

LAST GIRL

LIED TO

L.E. FLYNN

{Imprint}

MARK YOUR MARK

NEW YORK



A part of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Printed in the United States of America.  
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-15813-0 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-25015812-3 (ebook)

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Book design by Elynn Cohen

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2019

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Some things aren't meant to be stolen.

Boys.

Hearts.

Secrets.

Books.

If you borrow this book, return it to its rightful owner.  
Or else something of yours might just go missing too . . .

*For my mom, the best woman I know.  
I want to be you when I grow up.  
(How am I doing?)*



WHEN I FIRST met you, that stupid-hot day last September when you jumped into my car and slid down in the passenger seat and told me to drive, you were bleached blond. You had a pixie cut with dark roots, the kind of hair that was less a hairstyle and more a lifestyle. You were wearing too much eyeliner and had a ring in your lip and I never said it out loud, but I thought you were beautiful. Not in the regular way, but in your own way. And that was so much better.

You looked the exact same, day after day. You used to bleach your head every two weeks in your tiny bathroom at home. You asked me to trim your ends for you because you sucked at getting them even.

“My hair has to be short,” you told me. “It’s too damaged to grow out. I wish I had long hair like yours, but some things aren’t meant to be.”

“You can have mine,” I said. “It’s too thick. I hate it.” Really, I would have given you anything of mine you wanted.

Then, right after you graduated, just days after I watched you walk across the stage with your diploma and away from me, you showed up at my house with a stubby ponytail. A stubby, mouse-brown ponytail. I could tell by your smudged hairline that you had just done it on your own.

I barely recognized you.

"I never pictured you as a brunette," I said.

"I wanted to try it," you said. "Haven't you ever just been so sick of yourself that you had to do something about it?"

The next week, your hair was copper, with choppy bangs that you must have cut yourself. You didn't ask for my help, but I tried not to feel hurt. "It was a spontaneous thing," you explained. "I saw the dye and just went for it."

Two weeks later, it was black, with long extensions you said you bought on the internet. "I'm trying new things," you told me when I finally asked why. "It's time for a change."

After that, I didn't think much about it when you had a new look. Purple hair and streaked hair and bangs and bobs and curls and clip-in pieces. Then you started playing with makeup too, ditching your beloved, sooty eyeliner for false eyelashes and color contacts, and your lip ring for bright red lipstick that got on your teeth. I lost track of which version of you I would see, even though I saw you every single day that summer.

But I didn't think much about it, because lots of girls do things like that.

I didn't think much about it.

But I should have.

Because when you disappeared after the party, the police asked me for a description of you. They needed a description because they didn't have a recent photo. They didn't have a recent photo because no recent photos of you existed. You stayed out of pictures. You didn't think you were photogenic.

"I always look weird in front of the camera," you'd said.

“Besides, I’d rather just live in the moment. Why do people feel the need to document everything?”

I should have known you better than anyone.

But when they asked me, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to stop the room from spinning long enough to picture what you looked like, and I realized I had no idea.

# 2

WHAT I REMEMBER about that night: everything that matters.

What I tell them I remember about that night: everything that doesn't matter.

I know lying is wrong, but isn't breaking your promises worse? There's something about a promise that's more important. A permanent tie to somebody else. A signature scrawled in the air, pinpricked thumbs pressed together. Swallowing someone else's desperation. Hiding someone's biggest mistake. Speaking the three most important words in the English language:

*I'll never tell.*

So, as bad as I feel about lying to the cops about the night Trixie disappeared, it feels more natural than the alternative. And that's the thing about choices: When you put them on either side of a scale, they never weigh the same.

One is bound to be heavier.

# 3

*YOU WERE THE one who insisted we go to Alison's party, which was out of character, since you didn't even like Alison. You didn't like any of the people we went to school with.*

Trixie had graduated in June and couldn't wait to get away from them, from everything. I still had another year to go, and the thought of not having her there was something I was dancing around, even weeks before school started.

"It'll be fun," she insisted, dropping her backpack on my comforter and yanking her shirt over her head. "Plus, it'll be open bar. Let's just drink our faces off and celebrate."

*Celebrate what?* I wanted to ask. But I didn't.

I watched her open her backpack and pull another shirt out, a brown tank top. She stood in front of my mirror and shrugged it on. Trixie would have looked good in anything, so I wondered why she was wearing that to the party—an oversized top the color of shit with JERSEY GIRL across the front in blocky white lettering. Her skinny arms poked out of the too-big armholes and I could see her bra underneath. It wasn't even a cute bra, just one of those nude ones you buy to wear under white shirts.

"What are you going to wear?" she asked, straddling my desk chair.



"I don't know. I hate everything in my closet. It's all so ugly."

"What are you talking about? Your clothes are the best."

The truth was, I was afraid to try on most of my clothes. I had always hated something about my body—my thighs, my hips, my broad shoulders—more because girls are predisposed to be at war with their bodies than for any real reason. But over the summer, I knew I had put on weight and I was too scared to stand on the scale and find out how much. As long as I didn't know the number, I could convince myself it was all in my head.

"I'll find you something," she said, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course," I mumbled. "Just something boring though, okay? I don't want to dress up."

Trixie opened my closet and started rifling through my clothes. I felt a pang when I saw everything on hangers, ironed and color-coded and neglected. Bright yellow sundresses. Tank tops with skinny straps. Jeans that used to hug me in all the right places. Denim miniskirts. My cheerleading uniform, the one I never returned like I was supposed to. I stared at the clothes like they were old friends I didn't know anymore. I used to love getting dressed up, even if I wasn't going anywhere. I'd buy fabric and try to make my own clothes that I imagined people would stop me on the street and ask about. But nobody ever did, except Trixie.

"You have such good stuff in here," she said, twisting around to look at me. "Why don't you ever wear it?"

"I don't know. I just feel like nothing suits me." *Or fits me.*

"You could always make something new. Go buy another sewing machine. Right? You're so freaking talented."

“Maybe,” I said, staring down at my legs, which had barely seen the sun all summer.

I didn’t try to make clothes anymore because I didn’t know how to dress this girl, the pale one who looked back at me in the mirror, the one with a sloppy auburn bun on top of her head who felt doughy and stretched out in her own skin. My summer uniform was made up of forgiving long skirts and baggy T-shirts. Fashion had become an afterthought.

“This one,” Trixie said, pulling out the one item of clothing I was avoiding the most. The red dress I was supposed to wear to Alison’s party last summer, almost a full year ago. “You should wear this one.”

“Isn’t it kind of fancy? You’re not dressed up.”

“Maybe I’ll change later. You should definitely wear it, though. Who knows, right? You might meet the love of your life tonight.”

*I already have, and he doesn’t care*, I wanted to say, but instead I just grabbed the hanger, my face flaming, and made my way to the bathroom. I tried to step into the dress, but it wouldn’t fit over my butt. I tried pulling it over my head and my heart leaped when it managed to go over my shoulders. I had this thought, this one confident thought. *Maybe I worried for nothing*. I tugged it down around my stomach, ignoring the film of sweat on my skin.

Then I felt the back rip.

Tears stung my eyes. I bit my lip and counted backward from ten. I didn’t want to cry. Not with Trixie in the next room. Not when she had never cried, not about anything, not ever.

“It doesn’t fit,” I said, trying to keep my voice from wavering. “I’ll find something else.”

“Just wait a sec. I’m coming in.”

She never knocked. Which was ironic, because the one time I snuck up behind her when she was hunched over her computer, she flipped out. It was the only time I ever saw her angry. “You have to respect people’s space,” she had muttered. But she inhabited my space.

I took the beer she offered as she barged in and drank it while she fastened the back of the dress from the inside with a hidden safety pin and fixed my hair so the rip wouldn’t be noticeable. I marveled over the power she had. The power to turn everything around, to make me feel like the most beautiful girl in the world. I hadn’t just grown bigger since I met her. I had grown out of everything that used to be important to me, everything I used to think mattered. My old life didn’t fit anymore. I had grown into somebody Trixie called a best friend.

“See, it fits just fine. You look hot. I wish I was a redhead so I could look this good in red. You’ll be fighting guys off tonight.” She slid her feet into her well-worn flip-flops.

“You could pull off red hair,” I said. “You’ve tried pretty much every other color. I can help you dye it.”

“No,” she said. “It’s more your thing. Let’s go.”

I drank another beer on the way to the party as we walked to Alison’s house, Trixie’s backpack bumping against the small of her back with each step she took. Her shoulders sagged under the weight. I wondered why she was bringing a backpack to the party at all.

“I can carry that for a while if you want,” I said. “It looks heavy. What’s in there?”

“I’ve got it,” she said. “And it’s just a bunch of extra beers. In case this party has a shortage and we need some entertainment.”

But whatever was in there wasn't clanking around like beers would. *Why would she lie about that?* Still, I dropped it.

Later, the police asked me about the backpack.

*It was black. It had white trim. It was the same one she brought to school. She said it was full of beer.*

But what I remember most was the red dents it left in her shoulders.

Of course, I didn't tell the police about the red dents. I told them that Trixie and I left the party around the same time and went our separate ways because she told me she had plans with her dad in the morning and couldn't sleep over at my place.

I didn't tell them how my vision was blurry when Trixie shoved an ice cube down my back. I was holding a drink in my hand and the shock of the ice cube on my skin made me fling my cup. Red liquid spraying in the air—something sweet and strong—misting over Trixie's shirt before coming to land on cream-colored carpet and blooming like crimson inkblots.

I'm sure it wasn't funny. It wouldn't be funny when Alison saw it, or when her parents came home and found evidence that their daughter threw a party big enough for a spill like that to go unnoticed.

It wasn't funny, but Trixie laughed. She shook her head and put her hands on my shoulders.

"Oh, Fiona," she said with this long, drawn-out sigh. "What am I going to do with you?"

Those were the last words Trixie said to me, and they didn't sound like a goodbye. I had said goodbye to Trixie a hundred times, in a hundred different places. Her goodbye

was always the same. A peace sign, hand tossed over her head. A promise to call me later.

She really did tell me she had plans with her dad in the morning.

But I didn't leave the party with her.

Two days after the party, when the police talked to that guy on the beach and found what Trixie left behind, I realized what she really meant. I finally heard what I should have heard that night.

She said: "What am I going to do with you?"

But she meant: "What am I going to do without you?"

# 4

MOM MAKES ME eat breakfast on the first day of school, even though I feel sick. She plops a bowl of something that looks like birdfeed in front of me and tells me to finish it.

“I know the last three weeks have been rough,” she says. “But this is a fresh start. Your senior year. I want you to go in with a clean slate and take every opportunity you can. You only get to have one senior year.”

This is the part where her eyes get all misty, the part where I’m the elephant in the room because it’s my fault Mom never had a proper senior year. It’s my fault she had to finish high school from home. Because she got pregnant with me when she was sixteen and my grandma pulled her out of school. When I first became a cheerleader, Mom was so excited. She came to all the basketball games in the smelly gym and sat on the hard bleachers during football season just to watch me sing stupid Robson game chants and throw girls in the air. Mom hated Trixie because she thinks Trixie took me away from all that. Although that’s not the way she phrased it. When she brought it up, she was “worried I was impressionable.” Like I was a wad of clay, not a girl.

I force myself to swallow a mouthful of the seedy substance in my bowl. It’s sandpaper scratching the back of my throat.

“Remember, we’re seeing Dr. Rosenthal after school.” Mom stands up. “I’m supposed to have a meeting at four, but I’ll cut it short and meet you there.”

I don’t want to see Dr. Rosenthal. He’s a psychologist who specializes in teen issues, which makes me wonder if he never outgrew his. I’m not sure if Mom wants me to talk to him so badly because I put on weight or because I have a dead best friend or maybe both.

“You’ve been through a lot of emotional trauma,” she said before she called to book the appointment. “Talking to someone will help you get back on track.”

All I heard was *You’re disgusting. You’re not good enough anymore. You let yourself go.*

She opens her mouth to say something else, but her cell phone rings and she answers it right away. When I was little, Mom stayed home with me, in a tiny one-bedroom apartment my grandma paid for. But when I got a bit older, just being a mom and working at the grocery store part-time wasn’t enough for her, so she went to college and got a business degree and a job at a marketing firm. Now she travels all the time for work. It used to be just a random day here or there, but now it’s sometimes weeks. And two months in Tokyo in the summer. She wanted my aunt Leslie to come and stay with me, but I protested, told her seventeen was old enough to be home by myself. I reminded her that in a year, I’d be in a whole different city, maybe even state, on my own anyway.

Trixie helped me convince her. “Tell her you’ll call her to check in all the time. Tell her it’ll be a lesson in independence. Use those exact words. Parents eat that shit up.”

Trixie was a good liar. Now I am too. I wonder if lying works like that—if it’s contagious, a disease. I never used to

lie to Mom about anything, but after I met Trixie, I became a liar by association. I told myself they were just fibs and that Mom didn't need to know everything about my life. But it was more than that.

"You know, I can drive myself after school," I say, letting my spoon fall into my bowl with a clatter. "You should just go to your meeting."

Mom's forehead creases. "You sure, honey?"

I nod. "I'm sure."

I dread seeing Dr. Rosenthal. I know he's just going to ask all the wrong questions. He'll want to probe my brain and try to find the scientific cause for why I'm unraveling, which should be a relief. But he thinks this is all happening because of what I put inside my body, who I chose to let inside my life.

And maybe the problem isn't who I let in, but who was already there.



# 5

*I DON'T KNOW how long it took us to become best friends. Two weeks, maybe. Two hours. Or maybe it was in the first two minutes after you hopped into my car, when all I felt was this rush of possibility.*

The funny thing is, I never should have met Trixie Heller.

I should have been at cheerleading practice, on the bottom of the pyramid. Coach Hogan liked to call me her powerhouse. “Look at those strong legs,” she used to say. She meant it as a compliment. But all I wanted was to be like my best friend, Jenny. The kind of girl who fit perfectly under any guy’s arm. The kind of girl who could date any guy she wanted.

The kind of girl who wanted to date the one guy I told her I loved.

Ten minutes before I met Trixie, Jenny and I were heading for the gym. I was walking. Jenny was doing that annoying bounce-walk thing she did, as if life was so great that she couldn’t bear to walk normally. Later, when Trixie said that walk made Jenny resemble a demented duck, I could have kissed her.

I was already pissed off at Jenny. Not because of her loud

voice or little snub nose or perky butt or the fact that she barely ever let me get a word in edgewise. I was irritated because we couldn't even have a conversation anymore without Toby Hunter's name coming up. But that day, she said another name that made my breath catch in my throat—Beau Hunter.

“He asked me out,” she said, her words rushed. “It's not like I could say no. I mean, the guy's brother just—well, you know. Offed himself.”

I knew. Of course I knew. Everyone in Morrison Beach knew what Toby Hunter had done, and half of them had their own theories about it. But Jenny knew my truth. I thought about that night, which was long before I knew Trixie, when Jenny and I drank wine coolers outside on Alison's deck and I told her I loved Beau Hunter. She had hugged me and told me to ask him out, because he was too shy to ask me.

Eight minutes before I met Trixie, I wanted to wring Jenny's neck.

I waited for Jenny to say something, anything, to acknowledge that night, the way we were close enough for me to smell her bubble gum-flavored lip gloss when I told her my biggest secret.

But she didn't. I could have almost convinced myself that she didn't remember, but then I saw her lips curl up, ever so slightly. She knew. She moved on, started talking about the football game on Friday and some party after. I lagged behind, digging my fingernails into my palms so hard my hands hurt. Then I stopped walking altogether.

“I forgot my uniform in my car,” I said, my voice flat. “I'll catch up with you.”

She was my best friend and should have known it was a lie. I never forgot anything. But she just flipped me this dumb little wave and kept bounce-walking away.

Tears blurred my vision as I turned and walked back down the hallway, breaking into a run in the parking lot. When I got to my car, I opened the door and collapsed inside, the leather burning my thighs from the heat. I wrapped my hands around the steering wheel, even though it set my palms on fire. I balled my hands into fists and pounded the wheel. I opened my mouth to scream.

Then my passenger door opened, and Trixie was in my car.

“Can you do me a favor,” she said, sliding down the seat, her skin making a *smuck* sound as it stuck to the leather. “Can you give me a ride? I just need you to drive. I just need to disappear for a while.”

It wasn’t a question. She told me to drive and slunk down farther, until her legs were bent under the dashboard. I noticed the scrapes on her knees, like a little kid who kept falling down. She kept her hands in her lap and her nails were badly chewed, and she looked at me out of the side of her eye as if to say *What are you waiting for?*

And for no reason other than that, I listened to her. I didn’t ask who she was or tell her to find her own ride or tell her to go to hell.

I drove.

I drove away from cheerleading practice, away from Jenny. I drove away from Robson High. I waited to feel guilty, but I never did.

She put her head down as we left the parking lot, and I wanted to ask her who she was hiding from, who she was running away from. Where we were supposed to be going.

But it didn't seem to matter. She hummed and tapped her fingers softly against her bare thigh, and I stared at the back of her head, at her dark roots and the peak of hair on the nape of her neck, and I wanted to go where a girl like that was going.

I drove past the beach, past downtown. I kept driving until she sat up and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Hey, do you want to get something to eat?" she said.

No *thank you*. No explanation. After all that, she was the one who had the question.

"Sure," I said, even though I wasn't hungry.

"Turn left at the intersection. There's a place that has the best cheeseburgers. Sorry, but I'm starving. I skipped lunch today." She stretched her arms over her head like a cat. I noticed the raised pink lines on her left wrist, under a throng of bracelets, but pretended I didn't. "I really owe you one. Let me buy you lunch."

I didn't tell her that I had eaten lunch hours ago, or that I didn't eat meat. That I hadn't eaten a cheeseburger since I turned twelve and Mom watched a documentary about how eating meat was evil. I thought about my cheerleading uniform waiting in my locker, how a cheeseburger would make it that much harder to squeeze into.

"Sure," I said. Trixie had reduced me to one-syllable answers.

"Seriously," she said. "Whatever you like, I'll buy it for you. What's your favorite food?"

I realized nobody had asked me that in years. "Salad," I said instinctively, because that's what Jenny and Alison would say.

The corners of her mouth turned up. “Come on. Salad sucks. What’s your real favorite food?”

I stared down at my patchwork jeans, the ones I had deconstructed and put back together myself. Jenny thought they were ugly, but suddenly I didn’t care what she thought.

“Chocolate,” I said, the very word filling me up. “Chocolate anything.”

She broke out in a huge grin. “They have the best chocolate milkshakes at this place. See, it’s perfect.” She paused. “I’m Trixie, by the way.”

“I’m—”

“Fiona, right? I’ve seen you around.”

I stifled a smile. She had seen me, and that seemed important somehow. Maybe because nobody else did.

“Yeah. I’m Fiona.”

I was Trixie’s getaway car that day, and I never told her so, but she was mine too.

# 6

WHEN I GET to school, I park my car in the student lot and make myself get out and walk through Robson's red double doors. I mostly keep my eyes fixed on the ground, because the ground is the safest place. If I keep staring down, I can pretend he's not here, beating heart and all, walking the same halls. And I can pretend that she is here, and that her heart really is still beating.

I bump into a bunch of people going the other way. I hear them mutter *Watch where you're going* and *Get out of the way* and then *Oh, that's the girl whose friend died*. Because that's how I'll now be remembered at Robson. The girl with the dead best friend.

Beau is around every corner, behind every open locker door, in front of every classroom. He's everywhere and nowhere. Then, without warning, he's actually right in front of me.

I don't expect him to say anything. He stares at me like a deer caught in the headlights. I stare back, my brain flooding with all the stuff that never happened: drooping white roses and broken glass and cold tile and the sound of confessions slipping out just to be sucked back in.

"Hey," he says. "I'm sorry."

I'm numb, too numb to think of something to say. What

does that mean, *I'm sorry*? What does it mean, coming from Beau Hunter? How many times has he said those two words in his lifetime, and how many people has he said them to?

Anger bubbles up so fast that it takes me by surprise, so hard that I want to punch him in the face to see if he bleeds. But I don't, because his voice is so fragile and he's still the Beau who took poetry books out of the library and got shy in big crowds, the Beau who brought me snow in Southern California, the Beau who offered me rides on his bike before any of us could drive, the Beau who gave me his chocolate milk at lunch. I don't want to hurt that Beau, because he wouldn't hurt me.

"I know what it's like," he says, "when someone just goes away." Then he clears his throat, jams his hands in his pockets, and walks in the other direction, all crumpled over, like he's trying to fold himself in half. I wait for him to turn around, and the fact that he does—only for a second, with his hair covering most of his face—is enough proof that I do still know him, at least a little bit.

Pressure builds behind my eyes and I count backward from ten, telling myself I'm not going to cry, not right here in the middle of the hallway, like a pathetic loser.

The next time I see him, he's opening a classroom door for Jenny, just like a perfect gentleman. I wonder if he'll go home with her after school, if he's taking her out on a date, or worse, if they're staying in and they'll be alone together. I told myself I could handle this but now I feel like I could shatter at any minute.

He looks around before entering the classroom after Jenny, but he doesn't see me. Or he does a really convincing job of pretending he doesn't.

Then again, he's good at that now.

# 7

*I WAS MAD at you the night of Alison's party. I was mad because things had changed between us. You had been lying to me, and I wanted to ask you a thousand questions about why.*

Why she really quit her job at the restaurant, and why she didn't think she could tell me. Why she was always messaging Jasper on her phone when she claimed they were just friends with benefits and nothing more.

I was mad at her, but I still clung to her like a pathetic piece of Saran Wrap. I used her as a shield, dogged her like a shadow, hoping she'd give me the power to remain invisible.

"What are you drinking tonight?" she said. "I'll get you something."

"Anything alcoholic," I said, because it didn't matter. I just wanted to be out of my body. When I slunk through the crowd, the whispers and stares started. I couldn't actually see or hear them, and maybe it was all in my head, but it didn't feel that way. I tried to read their lips, imagined what they were saying.

*Oh my god, she's so big.*

*How'd she let herself get like that?*

*How does anyone let themselves get like that?*

My eyes darted around the room. I was even angrier with



Trixie because she had made me wear the red dress and I knew I must have looked like an overstuffed sausage. She had picked this outfit and dragged me here and stuck me inside a nightmare. It was like she knew I wanted to talk to her and she kept slipping around it, dodging the sharp edges of my questions, taking me to the one place we couldn't be alone. Pushing me away and pulling me back, like seaweed caught in the tide.

I knew the bathroom was upstairs, first door on the left. I ran up the stairs. I was breathing hard when I got to the top, and I opened the bathroom door without knocking to make sure it was empty.

I should have knocked, because it wasn't empty.

The lights were on and Jenny was sitting on the counter, with her legs wrapped around Beau's waist. I saw Jenny's eyes fly open, watched her expression go from shock to annoyance and back to shock again. Then I made the mistake of making eye contact with Beau in the mirror.

I saw the one thing there that could break me: softness. He was still in there, the old Beau, the one I fell in love with, the one who looked for the quietest room at a party because he couldn't stand the noise.

I turned around and ran back down the stairs. And I hated Trixie the whole time. It was easy to blame it all on her. Because if she hadn't jumped in my car that day, I would have screamed and pounded the steering wheel and went back to cheerleading practice and lived my old life. Maybe it would have been me in there with my skinny jeans-clad legs wrapped around Beau Hunter. I would have been invited to Alison's party instead of just showing up. Maybe listening to

Trixie when she told me to drive was the biggest mistake of my life.

But when I got to the bottom of the stairs, she was waiting with two plastic cups. She thrust one out toward me and told me to drink it, and then raised her cup up to mine.

“Cheers,” she said, and my drink was so strong that I sputtered. “Hey, is something wrong? You look upset.”

“It’s fine.” I took another gulp of my drink. “Seriously.”

“Okay,” she said, dragging out the word. “You know you don’t have to lie to me, right?”

“I know. Everything’s fine.”

By the third drink, I could barely taste the alcohol. My head was spinning, but in the best possible way. I felt light, airy, uncomplicated.

Trixie was beside me, matching me drink for drink.

But when I think about it, she didn’t seem drunk at all.



THE WORST PART of starting senior year with no best friend isn't feeling alone. I was prepared to start the year without seeing Trixie in the halls, but that was in a world where I'd see her after school and tell her how horrible it was without her. But this new world is all phantom pain. It's the morbid sensation that she's still here, that any minute she'll spring out from behind an open locker door and ask me what I think of her purple lipstick, and I'll tell her it looks great on her, because it does, because somehow she can pull off everything that I never have the courage to try.

It's watching people move on, people who didn't know her and read the news about a missing girl—which she was, for forty-eight hours—then read the news about her suicide and got the Talk from their parents about being open and honest. I'm sharing the hallways with people who will never question the idea that Trixie Heller walked into the ocean and drowned, because Trixie Heller was wallpaper to them, a girl who didn't smile much and kept to herself. Trixie Heller was a cautionary tale, a tragedy. By the time they start college, they'll forget all about her because other tragedies will be layered on top—a bad haircut or a bad breakup. I want to grab them by the shoulders, leap on their backs, and tell them

who she was. That she was wickedly funny. That she was just plain wicked sometimes. That she had great taste in clothes. That the ugly JERSEY GIRL tank top she left behind on the beach, folded neatly on top of her flip-flops, was not really her at all. That the fact she wore it that night feels like a message.

The locker we shared is mine now. We cleared it out together at the end of last year because the school makes all the students dump their locker contents before summer starts. As a joke, we left a picture of us inside a magnetic frame. Except, when I open the locker door now, the frame is all that remains. The picture, one of the only photos existing of the two of us together—taken by Trixie’s dad on her last birthday—is gone. Somebody must have taken it, but I can’t think who would want it.

I turn around like I’m being watched, and I am being watched. Jasper is lurking by the door to the art room—okay, he’s only standing there, but everything about Jasper’s posture is creepy. He hunches, like his shoulders have given up on trying and decided to just cave in. Plus, his face is etched in a permanent scowl, like he has never had a happy thought. Maybe he hasn’t. Maybe his whole life has been one long series of disappointments.

Maybe we have that in common.

I feel like I should say something to him, that we should try to find some shared ground. Because he’s the only other person in this school who actually knew Trixie—who knew her laugh lost its sound when she thought something was really funny, who knew she had zero patience for slow walkers and slow talkers and, most of all, slow drivers, even though she was always the passenger because she never got her license.

He’s the only other person in this school who might not

believe she actually walked into the ocean on purpose and let the tide carry her away, because she wouldn't have had the patience for that either.

But when I open my mouth, hoping the right words are there, it doesn't matter. He's already gone.

# 9

*YOU KNEW MY mom didn't like you, and you didn't care. You were used to the judgment, wore it as easily as your clothes.*

Trixie wasn't anything like Jenny, who was forever trying to suck up to my mom. Always complimenting her on how young she looked and asking for her vegetarian lasagna recipe and inviting her to watch movies with us. *Hi, Ms. Fontaine. You look nice today, Ms. Fontaine.* That just wasn't Trixie.

Trixie came back to my house with me after we ate cheeseburgers on that first day. I didn't invite her—she just got back into my car, like we had already made plans.

“Can we stop at that convenience store quickly? I just want to get some snacks. I know we just ate, but I'm always hungry.” She patted her flat stomach, and before she went into the store, pulled a blue baseball cap out of her purse and jammed it on her head, a clumsy disguise. It was too big for her, as if it belonged to a boy.

I could tell Mom disapproved the second her eyes skirted over Trixie. She saw the bag of potato chips in Trixie's hand and the ring in her lip, and then she looked right at me and asked why I wasn't at practice.

“It was canceled,” I said. I was surprised at how easily the lie slid out. It had been waiting to escape the whole time.

Trixie never asked what kind of practice I was supposed to be at. She never asked me why I wasn't there. The way I saw it, she didn't need to.

"You look like your mom," she said matter-of-factly when we were upstairs in my room, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"I guess," I said. "I've never even seen a picture of my dad. He split before I was born."

I don't know why I told her that. I never told anyone that. Jenny and Alison both had parents who were still together, who wanted them home to eat dinner as a family. I felt embarrassed that I was different, and I waited for Trixie to judge me.

"People suck sometimes," she said, staring up at the ceiling.

"How about you? Do you look like your mom or your dad?"

"I don't know." She shoveled a handful of chips into her mouth and wiped her hand on her shorts. "I'm adopted. My birth mom got rid of me."

I felt like an idiot, but maybe we were alike. We had both been abandoned by somebody.

"Is this what you're all about?" she said, touching my jeans with her fingers and pointing to the sewing machine in the corner. "You make clothes?"

I'd never heard it put like that before. *Is this what you're all about?* But I just nodded, hoping she didn't think it was lame. I could tell Jenny didn't get it. She liked to shop at the mall, where everything looked the same.

"Cool," Trixie said, running her fingers over one of the patches. "Maybe you could make me a pair."

My cheeks burned with something that felt an awful lot like pride. I wanted to be alone with that emotion, wrapped up in that feeling, before it went away.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Trixie said.

“No,” I said too quickly. I thought about Beau, about the day we met, the spark I felt so vividly that it was like I stuck my finger in an electric socket. Our texts and bike rides and one almost-kiss at the end of sophomore year. I thought about Jenny in the hallway, the way she wouldn’t quite look at me. *He asked me out. It’s not like I could say no.*

“Good,” she said. “They’re overrated. Once they go and fall in love with you, everything gets ruined.”

I didn’t know who she was talking about, and she wasn’t even looking at me anymore. She was staring at the photo collage on my wall with a quirky little half smile. I had made it the summer before, printed pictures of me and Jenny and Alison and cut letters out of magazines to spell *best friends* and *love* and *laugh*. Suddenly, I was embarrassed by all of it. The collage, my lavender walls, my canopy bed. I had a stuffed rabbit on my pillow and collector Barbies in unopened boxes on my bookshelf. The whole room was so babyish and felt too small with Trixie in it.

“So I take it you don’t have a boyfriend either?” I was desperate to say something to make her stop looking around, but it felt like the wrong thing to say.

She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling and sighed, this huge shuddering sound. “I had this thing with my lab partner. But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

I grabbed a chip out of the bag and popped it in my mouth. The salt stung my tongue and the crunching sound



drowned out all the noise in my head. Then I ate another chip, and another. I knew I shouldn't have been eating them, and that made them taste even better somehow.

"This guy I hooked up with, he keeps texting me," she said finally, standing up and leaning against my windowsill. "That's why I needed to get away for a bit. I needed some space. You know?"

I nodded, even though I didn't know. I hadn't ever hooked up with anyone.

"Your lab partner?" I said.

She lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out the window. I knew Mom would smell it and I'd get in trouble later, but I didn't care.

"We should have lunch together more often," she said. "I know a great place we can go next time. You'll love it."

She barely knew me, but it seemed like she knew me better than anyone. Well enough to know what I would love before I did.

# 10

TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS ARE made when I'm in homeroom. One is about cheerleading tryouts. The other is about Patricia Heller's memorial service, to be held on Friday. Trixie hated her real name: Patricia. Nobody called her that, not even her dad.

Both of my old lives, back-to-back over a crackling intercom. It's almost comical, the universe conspiring to make this day a wreck. I ask Mr. Hanson for a hall pass, which I use to go to the bathroom and lock myself in a stall and curl up in a ball in front of the toilet.

If it were me—if I were the one who was gone—she would have found the evidence. She would be following my trail, chasing the bread crumbs even as I swept them away, because she would've known where I was hiding. Maybe she left me a trail, and I never knew her well enough to follow it.

I wonder what she would think if she knew I was covering up someone's tracks from the night she disappeared. I wonder what she would think if she knew they weren't hers.

My eyes sting and my hairline is damp with sweat. I lean against the wall, resting my forehead on the toilet paper dispenser. I consider what Mom said this morning when she

hugged me before I walked out the door: *It's never too late to start fresh, sweetie.*

I remember how Mom's voice sounded when she got back from Tokyo, when she was on the phone with Aunt Leslie and I overheard her. Maybe she meant for me to.

"She's always hanging around with Trixie," she said as I listened at her bedroom door. "She's a bad influence. All they do is drive around and eat junk food. And I think she's been drinking too."

I had held my breath and imagined what Aunt Leslie must have been saying on the other end. Hopefully something in my defense, but I knew the mention of drinking would shake her up because of her own history with it. Then Mom exhaled deeply. I could almost see her face, the lines deepening on her forehead. "I'm worried about her. She needs to find other friends. She can't just be spending all her time with this one girl."

I had turned around and silently snuck away, my heart pounding. I was sick with worry, sick and angry. She couldn't separate me from my best friend. She couldn't take away the one person who understood me. She wouldn't.

The bathroom door swings open. I wrap my arms around my knees and stay quiet.

"It's emotional eating," a girl's voice says. "It happened to my aunt when she and my uncle split up. She used to be skinny. Now she can barely walk down her driveway."

I cover my mouth with my hand. I'd know that voice anywhere. High-pitched and airy, like wind chimes. Alison James, captain of the cheerleading squad, my former friend. If anyone is an emotional eater, it's her. She's the girl who

once cried over the perfect chocolate cake Jenny and I made for her fifteenth birthday.

She's also the girl who threw the last party Trixie ever attended.

"No, it started before her body changed," another voice says. Jenny. "She started acting different last year. It was like she was brainwashed or something."

"Maybe they were lesbians," Alison says in a hushed voice. "They spent basically every minute together."

I dig my fingernails into my palm so hard that they leave little red crescent moons.

"I don't think so," Jenny says. "Trixie was fucking that weird guy in my geography class. Jasper. Remember, the one I told you about? They sat in the back row and, I swear, he had his hand up her skirt during class."

*Liar, I want to shout. Trixie never wore skirts.*

"That's messed up," Alison says, and I can tell by the lilt in her voice that she's tilting her head up, probably applying makeup like she used to before practice, even though she'd just sweat it right off.

"Whatever," Jenny says. "Plus, I saw them in the smoke pit once practically doing it. Just gross."

"I wish we could help her," Alison says, smacking her lips together.

"Yeah, except she's dead now," Jenny says, and the word is a dull thud in the air.

"Not Trixie," Alison says. "Fiona."

"Look, not to sound mean, but she's not our problem either. This is senior year. I'm not getting dragged into someone else's drama. I have enough drama of my own."

A snapping sound, probably Alison closing her powder compact. "Beau?" she says gently, and the word sounds so tender that I almost want to barge out of the stall and hug her. Alison isn't a mean girl. Alison cares about people. Maybe she even cares about me.

"He's still drinking a lot," Jenny says. "And after your party, I don't even know how to bring it up without him going off on me. He said he was sorry, but I never know which version of him I'm going to get, and it's scary."

Maybe Alison doesn't, but I hear the excitement in her voice, buried under whatever else she's trying to layer on top of it. Jenny hasn't changed a single bit. She just loves the idea of tragedy: the romance of a boy wrestling with a ghost, the drama Beau brings to her stale little life. And I hate her for so many reasons, but that's the biggest one of all.

Alison drops her voice to a whisper. "Is he still involved in, you know, that shady stuff?"

"No," Jenny says, and I bet she's shaking her head adamantly, her bangs flying across her forehead. "No, he gave all that up."

A shoe taps on the floor. "I just don't really get what you see in him. He's not a good boyfriend. He doesn't do anything nice for you and doesn't make an effort around us. And he was psycho at my party. Like, someone-should-have-called-the-cops psycho. That would have been the last straw for me."

"You don't know him like I do," Jenny says, and her words are knives, carving me up. "You don't know what he says to me when we're alone. He loves me. He needs me."

"Maybe that's the problem," Alison says, shuffling toward the door. "He needs you too much. And you're starting to need him just as badly."

When they're gone and the door swings shut behind them, I want to scream. They think they know everything, that they have it all figured out. The whole story, the lie. Just like last year, with Toby Hunter. The rumors, collecting like dust in corners. The air foggy with bullshit, so thick that people were choking on it.

I get up and wash my hands and take my time walking back to class. I pretend to pay attention to Mr. Hanson, but when he asks us to write down our thoughts on some Shakespeare scene he just read out loud, I put something else on my page. Something I need to write down to actually believe. Because Jenny is wrong and Alison is wrong and my mom is wrong and everyone else is wrong. Trixie didn't walk into the water and drown. She wouldn't do that. She might not be here, but she isn't dead, and I'm the only one who can prove it.

The words, scrawled deep and heavy in my notebook, are their own truth:

REASONS WHY TRIXIE DISAPPEARED



*THERE'S PROBABLY A reason why people were so eager to believe that man's story about how you walked into the water. There's probably a reason they gave up so easily. Actually, several reasons. But the first one came from before I ever even met you.*

His name was Toby Hunter. Everyone at Robson High knows that name, and now everyone in Morrison Beach, California, does too. He became the poster child for suicide, the example of how you don't always see the warning signs. I'll never know the whole story of Toby Hunter and why he did it, because I didn't know the real Toby Hunter. I only knew the version everyone else knew. The football star, the captain of the swim team, the guy dating the most beautiful girl in school. The guy who was supposed to go on to become president or something. Clean-cut, nice, smart. Everything a girl wants in a boyfriend. Except, I didn't want Toby. I wanted the other Hunter brother.

Toby Hunter was going places. Until he went to the last place anyone expected: he left a party drunk and jumped off the Morrison Beach Pier.

I wasn't at that party. I was supposed to go, but I had

stayed home with food poisoning, puking like clockwork every five minutes. Later, Jenny told me in hushed tones about the fight Toby had with his brother, Beau, right before he stormed off. He was wild, she said. Probably drunk or high or both. Nobody tried to stop him, because everybody figured he just needed to cool off. Nobody thought he would do what he did.

Three people saw Toby jump off the pier. One went in after him and nearly drowned. The waves were too big, the current too powerful. It was immediately ruled a suicide, a tragedy, a terrible waste, even though Toby's body still hasn't been found.

The rumors started immediately too. Maybe he just fell, lost his balance. Those were the people in denial.

Then there were the other people. The ones who said he wasn't dead at all. The ones who said he was too good a swimmer to drown started circulating theories about why he would stage his own death. Like, he wasn't dead but was working on an oil rig in Canada. Or that he moved into the Ozark Mountains and grew a beard and farmed goats. And while the truth sank, the rumors sputtered to the surface. Completely out of control. All of a sudden, everyone seemed to know someone who knew someone who had spotted Toby somewhere in the world. Nobody wanted to let Toby Hunter rest in peace.

It's different with Trixie. She mostly kept to herself, didn't have a thousand friends. People flung words at her, tried to stick labels on her like tape. *Loner. Weirdo. Trouble.* She'd snuck out of Alison's house like a shadow after everyone else had left, except the ones too drunk to know where they were.



She didn't say goodbye to me. It's easy for everyone to believe she walked into the ocean and drowned. *The signs were all there*, they'd said. *A classic case of somebody who wanted out.*

The signs *were* all there. But not the signs everyone thinks, the ones tossed out like a last-minute life preserver from somebody who planned to die.

Trixie had all the signs of somebody who wanted people to think that.

# 12

THE LIST IS in my pocket as I drive to Dr. Rosenthal's office. I'm speeding, in a rush. I was late to leave school because Mrs. Moss, Robson's guidance counselor, insisted on cornering me after class and telling me her office was always open if I needed to talk. Like I'd really tell Moss anything. Her eyes would go wide and her jaw would drop if I told her what I did at the party, and who I did it with.

The list is in my pocket but I can hear the words in my head. My blocky handwriting in bullet points like I'm studying for a test. Except, if this is a test, it's the first one I'm failing.

## REASONS WHY TRIXIE DISAPPEARED

I'm wondering if the list is total bullshit, if she really did do what that man said he saw, when I slam on my brakes to narrowly avoid hitting someone walking through a red light. My chest tightens and my pulse races and I raise my hand to pound the horn, but then I see who I almost hit. Or rather, who almost hit me. The same person who stared at me across the hall today.

Jasper Hart, the only name currently on my list.

He doesn't even look to see who almost hit him, just raises an arm in the air and waves it, like he's conducting a

symphony in traffic. Then I see that he has earbuds in and think that maybe he is.

Somebody behind me honks and I slowly inch forward. Jasper is on the sidewalk now, and when I see him cut the corner down a side street, I make a hasty decision in the form of a sharp right-hand turn. I recognize this street because Alison's house is on it.

I look at the clock on the car radio and know I'll never make it to Dr. Rosenthal's, but suddenly, I couldn't care less. He's just going to tell me to start eating better and maybe give me a lecture, some canned bullshit I already know. None of it matters.

I stay a good distance behind Jasper and watch his lanky figure. He's wearing a long black jacket, despite the heat, and it swings from side to side like a pendulum. He takes giant strides and periodically snaps his fingers, and I chug alongside the curb, hoping I'll figure out a plan as I go.

When he stops suddenly, I do too. I hunch against the back of my seat and slide down as he stops in front of a driveway.

But he doesn't walk up the driveway. He turns around and walks right toward me instead. I stare at my key in the ignition. I should just drive away and avoid him for the rest of the year. For the rest of my life. But I'm paralyzed, either out of fear or curiosity or a thick mixture of both. And it's too late, because he's beside my window, rapping his knuckles against it, motioning for me to roll it down. His face is completely expressionless.

I roll the window down and he rests his forearms there until our faces are inches apart. "Following me?" he says. I can't tell if he's pissed off or amused or both. "I never would have presumed I was interesting enough for a girl to follow."

I suddenly wish the plate of glass were still between our faces. He's too close without it. Close enough for me to see his dark eyes and the fringe of thick black eyelashes casting a shadow on his cheeks. Close enough for me to see the smattering of acne scars, stark against the whiteness of his skin. His mouth is wide and his lips have a reddish tinge, like he has been drinking fruit punch. Trixie told me he was a good kisser, but to me he looks more like a vampire, ready to suck the life out of everything.

"I didn't see you at the funeral," I say when I finally find my voice.

Jasper bites his lip and stares at the ground. I notice the top of his head for the first time, which I never saw before because he's so tall. Blond hair is growing in at the roots, a stark contrast to the black hair hanging down to his shoulders. Blond roots and dark hair, the total opposite of Trixie.

"I don't do well with grief. I'm better at expressing it by myself."

I nod like I understand, but I don't. It's a strange thing to say. Nobody deals well with grief. Nobody knows what to say at funerals. Jasper makes grief sound like an art form.

He looks directly at me, which is unnerving, like he knows all my secrets. "So, I'm intrigued. Why are you following me?" he says slowly, enunciating each word.

I squirm in my seat, wishing I had just gone to see Dr. Rosenthal like I was supposed to. Being prodded and judged couldn't possibly be any worse than this.

"Because I don't think she's dead," I say, my voice coming out in a high-pitched squeak.

He says nothing and I'm sure he's going to say that I'm delusional, that I'm just sad and lonely and making stuff up.

Then he glances around, like he's checking to see if we're being watched, and walks around to the passenger side of my car and hops in. Just like Trixie did that day. Uninvited. He leans over the console and his hair flops in his eyes.

“Well,” he says, his voice almost a whisper, his hands pressed together like he's praying. “If she's not dead, where in the world is she?”

# 13

*YOU WEREN'T A part of my life in sophomore year. I had probably walked past you countless times, but I never saw you once.*

The first day of sophomore year, before I knew Trixie existed, I wasn't searching for a girl who was presumed dead. I was searching for Jenny and Alison, who were supposed to meet me outside the school's front doors. We weren't eating in the cafeteria that day. We wanted to celebrate the first year of not being freshmen—of being higher up on the high school food chain—by having lunch away from school. None of us could drive, so we planned to walk to some little place near the beach that Jenny claimed had good taco salad.

I waited for them, trying not to feel annoyed by the fact that it was always me doing the waiting, never them, and that I always seemed slightly separate from them, that they were a tighter unit together. But it was fine, because we were sophomores and we were eating lunch off campus and when the wind lifted my hair off my neck, it felt like freedom somehow.

"Are you going home?" Beau came up behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder. He always seemed to find excuses to do that, to touch me in ways I would barely remember

when I was home alone later, when I would wonder if it had actually happened. “I was going to sit on the benches over there and eat lunch, if you wanted to join.”

Beau always brought his lunch to school, which was endearing somehow. His mom packed him and Toby a brown bag every day with the same turkey sandwich, yogurt, apple, and baggie of pretzels. Sometimes she added a date square if she had baked that weekend. I tried not to think about what it meant that I had memorized Beau’s lunch.

“I would,” I said. I considered blowing off Jenny and Alison. Would they really care if I didn’t show up? As we would wait on our taco salad—I always ended up ordering whatever they ordered—we’d have the same conversation we had the week before and the week before that. Alison would talk about some new diet she was trying or some shampoo she was using and Jenny would talk about whatever boy she was in love with. I’d listen and provide advice, because that was my role.

“Great,” he said. “Maybe we can—”

But I never got to hear about what we could maybe do, because Jenny chose that moment to bounce over, Alison trailing behind her, staring at her phone.

“Hey, girl, you ready to go? I can’t miss any of fifth period!” Jenny grabbed my hand and practically pulled me along, as if they had been waiting for me, not the other way around.

I should have told them I changed my mind, that I was staying at school and eating lunch on a bench with Beau. But for some reason I didn’t. I thought Beau might read too much into it, me ditching my friends for him. I knew Jenny and Alison would read too much into it. I hadn’t told them yet

how I felt about him, because I had barely admitted it to myself.

“No worries,” Beau said. “Another time.”

But that other time didn’t happen. There was always something else, someone else, some other plan. I still wonder how things would have been different if I had stayed.



# 14

I WONDER IF they held hands, if behind closed doors Trixie and Jasper acted like a couple. I wonder if he ever got tired of her pretending he didn't exist in public. If they came back to his house during the lunch hours that Trixie didn't show up for. If she got excited to see Jasper the way I used to get excited when I knew Beau was going to be at a party or a game.

It's weird, going into Jasper's house and walking up the stairs to his room. It's my first time ever going upstairs with a boy. It feels wrong that I'm going with this boy, Trixie's boy, like cheating and getting away with it.

Jasper's bedroom barely looks lived in. A twin bed, dark blue walls, plain black curtains. A desk with nothing on it but a laptop. There's nowhere to sit but on his bed, so I stand.

"So, this is interesting," he says, sitting on the edge of his bed. "You don't think she's gone. But someone saw her walk into the water. And there was a funeral."

"With no body," I say so quickly that my words trip over each other. "I think she wants everyone to believe she's dead. But she's not. I know she's not. And you're the only person who really knew her besides me, so I need your help."

He lies back on the bed and folds his hands in his lap.

Trixie must have been in that bed at least a dozen times, but it doesn't look big enough for two people.

"Somebody saw her," he says, tapping the back of his head lightly against the wall. "That man saw her. You can't really argue with that. And I'm sure you know that she couldn't swim."

I bite the inside of my cheek. In my head, I correct him. *Can't swim*, present tense. I do know that. Trixie and I spent so much time at the beach during the summer, but she never once went in the water. I was relieved that she couldn't swim, because it meant I never had to put on a bathing suit and go in either.

"This might sound crazy," I say slowly, rolling the words on my tongue. "But don't you think that his story might have been a little too perfect? Like, he just happened to be there to watch her walk in and didn't try to stop her? And didn't try to call the police?"

"He said he did try to call," Jasper says. "From a pay phone. But it wasn't working, because the line was cut."

Obviously, Jasper had memorized all the articles in the newspaper just like I did. "Exactly. Too perfect."

Jasper stares up at the ceiling. I follow his eyes and notice he has those little plastic glow-in-the-dark stars stuck there, and they seem out of place.

"That doesn't seem like enough of a reason," he says. "I mean, I don't want her to be gone either. I miss her too. But I saw this coming." His voice gets lower. "She had scars. She never talked about them. But I saw them, you know?"

I nod. I do know. I wish I would have asked her about those scars when I had the chance. I wish she would have

had the chance to finish what she wanted to tell me that day in her backyard before her dad interrupted.

“Plus, we know that the guy on the beach saw her walk in,” Jasper continues. “Because he described her perfectly.”

“Too perfectly,” I say, before I can stop myself. “Right down to the stitching on her backpack.”

“So what?” Jasper says. “He probably had to. You don’t just forget about watching somebody die. It becomes one of the defining moments of your life.”

I’m starting to hate the way he talks, like he’s the human equivalent of a Rubik’s cube. Cryptic and hard to put together.

“So, if he really was up on the sand, how could he possibly see the stitching on her backpack? He’s close enough to see that, but not to call out to her or grab her?”

Jasper narrows his eyes. “I don’t know, Fiona. What are you saying? That he made it all up and secretly kidnapped her or something? Sold her into human trafficking?”

“No. I’m saying that he knew exactly what to say.”

Jasper crosses his arms and exhales deeply. “You lost me.”

I clear my throat before I can chicken out, before I can take it back.

“He knew exactly what to say. Almost like somebody put the words in his mouth.”