy. I rescued her a few months ago from the woods. Hopefully, she won't bother you."

"No, I like cats." I peek past her into the hallway, but there's no sign of Daisy.

"Anyway," Lucy says, "I've read up on the Stewart family over the last year. Joseph Stewart, the man who had this house built, was a banker from Portland. Apparently, he had quite a reputation." She walks to the bed and drops onto it with a little bounce. She's gorgeous, though in her leggings, baggy top, and bare feet, she carries an effortless air. "He picked this hill because he wanted privacy. Turns out the Stewarts were a calamity all the way up through the generations. The last of them, one of Joseph's distant nephews, died here about ten years ago."

I fold my arms and lean against the wall, feigning boredom, listening raptly.

"I hear he was a drinker," Lucy goes on. "I hear that's all he did, which explains why the house was such a mess. It was willed to one of the remaining Stewarts, a doctor who lives in Eugene, but she didn't want anything

to do with it. It sat empty, neglected, for a lot of years, until she put it on the market. You'll see when we start working upstairs—she didn't even bother to clean out her relatives' belongings. There wasn't much interest until I came along."

"Why'd you want it?"

Her expression becomes pensive. "After my marriage fell apart, I needed a break from Los Angeles. I needed a project to keep myself busy. Moving to Oregon, buying this house, turning it into a B&B . . . I'm chasing a dream."

I'm wondering why she never shared any of this last summer, with Chloe and me, when a gray-and-white cat slinks up to the doorway, assesses me and the room, then gives a purposeful *meow*. Her slate eyes are marble-round, and her tail's fluffed up. She hisses once, not at me—the stranger in her home—but at the wardrobe.

"Daisy! What's gotten into you?" Lucy says, rising from the bed.

The cat backs away, then turns and bolts down the hallway, paws slipping almost comically before they find purchase on the polished hardwood.

"It's just Callie, you crazy kitty," Lucy calls after her. She shakes her head, baffled. "I'll properly introduce you two later. She's really very sweet."

I shrug. Maybe animals sense sadness the way they sense approaching storms; I wouldn't want to be around me, either.

"So what are you up for tonight?" Lucy asks. "Movie? I have some board games we could dig out. Or we could hang out with a couple of books."

A vague memory needles its way into my mind. Christmastime, several years ago, after Grandma died, but well before Chloe and I visited

Bell Cove. Lucy's husband was shooting a movie in the remote Canadian wilderness, so she spent the holidays at our house. During the ten days she was with us, she took over Mom's bedtime story routine, reading to my sister and me, the three of us in flannel pajamas, snuggled beneath a blanket on the living room couch. Lucy's curls smelled reliably of lavender, and Chloe's bony elbow always found its way into my ribs. The book was *Little House in the Big Woods*, a few chapters each night.

Once upon a time, I might have been seduced by the notion of my aunt and a stack of books in a fanciful Victorian. But this Victorian has too much history. Reliving it in jagged fragments this past hour has siphoned my energy.

I give a genuine yawn. "Honestly, I'm ready for bed."

"Oh," Lucy says, her tone betraying her disappointment. "Then how about tomorrow we have breakfast together before we start working?"

I nod. She hugs me again, but her embrace isn't as comforting as it was earlier. There's something rueful, piteous, about the way her arms encircle me now, something that makes me want to duck away from her touch.

When she steps into the hallway, I close and lock the door. Then I root through my suitcase for the meager stash of weed that escaped the search and seizure my dad carried out last night. I shove one of the heavy windows open, trying not to think about how displaced I feel, how badly I long to be at home, how desperately I miss my parents, and my sister.

I pack the bowl of the glass pipe Isaac gave me last August, a gift of contrition handed over before he moved back to San Diego to begin his freshman year of college, then draw in a stream of smoke. Closing my eyes, I hold it until my lungs burn, then blow a cloud into the darkening backyard.

For the first time all day, I don't feel like I'm floating away.



4



Daisy wanders through the crack in my door a long while later. I'm flat on my back on the bed, the *new* bed, staring at the subtly textured ceiling. She mews once before leaping up and lying down beside me. I stroke her back, glad I decided to open the door. She's a ball of soft, purring fur—nothing like the hissing creature I met earlier.

I think I like her.

I slide off the bed to check my phone—no calls, no texts, as usual—then plug its charger in and leave it to sit on the nightstand, where it'll likely remain all summer, unused. Sleepily, I change into a T-shirt and sweats. I'm pulling socks over my cold toes when Daisy lifts her head and lets out a moan. I reach out to pet her, placate her, but she's not having it. She vaults off the bed and darts out of the room, a gray streak of panic.

She's just disappeared down the dimly lit hallway when a clatter obliterates the house's silence. I whirl around to find my phone facedown on

the floor, still tethered to the wall by its charger. My pulse races, thunderous in my ears. Stupid, because, holy hell, my phone fell—that's all. Stewart House is so old its floors probably aren't level.

Still, I glance around the room, making *certain* I'm alone.

A chill slithers up my spine as I notice the windows, curtains wide open. I try to remember if I pulled them shut after my smoke, before the night became so dark. I *thought* I did. But they've been open all this time, while I lay on the bed. While I changed clothes.

Stewart House is secluded, but I hate the idea of being so exposed. So vulnerable.

I hurry across the room and yank the curtains closed.

I can't shake Daisy's frantic exit or the seemingly spontaneous fall of my phone or the shiver of cold I felt a few moments ago. I consider finding Lucy, if only to share space with another human being, but quickly talk myself out of that idea.

I won't be chased out of this room I have to spend the summer in.

Throwing my shoulders back, I stride to the bathroom. Standing at the sink, I gather my hair into a ponytail and secure it with an elastic. I dig my toothbrush out of my toiletry bag and brush my teeth ferociously. With a generous squirt of cleanser, I scrub my face into a frothy mask, glowering at my reflection. Bending over, I rinse. I breathe deep, inhaling steam, letting lingering unease rush down the drain with sudsy water.

It's then, standing at the sink with my face dripping wet, that my ponytail rustles—as if a gust of wind has whipped through the small space.

I spin around, clutching my hands to where my heart sits frozen in my chest, water streaming down my face and neck, soaking the collar of my shirt.

I expect—*hope*—to find Lucy behind me.

The bathroom is empty.

I retreat to the parlor, where I spend the next half hour trying to get my blood to quit hammering my pulse points. I wrap a blanket around my shoulders, residually cold. My gaze stays fixed on the darkened hallway, watching for the slightest hint of movement.

Except, everything is still.

I keep telling myself: I smoked too much. I'm paranoid. There's no way what happened could've been real.

Right?

My grandma was a pragmatic woman, a lot like my dad, but she harbored a lifelong interest in the paranormal. There was a shelf on the bookcase in her living room that housed books with titles like *A Cultural History of the Occult* and *Apparitions: Our Silent Companions*. She used to watch shows about psychics and ghost hunters and the most haunted locations in America, and when I visited, I'd watch with her. She thought skepticism about the afterlife was the same as arrogance. Nobody *really* knows, so why not keep a mind open to possibility?

When I've climbed down from my high, when I've stopped shivering, when I'm *sure* there's no one lurking in a shadowy corner, I get up to scan the dozens of books Lucy's displayed on the parlor's built-in shelves. There's nothing about the supernatural, but I do find a tattered copy of *Little House in the Big Woods*. It's super late, but I curl up on the settee and spend some time with Laura and Mary and Ma and Pa, trying to replace my lingering restlessness with the pleasantness of their everyday

Wisconsin lives, trying *not* to think about how acutely this story is linked to my sister.

It's nearly dawn when I work up the courage to leave the parlor for my room. I steer clear of the bathroom and dive into the bed. Once I bury myself in soft cotton and down, I feel safer.

I dream of a gloomy cemetery. Headstones, ashen and crumbling, staring straight ahead. The grass is soggy, the sky liquid mercury, tossing up thunder and rain. Lightning illuminates graves, trees, bouquets of faded flowers left by long-ago mourners.

Laughter is so wrong in this place, but I hear it, cheerful and tinkling. I spin around to find the source of the sound, wet hair snaking across my face, and see my sister, wearing a yellow dress, walking among the headstones.

I call out, but she must not hear me. My feet sink into the earth as I step closer. "Chloe!"

She looks up, strawberry blond hair heavy and wet.

Sheets of rain pelt my skin. "Chloe, come here!"

For a moment, she stares.

And then, she turns and runs.

My heart splinters. My sister, my favorite person in the world, doesn't want to see me?

I follow, weaving through headstones, stepping around plaques set flush to the grass. She pulls to a stop at the edge of a grove of trees, her back heaving with the exertion of her dash. When she turns to face me, I see that her eyes, once blue like mine, have gone black. She clutches her chest, her mouth opening soundlessly.

"Chloe!" I scream into the wind.

I cover my face with my hands, raindrops mixing with tears.

It's a long time before I summon the nerve to look at her again. When I do, she's gone.

In her place stands a flower, face turned up, seeking sun.

Its petals are as red as blood.



5



I sit up in bed, the platinum light of morning washing over me.

It's been months since I've dreamed of Chloe. Of cemeteries. Of death. I wrap my arms around my middle, pinching my eyes shut.

When I open them a moment later, I find flowers on my nightstand. Red, centers of inky black. They're not in a vase like the flowers on the desk. Instead, they're tied with a long blade of grass, sitting near my phone. I pick them up and inhale the softest honey scent. They're eerily beautiful—just like the flower from my dream.

On some subconscious level, I must have noticed them before climbing into bed. I must have filed them away to conjure while I slept.

The flowers urge me up. I conduct a distanced examination of the bathroom—serene, still—before tiptoeing over the threshold and taking history's quickest shower. With the drapes in my room securely drawn, I

dress for work, old cutoffs and a gray T-shirt. I consider a hoodie to cover my scar, but my aunt's acquainted with it. There's no point in suffering the humidity of this old house for vanity's sake. I tie my hair into a messy knot and, grabbing the spray of flowers, I head for the kitchen.

Lucy's up, wearing baggy jeans and an electric-pink tank. She's standing over a griddle, poking slices of French toast with a spatula. She's brewed coffee, which smells amazing. I pour myself a mug.

"You're up early," she says. "Sleep well?"

"Sure," I lie. I find a drinking glass in a cabinet near the sink and fill it with water, then submerge the flowers' stems.

"There's something about the ocean air, you know?" She gestures toward the flowers with her spatula. "Those are pretty. You like poppies?"

"I didn't realize that's what they are, but yeah. They're nice."

"There's a meadow out past the tree line where poppies bloom, hundreds of them at a time. You and I should hike out there one of these days."

"Yeah, maybe."

She goes back to the French toast, the bangle bracelets on her wrist clacking together as she works. I take a seat at the table, and after a few minutes of dense silence, Lucy slides breakfast in front of me. She plops down with a plate of her own and spears a bite. She holds it up in the air as if to exclaim, *Cheers!* "Fuel up," she says. "We've got a lot of cleaning to do."

I eat, mainly to avoid conversation. The French toast is sweet, with hints of cinnamon and vanilla, and the maple syrup drizzled over the top is delicious.

"How is it?" Lucy asks when my plate's nearly empty.

"Really good," I admit.

She flips her copper curls over her shoulder. "Your grandma taught me how to cook when I was about your age."

"Really? Dad can barely fry an egg."

"He was out of the house by then, absorbing culture in Greece."

"I don't get his obsession with that place."

Lucy sips her coffee. "It's the thing he's most passionate about. My thing used to be acting; now it's this house. Yours is swimming."

I look down at my plate, swirling my fork through sticky amber syrup, thinking about the outdoor lap pool in Bell Cove. Last summer, Lucy tried to get Chloe and me to work out there instead of in the ocean, but Chloe wasn't into it, and I never wanted to go without her.

I shiver, cold out of nowhere. Quietly, I say, "I quit swimming."

Lucy doesn't appear surprised, which means my dad told her. For a moment, I wonder if he mentioned my shitty grades and the weed, too, but for him, candor usually comes second to reputation. I doubt he wants my aunt to know how far I've actually fallen.

She gazes at me over the rim of her coffee mug. Her eyes fall to my arm. My scar, pink and prominent against my pale skin. "How come?"

"I'm not interested in it anymore. Not since . . ."

"Since Chloe died?"

I shake my head, my windpipe kinking like a hose. I don't want to have a conversation about my sister. Not with Lucy. Not with anybody.

She puts down her mug and tents her hands. "I know things at home have been intense, and I know I've been . . . away, but Chloe isn't a taboo topic. I think it might be good for you to talk about her."

I stare at my lap, praying she'll leave it alone.

"Really," she says, her voice dripping with sympathy. "I'm willing to listen."

She's dangerously close to hurdling over the line that separates inquisitive from intrusive. The tiny part of my brain that's still sensible knows her intentions are good, but the unreasonable part is screaming, *Lucy doesn't know you anymore!*

"You don't get it," I say.

"I get more than you think. In a way, I've lost my husband."

Her comment triggers an explosion of anger, and I stand so abruptly, with such force, my chair topples backward, banging against the floor. "You and your husband got *divorced*—he's alive and well. You left Seattle after Chloe's funeral. You bailed on us. On *me*. So don't pretend to understand what I'm going through now!"

Lucy stares at me, openmouthed, a flush climbing her neck.

I storm out of the kitchen before she can say another word.



6



I retreat to the porch, where the smell of cloyingly sweet French toast isn't gag-inducing. There are white rocking chairs lined in a row, as if Stewart House is an antebellum plantation instead of a beach-town Victorian. I choose the farthest rocker from the door and fall into it, fuming.

I wish I could talk to my sister about the last twenty-four hours: my strained ride with Dad, the changes inside Stewart House, my falling phone and the chilly drafts, Lucy's wacky clothes and heedless insensitivity, and Daisy, who's either hissing or purring. Chloe would ask for details about our aunt's eccentricities and her cat's mood swings, then giggle breathlessly and tease me about being scared last night. Remembering her laughter brings a torrent of emotion so powerful I have to pull my knees to my chest to contain it.

Closing my eyes, I inhale ocean air, listening to the faint sound of waves crashing against the rocks below the cliff out back.

I wonder how high we are. . . . fifty feet above the water? One hundred?

The crunching of tires on the gravel drive disturbs my relative peace. I peer through my lashes as the approaching vehicle comes into view, a cloud of dust trailing behind. It's one of those old Jeeps, a Wagoneer, I think, boxy and covered in hideous wood panels. I remain motionless, watching from my secluded corner of the porch.

The car comes to a screeching halt. A guy climbs out, wearing khaki shorts and a T-shirt the same pale blue as the sky. He slams the car door and hustles toward the house with a bounce in his step. Sinking lower into my chair, I pray he doesn't spot me; I lack the patience for a conversation with this apparently merry stranger.

As he gets closer, I see that he's younger than his car made me assume. A split second passes, during which I think, *Holy hell, he's adorable*, before recognizing what a frivolous thought that is. I have no business entertaining even the most innocent of romantic inclinations when I can barely stand my own existence. Still, I can't ignore his tall frame, his sun-bronzed skin, or his bleached hair, longish, in that shaggy, I-don't-give-a-shit style few pull off.

His footsteps fall heavy on the porch planks. He raises a fist to the front door. There's a pause, a moment of silence while I wait for his inevitable knock—which never comes. Instead, to my embarrassment, he turns and catches me staring from my remote rocking chair, as if I'm a stalker.

His smile is like a sunburst.

Heat floods my face.

He strolls over, then folds himself into the chair next to mine. His

eyes are sea-glass green, sparkling in the morning light. He extends his hand in my direction and says, "Tucker Morgan. Lucy hired me as her landscape specialist, known also by its less glamorous title: yard boy."

His palm floats in front of my face while he waits for me to take a turn introducing myself. I don't, and I don't shake his hand, either.

He drops it to his lap.

It's not like I'm trying to be rude to this guy who seems generally affable, but I don't want anything to do with him.

"You're not going to tell me your name?" he asks.

I shrug. "It doesn't matter."

"Sure it does. If you're gonna be hanging around this summer, we'll probably see a lot of each other."

"What makes you think I'll be hanging around?"

He sizes me up, from the tips of my toes, higher, his eyes lingering a millisecond on my bare legs and the scooped neckline of my shirt. When he finds my scar, I wait for curiosity to seep into his expression. It doesn't, and I feel naked, suddenly, like Tucker Morgan can see all of me, inside and out.

"You look comfortable," he says. "I bet you'll be around awhile."

"Wrong. I'm visiting."

"Cool. You'll love Bell Cove."

I wrinkle my nose.

"City girl?" he guesses. When I don't confirm or deny, he continues. "I've lived here my whole life, which gives me the authority to tell you: Bell Cove is the shit."

The blind conviction in his voice gives me pause, and for the space of a second, I wonder if Bell Cove might really be an okay spot to hang out for a couple of months. Then I remember my prying aunt and my

frightful night and the feeling of displacement that won't quit. I remember last summer, and the day my sister was found just down shore from Bell Cove.

This town sucks.

"Anyway," Yard Boy says, "if you get bored while you're visiting, you can, you know, tell me your name and then, if you want, maybe I can show you around town."

I'm preparing to shut him down—I don't want to hang out with him, or any boy, maybe not ever—when Lucy barges through the door, big hair and bigger jewelry. "That's a good idea!"

I tense; she's been eavesdropping. "It's not necessary."

She makes her way down the porch and leans against the rail, across from where I sit. "Sure it is. You can't sit around in the house all summer like a recluse, Callie."

"I can do whatever I want," I snap. "I came here to help you, not to explore." I look Tucker Morgan in the eye. "Not to make friends."

He's not smiling anymore.

"Oh, come on," Lucy says, tapping her coral-painted toes against mine, like we're best friends—or worse, sisters.

"I said no, okay? Would you just let it go?" I pop out of my chair, blowing past her and her stupid landscape specialist, and head for the house.

I slam the front door hard enough to rattle the stained glass in its frame.



7



I've had one boyfriend of significance, Isaac Park, who bulldozed into my world a month before the end of my sophomore year, when he and his parents moved into the home next door. The first time I saw him, he was sprawled in the grass out front, holding a beat-up clip-board, flipping through a stack of papers as a crew of movers traipsed between the huge truck parked at the curb and the house.

I spent a minute in my Acura watching the boy, who watched the crew haul cardboard boxes, sleek furniture, and an assortment of expensive-looking mountain bikes. Chloe should've been in the passenger seat, but she'd persuaded me to let her run the five miles home from the pool after swim practice because she was hard-core that way. As I sat, I cataloged my observations into what would quickly become a thick mental file: the boy's hair was dark, he was wearing gray chino shorts with a hoodie, and a pair of mirrored aviators hid his eyes.

One of the movers emerged from the back of the truck, calling out a number. Dutifully, if not apathetically, the boy drew a finger along the paperwork, then made a mark.

He was cute.

I got out of my car, slamming the door a little harder than necessary, ensuring he heard, guaranteeing he noticed.

He lifted his hand in a wave that tried and failed to be blasé. Even from behind those sunglasses, I felt his gaze track me as I moved down the driveway, along the sidewalk, and up the lawn toward where he sat.

“Neighbor?” he said.

“Neighbor,” I confirmed.

“Isaac Park, formerly of San Diego.”

“Callie Ryan. Lived here forever.”

He appraised me without the pretense of discretion. “Getting home from school?”

“Swim practice. School let out a couple of hours ago. I go to North Seattle Prep.”

“High school?”

I nodded. “Couple more years. You?”

“Just graduated.”

“Lucky. We’ve still got weeks to go.”

“Yeah, kinda nice to get a jump on summer. I’m starting at UCSD in the fall.”

Back to San Diego—to attend a *university*. Two years isn’t much of an age gap, but the fact that he was, for all intents and purposes, a college guy . . .

His appeal skyrocketed.

"I've heard that's a good school," I said, "though my dad's a professor at UW, so . . ."

"Go Huskies," Isaac said wryly, circling his pen through the air like a little streamer. I laughed, and he grinned, revealing a dimple that put all other dimples to shame. He pulled his sunglasses away, allowing me the full scope of his face, all tawny skin and honed angles. His eyes were deeply brown and slightly hooded, his brows thick and black as his hair. He said, "I like your smile, Callie Ryan."

He gestured to the patch of grass beside him.

I sat.

He told me about his dad, who's half Korean, half Irish, the biggest Padres fan on the West Coast; his PR firm had recently transferred him to Seattle. And then he told me about his mom, who'd been a New York City socialite until she left the East Coast for Southern California and, more recently, the Pacific Northwest. He marked numbers on the inventory as the crew marched up and down the driveway with his family's treasures. I listened, mesmerized, as he told me that he liked to read about famous athletes and that he couldn't wait to go mountain biking in the Cascades. He was an only child and glad about it, he said, and his parents were way cooler than any middle-aged duo had a right to be.

"Dad's at the office, and Mom's inside, directing traffic. Next time, I'll introduce you."

I smiled. There'd be a next time.



It's Tucker Morgan, not Lucy, who finds me in the kitchen ten minutes after my outburst. He joins me at the table, a safe two chairs away from

where I sit, chipping Black Currant polish from my nails. He's plugged buds into his ears, a thin white cord trailing down, disappearing into the pocket of his shorts. Faintly, I hear the strains of "Better Man," an oldie that's easily recognizable because Pearl Jam is a Seattle institution; my parents used to listen to them, before, while working on dinner in the kitchen, or pulling weeds in the yard.

Such a good song.

As soon as the thought materializes in my head, Tucker pulls out his phone and turns off the music, tucking his earbuds into his pocket.

"So," he says. "You okay?"

I don't look at him, just continue chipping.

"No, I guess?"

In my periphery, I watch him glance around the kitchen, eyeing the poppies that remain in the center of the table, then the fruit bowl. He starts to reach for a peach before thinking better of it. "This is a nice house," he comments, his tenor like a curl of smoke in the sunlit kitchen.

God, his voice, I think, and then, What is wrong with me?

"I've never been inside," he tells me, like I care. A wayward flake of Black Currant lands on the table in front of him. Unfazed, he brushes it away. "Today's my first day of work. I'm not dreading it, to tell you the truth. Changing something neglected into something people will look at and appreciate . . . I mean, is there a better job?"

I want to tell him that, yeah, I can think of about a million, but I don't, lest he conclude that I, too, am a project in need of improvement. I'm starting to wonder how long he's going to keep up this one-sided conversation when he says, "So if Lucy can be trusted, your name's Callie?"

"Short for Calliope," I say, still focused on my fingernails.

“Greek muse or musical instrument?”

I look up, surprised he’s heard of either. “Greek muse. My dad’s obsessed with ancient Greece. Besides, the musical instrument is loud and big and abrasive.”

His eyes spark with amusement. “Well, that’s not you—not the loud or big parts, anyway.”

I’m not sure why, but his comment makes me smile. The expression feels stiff, though, and I drop my gaze, embarrassed out of nowhere. My nails look horrible with their jagged patches of polish, and I hide my hands under the table, trying to recall the exact moment I stopped giving a shit about looking nice.

Tucker reaches for the peach he eyed before. It rolls in his outstretched hand. “Want one?”

“You’re passing out my aunt’s food now?” I ask, but I catch it when he tosses it my way.

It’s good, sweet. Tucker polishes off his in all of two seconds, then places the pit on a paper napkin he snags from the stack in the center of the table. He fixes his gaze on me, and then I feel self-conscious, biting and chewing and swallowing in front of this disarmingly beautiful boy. I put my unfinished peach down next to his pit.

“No good?”

“I’m full.”

“So, anyway,” he says with a shrug, “I’m thinking we should start over. I mean, if you’re here all summer, we’re gonna run into each other sometimes and I, for one, don’t want things to be uncomfortable.”

The way he says all this, flashing a smile that could thaw glaciers, is too genuine to answer with irreverence.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s start over.”

Again, he sticks out his hand. “Tucker Morgan.”

“Callie Ryan.”

I slip my hand into his, surprised by the warmth of his palm, the firmness of his grip.

I pull quickly free, before I become swept away.



8

When Tucker heads outside to start taming the yard, I escape to my room. I bring the poppies and set them on my nightstand; they're too pretty to leave in the kitchen, where Lucy might enjoy them. I know I'm going to have to face her and get to doing some actual work eventually, but some time to cool off won't hurt either of us.

Everything in my room is as I left it: the wardrobe, the desk, the bed—an unavoidable reminder that I'm no longer half of a pair—and the mirror. I *hate* the mirror. It's bad enough, recalling the original and why Lucy had to replace it, but this new mirror's clear cast throws back my likeness with staggering clarity. I shirk past the sad girl's reflection, draw the curtains, and curl up on the bed, enormous and cold and lonely. The light is dim and the air is cool, and there's a constant, quiet *tap-tap-tapping*. Drafty old house, Daisy playing, wind rustling the tall trees.

I'm off course, having just encountered an intriguing boy.

The last time this happened, I couldn't wait to tell Chloe. Except, she beat me to it.

"I met someone," she'd said, bursting into my room.

She was incandescent, wearing a nightgown, an old favorite she refused to give up, her hair freshly washed and twisted into a knot. She'd been distracted through dinner, ignoring Mom's chatter about how she'd just planted summer squash and lettuce in the backyard garden, shrugging off Dad's concern about her running home from the pool by herself, but now she was focused, situating herself on the end of my bed, folding her fawn legs beneath her.

"Really?" I said, putting my bio homework aside.

"After my run. Get this—he's *our new neighbor*."

Her eyes glittered, as if such good fortune was unheard of. Her interest in romance, in boys, was new and innocent and sweet. I wasn't about to flatten it, but I couldn't pass up an opportunity to tease her, either.

"Isaac," I said, nudging her with my foot. "Dibs."

"Callie!"

I laughed. "I talked to him when I got home from practice. He's nice, right?"

"So nice."

"And cute."

"So cute."

"And . . . old."

Chloe rolled her eyes. "Not that old."

"Ancient. He's going to college in California in the fall."

"He told me. Also, he thinks it's badass that I'm training for a triathlon."

"If only Dad felt the same."

She groaned. “He gave me such a hard time while we were doing the dishes. He was all, ‘I just don’t understand why you can’t swim exclusively, like your sister. It’s *dangerous*,’” she said emphatically, mimicking Dad’s disapproving baritone with impressive accuracy. “‘Cavorting around the city alone. What if you’re hit by a car? And during the triathlon, what if you crash on your bike? What if another swimmer takes you under?’” She’d giggled then, as if our dad’s fretting was unfounded and absolutely hilarious.

“Have you registered yet?”

“Last week. I used birthday money from Aunt Lucy for the fee.” She was lucky her birthday fell when it did; fifteen was the minimum age for athletes entering the Seattle Summer Triathlon, held Labor Day weekend annually.

“Dad might be ticked,” I warned.

“It’ll be worth it. Swim team is cool, but I’m starting to feel like a hamster on a wheel, blowing through all those sets, going literally nowhere.”

I pulled an indignant face.

“No, no,” she recanted. “I love that *you* love swim team, and I think you should stick with it—you’re too good to give it up.”

“You’re good, too. In a couple of months, you’ll probably be faster than me.”

She shook her head, her gaze drifting around my room, snagging on the trophies and medals displayed on the wall across from my bed. “I need something else,” she said. “Something different. Something all mine.”

“I get it,” I told her, though I didn’t. I liked that we were both swimmers, both students at North Seattle Prep, both regularly annoyed with our loving but overbearing parents.

We were the Ryan girls. A twosome.

“You could register for the triathlon, too,” Chloe said. She’d detected, as usual, my hesitancy to speak the truth. Another difference: My sister favored honesty, while I defaulted to courtesy.

“No way. Dad’s right: *so* dangerous.”

She smiled, though her tone was apologetic. “When I said I wanted something all mine, I didn’t mean—”

“No, I know. The triathlon’s about you, and what a badass you’re becoming.”

She moved quickly, a snake’s sudden strike, and poked me in the ribs. “Isaac thinks so.”

Isaac did think so. Not long after, he started giving Chloe pointers on biking, going so far as to join her on some of her training rides. My parents liked that she wasn’t out alone. My sister liked that she had a hot guy pedaling beside her.

I roll onto my side, uncomfortable on this unfamiliar mattress, in this unfamiliar house.

Disoriented.

Sometimes I fall into memories so vivid and powerful, so full of Chloe’s spirit, I forget, for a few minutes, that she’s really gone. Resurfacing—*remembering*—is the same as losing her all over again, an endless cycle of daydreams and dashed hopes.

In need of a diversion, I give myself permission to think of Tucker Morgan, all floppy hair and cheerful smiles. I waste a few minutes conjuring stories about his youth, deciding his parents were once into the grunge scene, before he crashed into their lives and forced them toward a more conservative existence. Reasonably intelligent, the Tucker of my imagination is considering college but wants to see how he feels about

lawn mowers, rakes, and climbing roses before committing to higher education. And so he's taken up work as Bell Cove's most promising Yard Boy.

For the first time since arriving in Bell Cove, I relax and drift into a dreamless sleep.