

Y O U N G

W I D  W S

C L U B

PROLOGUE

IT'S ONE OF THOSE FLAWLESS, COTTON-CANDY-cloud days.

Noah fidgets in his favorite faded button-down. We stand near the water, the crowd a half-moon around us, blurry at the edges. Noah smiles and holds my hands and I forget for a minute all the people who are missing:

My mom.

My dad.

My family.

Noah is family now.

The officiant, a shaggy-haired friend of Noah's father, says words between other words I don't hear, words like *forever* and *better* and *worse*. Noah digs in his pocket for the rings. The cool gold band slides easily over my finger. His gets caught at the knuckle. I smile and push harder.

We laugh.

Inside, I hear a voice saying the clichéd things I never thought I'd care about hearing:

We'll have our whole lives to be together.

Real life starts now.

This is just the beginning.

Over and over, as if a part of me needs convincing.

We kiss and I feel myself floating.

I see us, barefoot, pieces of our hair tangling together in gusts of the sea-scented breeze. I see those around us clapping, cheering, leaning in like magnets. I see us all like tiny figurines, trapped in a snow globe, frozen and happy, suspended in glass.

What I didn't know then was that it wasn't the beginning.

It was the beginning of the end.

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Six weeks later, the glass is shattered.

Six weeks later, Noah is dead.

ONE

ON THE MORNING OF YOUR HUSBAND'S FUNERAL,
under no circumstances should you be:

- a. Hungover.
- b. Cocooned in a sleeping bag that smells like
Jolly Ranchers.
- c. Seventeen.
- d. All of the above.

My phone chimes, a series of cascading bells meant to lure me peacefully from sleep. I swipe groggily at the screen and the phone slips under my clumsy fingers, skidding across the floor.

I unpeel my cramped legs from the sleeping bag I found in a box in Noah's basement. It's child-size, and judging by the

lingering candy scent, I'm guessing Noah hasn't used it since the summer he went to band camp in New Hampshire. It wasn't actually called "band camp," it was something fancy sounding, like Improvisational Techniques and Compositional Theory on the Mountaintops, something he won a scholarship for and pretended to hate, even though I could tell from his rambling letters and kitschy postcards that all music, all day was basically his idea of heaven.

I wonder if I could trick myself into thinking that that's where he is now. Back at camp with the Jamaican chef and the bunkmates who never showered and the endless jam sessions, where he learned to tie-dye T-shirts and start a fire and write his own songs.

The sun screams through the bare, open windows. Curtains were my responsibility. There was a time—it was just last week but it may as well have been the dark ages—when I thought about going to the fabric store and asking Noah's mother, Molly, for help with the antique sewing machine she keeps in her office. Noah insisted he'd like anything I chose. I knew he just didn't care about curtains, but I was happy to have a task. It was our deal. Noah and his dad, Mitch, would build the house. Molly would help me decorate it.

Instead, I'm stuck with a half-finished shell, a glorified cabin with windows and walls and not much else. A bed I can't look at. A bathroom with no sink. My dead husband's kid-size sleeping bag in a puddle at my feet.

I rub my fists into the throbbing sockets of my eyes and peer through the window, factory-issued stickers still glued to the outside. It's a clear shot across the pebbled driveway to Mitch and Molly's house; the Jeep is gone but Mitch's truck is still here, which means they drove together. Mitch left a note last night asking if I wanted a ride, but there was something about carpooling with Noah's parents to his funeral that felt wrong. It's bad enough I'm living in their backyard. The least I can do is drive myself.

I hurry to get dressed, pulling one of Noah's flannel shirts from a half-packed suitcase on the floor and buttoning up the faded jeans I've worn for the last four days in a row. I grab my keys from a hook on the wall, trying not to see Noah, hunched over and happily focused, as he nailed it in. Trying not to hear the soft scratch of his voice, reminding me that it's harder to lose things when you have a place to put them.

Outside, the air is sticky and full. It feels threatening, like it might rain, and I wish that it would. There's not a cloud in the sky and it seems unfair. This day should be dark. The sun should beat it. Instead, it's showing off. An obnoxious blow-hard, a relentless, uninvited sparkle.

Across the street, a screen door slams. Mrs. Hodgson thumps across the rickety wooden deck, wrinkled hands cupped around her mouth. Her hair is wild and unbrushed and she's wearing thick, wool socks with sandals. "Birdie!" she shouts, calling for her three-hundred-year-old fluffball of

a cat. I imagine the cat, perched high in a tree, or nestled in the damp space beneath the foundation; I imagine the harried lilt in Mrs. Hodgson's voice when at last she hears a rustle; I imagine the sweet, scurried reunion they'll have on the steps, and while I'm imagining I remember, once again, how wrong it is that life is a thing that still happens.

Not my life. My life hasn't happened for days. Not since the morning Noah didn't wake up. He'd come in late from rehearsal at Max's the night before. I listened to him fumble around in the dark. I felt him kiss the top of my head. I heard him nuzzle the pillow the way he always does—did—to find the place where his head fit the best. And at some point between then and when I found him, after breakfast—half a banana on toast with peanut butter and honey—his heart had stopped beating.

Most of the time it feels like mine stopped, too. But I'm still here. Mitch and Molly are still here. Mrs. Hodgson, Birdie, sleeping bags, Jolly Ranchers. All of it still exists in the universe, pointless and oblivious and taking up space. I start Noah's car and listen to the engine wheeze, thinking for the thousandth time this week that I'd happily trade it all in. I'd live in an empty cardboard box and never see another person again if it meant I could go back to the way things were, when Noah was alive and I could sleep and the rest of the world wasn't such an asshole.

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The church lot is packed. Hatchback Subarus and rusty pickups and older-model Volkswagens are shoved up against each other, scaling the grassy hill and clogging the narrow roads. I do a lap, give up, and find a spot at the playground across the street. The park is also jammed—the early Saturday morning crowd. A couple of kids are swinging and two boys in matching fleece coats are pushing the empty carousel while their parents sit on benches and ignore them.

Ahead, I see Ross and Eugene loping across the church gardens. They're each wearing pieces of what looks like the same suit: sweaty gray herringbone that definitely doesn't belong to either of them. But they look okay. Better than I do. Better than any of us should after staying up all night in Ross's basement, pretending to rehearse but mostly just staring at our hands and talking about how disgusting it is that Noah's gone and we're not.

Traffic slows and I cross the street without looking. Anybody who is supposed to be here is already inside. The rest of the cars are blatantly rubbernecking, curious drivers biting their nails, shaking their heads. I can practically hear them telling each other whatever they think they know, in hushed, capital-letter tones. *Did You Hear? Mitch Connelly's Kid. Was It Drugs? Just Awful. Can. You. Imagine?*

Gossip on an island bounces around like pinballs in a machine, fact and fiction whipping up and down and around. As a former-runaway-turned-teen-bride-turned-widow, I'm something of an expert on gossip: how it starts, when it's real,

and when it's a convoluted mess of nothing even resembling an original kernel of truth.

The truth, in this case, is unbelievably dumb. Noah's heart stopped beating. That's it. He didn't have a "condition." No drugs or abnormalities were found in the autopsy, which, it turns out, is a thing that happens to real people, not just the unlucky victims on *Law & Order SVU*. The on-call emergency room doctor, a lanky man with a wispy comb-over, explained that it was probably something called Sudden Arrhythmia Death Syndrome. *SADS*. That's the official acronym. There was no way of knowing, and nothing that could have been done. It was, as far as we know, just SAD.

The inside of the church is quiet and smells like coffee and gardenias. Flowers are everywhere, exploding in large bouquets from the end of each pew and potted at the front on either side of the coffin. My knees get tingly, and I think for a second that I might pass out and also that I wish I hadn't worn jeans. Nobody else is wearing jeans and the last thing I need is another reason to be stared at.

Noah would have worn jeans. Noah always wore jeans. Secondhand jeans, with rips and tears and awkward hemlines, that somehow always fit him just right. He wore jeans to our wedding. They were his Fancy Wedding Jeans. We got them together at the J. Crew outlet on the mainland, dark wash with white stitching on the pockets. He pretended he was going to iron them. Nobody we knew owned an iron,

but he kept the jeans folded over a wooden hanger in our makeshift closet, before and after. He never wore them again.

I look for a seat in the back but there isn't one. There isn't an open seat anywhere. People are stacked three deep against the walls, and I think about squeezing between them, but the first person I see is Miss Walsh, my old AP English teacher. Not *old* like she's old, she's actually really young and has this amazing curly red hair and I probably would have liked her and her class if I hadn't been so committed to dropping out of school altogether. But I was, and when I told her she did a lot of squeezing my shoulder and looking disappointed and asking if I was sure, and now I can't imagine having to stand in the same room with her and all of these other people and a coffin.

Pastor Paul is hunched over Mitch and Molly in the front row, and all three of them turn to wave me up. I haven't been in a church since Dad and Juliet got married, and even then I spent most of the ceremony outside.

Nothing in me is prepared for the long, silent walk up the center aisle, my stupid flip-flops slapping against the dull wooden floor. It feels like a nightmare where you're naked in front of a bunch of strangers, only instead of strangers it's everyone I've ever known, and instead of being naked I'm just a girl in flip-flops who wants to be dead.

Last Saturday Noah and I went out to breakfast, the two of us. Molly usually makes a big deal out of weekend breakfasts,

but we wanted to do something special. We were celebrating our one-month wedding anniversary. We went to the Tavern, got cinnamon French toast and eggs Florentine and shared them both. We said we'd make a weekly thing of it. A Saturday breakfast date.

Mitch shuffles on the bench and makes room for me beside him. He's wearing what appears to be every article of black clothing he owns, all at once. A black vest and a black turtleneck and black dress slacks. Molly sits to my right, swathed in a black skirt and black sweater and even sheer black pantyhose, as if the neutral tone of her bare legs would have been an insult to the memory of her son.

For some messed-up reason this almost makes me laugh. I don't laugh. I sit, and Molly hands me a crumpled tissue and I look at the open casket for a second to make sure all of the laughing feelings are gone. From this angle I can see only the tops of his hands, folded over his belt in a way that looks uncomfortable and absurd, probably because he never, ever wore a belt. I can almost see the glint of his ring, and my jaw goes slack and I think I might puke. I look away and force myself to believe in a parallel universe, where Noah and I are holding menus and ordering coffee and thinking about all of the Saturdays we have left.

Pastor Paul walks to the podium and says something that sounds like a greeting and something else about these difficult times. He says it's okay to have questions for God, but I don't have any questions. What I have is a half-used tissue

and two dangling flip-flops and a lump in my throat the size of a small continent.

I swallow, but instead of going away the continent morphs and gets bigger, like it's oozing between my lungs and up into my throat, and suddenly, too late, I know that it's not a lump. It's puke, actual puke, and it's not going away.

I claw at my mouth with my hands and I shuffle back down the aisle, trying not to run or make too much noise or throw up on my flip-flops, which are flipping and flopping so obnoxiously that I think Pastor Paul stops talking, though I'm sure I couldn't hear him even if he didn't.

I stare ahead at the swirled stained glass of the chapel doors and push through them, the idiot sun mocking me all the way to a cluster of soon-to-be-sullied hydrangea. I fold in half and let it all go, or what I hope is all of it; anything that was ever a part of me today, proof that this happened, this is happening, a record that I'm here: I bend and I retch and I heave, until it's gone.

TWO

Six Months Later

“WELL THAT WAS A BUST.” MY HALF BROTHER, ALBIE, straddles the arm of the sofa, chocolate frosting crusted on his chin, a plastic bow and arrow balanced menacingly across his lap.

Dad and Juliet’s living room, normally catalogue-ready with embroidered pillows and matching throws and color-coordinated toy bins stacked neatly in the corner, is now a mess of discarded party hats and scraps of wrapping paper, the carcass of a lobster-shaped piñata spewing candy guts across the geometric pattern of Juliet’s favorite rug. The detritus of a six-year-old’s birthday party.

“Looked like fun to me,” I say, wading through a valley of plastic toy guns that, along with the bow and arrow, I know will be quietly spirited to the basement later tonight after Albie is asleep.

“It wasn’t,” Albie says. “It was too crazy. I already forget what happened.”

I wad up a handful of wrapping paper, bears in bow ties riding unicycles, and toss it into the open trash bag I’ve been dragging around the wreckage. Upstairs the bath is running, and Dad is trying to convince Gracie not to wear her tutu in the water. The tutu was a gift from Albie, in the sense that Juliet bought it and wrapped it and made Albie give it to her first thing this morning, an attempt to ward off any sibling-birthday envy. Apparently this is something Juliet and her three sisters all did growing up. The kid with the birthday gives the other kids presents before opening up his own. I was an only child, at least until Albie and Grace came along, so maybe I just don’t get it, but it seems like a weird and unfair tradition to me.

“I have an idea,” I say, as Albie strings the bow and arrow and aims it directly at my face. I gently nudge the rubber tip away. “Let’s get ready for bed and you can tell me all about it.”

“All about what?” he whines, releasing the arrow with a *thwang* into a rumpled cushion on the couch. “You were here.”

I grab him by the waist and haul him off, sideways, toward the stairs. “I know,” I say. “But sometimes it helps to remember things that happened when you say them out loud.”

Albie rights himself and stomps up to his room. “That’s dumb, Tam,” he says. “That’s so dumb I can’t even think about it anymore. It’s making me dumber.”

“Albie!” Juliet barks from the kitchen, elbow-deep in a sink full of dirty frozen pizza dishes. “Listen to your sister. And don’t talk back.”

I follow Albie to his room and help him into his Spider-Man pajamas. He lists off roughly thirteen edible plant species while brushing his teeth, and then I tuck him in before Dad shows up to read him a book.

“Tam?” Albie shouts as I reach the hallway. I poke my head back in. “Remember when you came over for breakfast and Mom made crazy eggs because they’re my favorite and you ate them even though you hate crazy eggs because it’s my birthday?”

“Yup,” I say. Crazy eggs are regular scrambled eggs doused in ketchup, which Albie requires in epic proportions on pretty much everything he eats. “I remember.”

“Okay.” He waves at me dismissively and stretches across Dad’s knee for a book. “This one, please,” he announces, selecting a hardcover picture book about picking blueberries in Maine. “It’s for babies, but I find it soothing.”

Dad playfully rolls his eyes at me over the cake-crumbed mop of Albie’s dirty blond hair—no baths on birthdays—and I start downstairs, catching the tail end of “Minkle, Ninkle, Litta’ Stah,” as Gracie sings herself to sleep.

“He loves having you here,” Juliet says, her back to me as I collapse at the kitchen table. “It’s all we’ll hear about for the next two weeks.”

There isn't any rule, or schedule, about how often I come over for dinner, but it's worked out to be just about every other Sunday (with exceptions for holidays and birthdays). Dad or Juliet will call on Thursday or Friday and act casual, like it's just occurred to them that they haven't seen me in a while, and make up some excuse about why one of the kids needs to see their delinquent half sister. I don't mind; it's nice not to have to think about making dinner by myself, for myself, which is both depressing and a pain.

It was Mitch's idea for me to stay in the house that he'd built for me and Noah. I hadn't really given it much thought. After the funeral, it took me a few weeks to start thinking about anything again, other than how to tape towels to the windows to block out the sun, or how to survive on seltzer water and crackers. Mitch came over one night with a foil-covered plate of leftovers—a rotating crew of well-meaning friends brought them dinner every afternoon, for what seemed like an eternity—and said that they'd talked about it. He'd finish insulating the basement and get me a space heater. As long as I was warm enough, I could stay.

Juliet folds a dish towel in thirds and loops it over the oven handle as Dad shuffles in behind me. He opens the refrigerator and rummages for leftover pizza. "Anybody else?" he asks. With a houseful of hopped-up six-year-olds, none of us had a chance to eat much besides stolen handfuls of Goldfish and maybe a spoonful of frosting.

“No thanks,” I say, even though I’m headed to Max’s to watch the guys rehearse and I won’t have time to eat. “I should get going.”

“Hang on a minute,” Dad says, one long leg unfolding like a gate across the kitchen floor. Chicken legs, Mom used to call them, long and spindly. I definitely inherited his height, which I’m grateful for most days, but also Mom’s curves, which, usually, I’m not. Looking older helps get me into bars and clubs, but otherwise I’d happily trade in my “womanly figure” for a typically compact teenage physique.

“We’ve hardly had a chance to chat,” Dad says, gnawing on an edge of cold crust.

“Chat?” I smirk. Dad and I don’t chat. We yell—or at least we used to, before he married Juliet and everything got so civilized. Mom was a yeller. Some of my earliest memories are doors slamming, walls shaking, and the long, teary hugs that followed. Juliet prefers to talk everything out in measured tones, and I played by her rules for as long as I could. I didn’t yell when she moved in. I didn’t yell when they got married. I didn’t yell when Dad cut his hair, or shaved his beard, or started wearing button-down shirts to his new job at the bank.

I didn’t yell again until Noah asked me to move in with him. To marry him. Even then, I didn’t think I’d have to. Dad married Mom when they were both nineteen, a year older than Noah was when he asked. And I still don’t think it was the marrying or moving-out part that really bothered him. It

was school. He didn't like the idea of me dropping out, even though, once again, he had done exactly the same thing.

"Yeah. You know. Catch up," Dad says, still straining for nonchalance. "How is everything?"

"Everything is fine," I say carefully. "How is everything with you?"

"Good. Good. You know." Dad pushes a piece of crust into a puddle of marinara sauce on his plate. "What are you up to? Still working for Max?"

Working for Max is code for pushing around a mop at the one bar on the island that isn't completely lame, the bar where the band rehearses, the bar that's owned by Dad's former best friend. (Former because Dad no longer has friends, he has Juliet, and two little kids, and pressed khaki pants, and a job at the bank.) It's hardly work and I hardly get paid—Max sometimes throws me a few twenties and always feeds me when I'm there, but it's nothing formal.

"Yup," I confirm. "He says hi, by the way." This is a lie. Max never asks about Dad anymore, I think because the answer's always the same. Ever since "The Great Reformation," as Max calls Dad's post-Juliet life, they haven't had much in common.

"I keep meaning to get down there." Dad shakes his head, as if time just gets away from him. As if he still leads a life in which heading into town on a weeknight to see a friend's new band makes sense. "One of these nights, right, hon? Get a sitter? Hear some music?"

Juliet is busy rebuilding the living room and offers a phony “Sounds fun!” in response. The house is a disaster, sure, but all of the sudden I notice there’s something stark and pointed about Juliet’s absence. She’s shuffling back and forth, close enough to hear what’s happening, but she’s clearly giving us space. Almost as if the whole thing has been prearranged. Planned out. Suddenly, I know exactly where this chat is headed.

As if sensing I’ve been spooked, Dad leans quickly forward, rapping his knuckles on the table with a new sense of urgency. “Listen, Tam,” he says. “It’s been a while since we’ve talked about . . . things. I’ve . . . we’ve . . . wanted to give you time, but . . .”

“Time for what?”

“To figure things out on your own. I know this year hasn’t been easy . . .”

I look down at the chipped linoleum floor that Mom picked out. She thought it was retro. Juliet says it’s tacky and is always trying to get Dad to put in tile. “Not exactly,” I say, barely above a whisper.

“I know,” Dad says warmly. “But . . . you can’t just . . . I mean, at some point, you have to . . . you know . . .”

“No. I don’t know, Dad,” I say, feeling the old, familiar shouty voices clawing at my chest. “Really, I don’t. ‘At some point I have to’ . . . what? Please. I would love it if somebody could tell me. What comes next?”

I stare into Dad’s watery blue eyes and hold his gaze as long

as I can. I'm not sure if it's a sign of our failing relationship or just the awkwardness of the situation, but we still haven't had "the talk." The talk where Dad tells me he "knows" how I "feel." The person he was in love with, the person he thought he'd spend the rest of his life with: she died suddenly, too. Maybe it's because he knows I'm not the biggest fan of the way his version of the story turned out. If his advice is going to be "Change everything about the person you once were, and find somebody who is the polar opposite of the person you lost," then it's probably better that I don't hear it.

Dad sighs and runs his hands through his thick, sand-colored hair. "I don't know," he finally says quietly. "I have no idea. But I do think you should go back to school."

The chair squeals as I push it back and stand up.

"Tam," he says. "Wait. Just hear me out."

"I don't want to talk about it, Dad," I say. "Really."

"I'm sure you don't," he says. "But you're not thinking this through. Say you don't go back to school. You don't graduate. You don't go to college . . ."

"And I end up just like you?" I yell. I see Juliet's shadow jump as she busies herself by the fireplace.

"Tam," Dad says; his warning voice.

"I'm sorry," I say. I push through the narrow hallway, ten pairs of baby Grace and Albie eyes staring at me from the gallery wall near the stairwell. I feel Juliet, frozen with a broom in her hand, just a few feet away. "Maybe I shouldn't come back for a while."

“Tam!” Dad follows me out of the kitchen. He shoves one hand into the pocket of his chinos and slumps against the doorjamb. There’s always a moment like this: the instant when he starts to look familiar again, like the Dad I used to know. The Dad who used to let me stay up late, watching old movies and eating baked beans from the can. The Dad who let me wear whatever I wanted to school, even if it was pajamas, and learned to braid my hair just the way Mom did, high pig-tails with elastics that never matched. The Dad who tried everything to hold it all together, after his world—our world—was broken. Only mine was broken twice. “I just want to talk.”

I grab my coat from the rack near the door, Noah’s coat, the one that still smells like him, still has his receipts in the pockets. Iced tea and a chocolate croissant. *Rolling Stone* and three Twix bars, his late-night favorite.

“You’re still my daughter,” Dad says when my hand closes on the doorknob. “I know you don’t think that means anything anymore, but it does.”

I wait for a minute before I pull the door open, a wet blast of winter air rushing at my face. “Bye, Dad,” I say into the biting wind, and the door slams shut behind me.

THREE

THE LINE AT THE ROYAL IS LONG FOR A SUNDAY. I snake my way through to the door and strain to catch Max's eye. He's perched on the stool as usual, doing a cursory check of IDs and collecting the five-dollar cover, his long, graying hair twisted in a braid down his back.

I wave and try to shuffle past, so as not to hold up the line, but he pulls me in for a quick hug. His beard is reddish and scraggly and tickles the side of my face. He smells exactly the way Dad used to: warm and earthy and weirdly sweet.

"How ya doing, Pickle?" he asks. "All good?"

Max is the only person who still calls me Pickle, the nickname Mom gave me when I was born. ("I ate so many before you came, I thought for sure you'd be one.") I used to hate it, but now I don't mind. Sometimes it feels like everything

that happened before happened in a different life, to a different person. It's nice to know I didn't make it up.

I nod and half shrug at the same time, which is basically my preferred shorthand these days for "You know. Getting by."

Max shifts on his stool as a group of carpenter types, stocky and gruff in full-body Carhartts, fumble with their wallets. "They're in the back," Max says to me, nodding toward the beaded curtain beyond the throngs of people swaying to the old-timey bluegrass band on the run-down stage in the corner.

"Thanks," I say, and begin to make my way through, waving quick hellos to the regulars.

I'm not sure if it's possible to be "legendary" by the time you're seventeen, but if it is, I may just be the island's most legendary groupie. Before Mom died, we used to go out to the Royal almost every night, to hear whatever collection of her and Dad's ex-hippie friends was taking the stage. We'd go right after dinner—usually a one-pot, cumin-scented vegetarian dish Mom had concocted—and post up at a table near the back. It was a half-booth and perfect for me to fall asleep in during the band's second set. By now I can see how not-normal it was to put your six-year-old to bed in a bar, but I didn't know any different at the time.

Plus, I loved it. I loved the dark wood and sticky floors and plastic baskets of peanuts. I loved watching my parents dance, the way they swayed and looked so happy. I loved that everyone knew my name and I loved the way they'd point me out

when I stood in front of the stage with my arms crossed, staring.

But mostly, I loved the music. It didn't matter what kind. Since these were my parents' friends it was usually folksy, but there were a few really funky groups that played songs I adored, songs by James Brown, Otis Redding, that kind of thing. Those were my favorite nights, when everyone got on their feet and nobody noticed if I stayed up past the encore.

Max grew up with my dad in New York, in a small town on the Hudson River, and after high school they packed up Dad's van and moved to the island, in search of a "simpler life." Until I was about five, we all lived together, us and Max and the rotating cast of girls he was seeing, plus Skip and Diane and their daughter, Lula Bee. I guess it was kind of like a commune, except that it was just an old, run-down house by the water that belonged to Max's grandmother, and none of them paid for anything, I don't think.

Max drove my parents to the hospital on the night I was born, in his '76 Volkswagen Golf at an alleged ninety-five miles per hour. He has known me longer than anyone I'm not related to and doesn't care that I'm technically too young to be in here. We have an agreement—as long as I don't try to buy drinks or get in any trouble, I can hang out and listen to music and eat all the peanuts I want.

The guys are still setting up when I finally push my way through the curtain. Ross is tinkering with levels on his B3 organ, his tall, wiry body curled in a giant C as his feet work

the pedals below. Teddy sits behind his drum kit, tongue stuck through the gap in his two front teeth, a messy mop of yellow curls shielding his face. And Eugene, as usual, picks out notes on his towering upright bass, his face to the wall, pretending he's alone.

There was a time when Ross and Eugene still talked about going on tour, and I still planned on going with them. Early last year, right around the time Noah asked me to marry him, the guys had been signed to LoveCraft, a new indie label out of Detroit. It was the perfect fit for them, small but not too small, lots of personal attention but also some big names to back them up. The label guys said they'd foot the bill for the tour if we planned it. "We" meant me, the de facto band manager, the only band girlfriend crazy enough to spend hours on the phone with venues and motels, shipping off demos and stalking everyone from bookers to bartenders online.

After Noah died, we got a call from the label telling us they were sorry for our loss, but we'd been dropped. Noah was the heart of the band, the label guys said, he was the whole of the "image" they signed. No one really knew what to do after that. We still met at Max's once a week, the guys going through the old songs and vamping underneath the parts where Noah was supposed to come in. It was enough to just be together, playing something.

Ross takes a solo on the keys and it goes on for so long that I almost forget which song they're playing. It's one of the poppy ones that Noah wrote when he was listening to a lot

of Beach Boys, called “Sunday Sun.” Ross’s fingers fly over the keyboard so spastically that the original melody is almost unrecognizable, just a flurry of notes and the occasional heavy chord.

“You made it.”

I hear an unfamiliar voice behind me and turn to see Simone, Ross’s girlfriend-of-the-moment. She was a junior when I was a freshman, and then, as now, wore only floral prints. Floral sundresses in the summer, floral jumpsuits in the fall. A long black coat embroidered with a loud floral pattern all winter long. The coat is currently draped over her knees as she leans against a broken amp, floral tights peeking out from under the hem.

“Hi, Simone.”

We watch the guys play. It’s too loud to talk, which is fine; we’ve never had much to say to each other anyway. Simone started hanging around a few months before Noah died. He called her the Predator. She always seemed like she was circling something, waiting for the right moment to go in for the kill. Ross was easy prey; he’s a serial monogamist. None of his relationships last very long, but he bounces from one to the next like he’s got a list. He probably does; there’s never any shortage of skirts swaying nearest his corner of the stage. But Simone’s stuck around longer than any of us ever thought she would, which is both awkward and kind of sweet.

After a few minutes, Ross stretches and lumbers over to say something to Teddy. Teddy gives him a thumbs-up and

nudges Eugene, who finally turns around, his choppy black hair stuck in sweaty patches against his forehead. Ross puts a hand up over his eyes—the lights are bright back here, to keep the “stage” authentic—and I notice a sharp shift in his posture when he sees me.

“Tam,” he says, loping toward me. “I didn’t think you were coming.”

I slip my arms out of Noah’s coat and hold it to my chest. I’m still wearing the dirty jeans and too-big flannel I wore to Albie’s party, and suddenly, wedged up against the ever-blooming garden of Simone, I feel like a grubby street urchin.

“Why not?” I say. “I’m here every week.”

Ross scratches the back of his bald head—the ratty dreadlocks he wore in high school took their toll on his hairline, and now he shaves it clean. His mouth twists into an anxious knot.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. Simone gracefully pulls herself up to her feet, doing some kind of yoga stretch that involves one foot perched against the inside of her thigh, her hands clasped at her heart in silent prayer.

“Nothing, nothing,” Ross insists. Teddy coughs behind him, and Eugene pretends to fiddle with a knob on the Peg-Board. “It’s just—well, we told Simone she could sit in tonight. You know, give it a shot.”

I look sideways at Simone, whose eyes are now closed, her lips quietly moving as she fakes her way through a Sanskrit chant.

“Give what a shot?” I ask, although my heart has already dropped into my stomach and is churning around with the answer.

“I thought it might be cool if she sang with us,” he says. “You know, just for fun.”

Simone’s eyes flutter open and she smiles at me. “Just for fun,” she repeats, giving my arm a quick squeeze. She skips up to the stage and stands behind the microphone, her loose auburn curls falling to one side as she taps the mike with her fingers.

“Tam, I’m sorry,” Ross says, quieter now, leaning against the wall. “I would have told you, but I didn’t think you were coming. You said you had that birthday party, I . . .”

“He’s six, Ross,” I mutter. “Did you think it would go all night?”

Ross looks at the scuffed toes of his high-top sneakers. “I’m sorry,” he says again. “But we need to get serious about where we’re going. Right? I mean. We can’t do this forever. We need a singer. And it sure as shit isn’t going to be me.”

Ross chuckles hopefully, searching my face for some sign that it’s all going to be okay. “You’re welcome to hang out,” he says. “If you’re up for it. I’d love to know what you think.”

My mouth goes dry and there’s a pounding in my temples, but I manage a quiet nod. “Sure.” I swallow, forcing a tight smile. “No problem.”

Ross wraps an arm around my shoulder and gives me a squeeze before shuffling back behind the keys. I lean against

the wall and take a deep breath as they throw out ideas for what tune to play next. I knew it would happen eventually. The band couldn't go on without a lead singer forever. But Simone? We could hold auditions for years and still not find a person less Noah-like on the island. Possibly even the planet.

"How about 'You and the Rest'?" Ross calls out.

Simone swoons, her hands clutching her heart. "Oh, can we please?" she begs. "I adore that one."

Eugene picks out a few notes before launching into the song's signature bass line, a staccato climb that ends with Teddy coming in strong on the drums. "You and the Rest" is one of the few songs Noah wrote before we got together that the band still played regularly. It's about an older girl he liked who worked at the record store in town, before it closed for good.

Simone starts singing and my throat gets tight, like breathing is suddenly a challenge. She's not bad, her voice is sweet and mellow, but it all just feels so wrong. To her, the lyrics are just words. She has no idea what they mean, what they meant to Noah when he wrote them. There's a buzzing in my brain and I feel like screaming, or at least covering my ears and rocking back and forth like a baby. Anything to make it all go away.

Instead, I turn and push back through the curtains, jostling against the warm, clumsy bodies of the drunken crowd, and find my way to the door.

FOUR

“TAM, WAIT UP!”

I’m winding my way through the narrow side streets in town, the icy wind stinging my nostrils. I don’t realize how fast I’m running until I turn to see Eugene, sprinting to catch up. I turn back and keep running, hoping to lose him around the corner.

Across the street, beyond the vast, open green, lit up by a half circle of streetlamps, I see the silhouette of the weather vane, spinning at the top of the Howard’s tallest spire. The Howard House is one of the oldest buildings in town, and by far the most ornate. It’s like a gingerbread house on steroids, with fancy, curlicue moldings and red and white frosting trim.

I sprint across the green and Eugene strides to keep up, his short legs cutting across the grass in hurried slices. At the

sidewalk I duck immediately between a row of prickly hedges, into the overgrown garden. The gate, knotted iron with a rusted latch, is locked, but it's not a bad climb. I've done it before.

After graduation, Mitch talked Noah into helping out with some roofing jobs. Noah hated it—hated the burnt smell of asphalt in the sun, hated being up so high—but it was good money. Money we needed to save up for tour. And every so often they'd get to work on something special, usually the stately summer home of some old-moneyed family that visited only once or twice a year. The Howard was Noah's favorite.

He took me here the night he proposed. We snuck onto the back porch and climbed up to an open balcony, and stayed nestled there for hours. Noah brought take-out Chinese and made me eat my cookie first. On one side of my fortune, scrawled over the factory type in ballpoint blue, it said: "Marry me?" On the other, the Chinese characters for dumpling.

Getting married wasn't something we'd ever talked about. And Noah wasn't really the crazy-impulsive type. But the band was gearing up for their first big tour and I would only be going to the first few shows, the ones that were nearby. He wanted me to know I was his family, he said. He wanted me to know that he would always come home.

When he asked, that night on the balcony, I didn't cry. I didn't shout or squeal. I kissed him. I said yes. Because as crazy as it was—the idea of being married before I turned

eighteen—I knew it was supposed to happen. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with Noah. Why wait?

I look up at the balcony as if they might still be there, the best versions of who we were, so certain that we could tackle the future together. So certain we *had* a future. I scramble to the top of the arched metal gate and throw one leg over a spiky point.

“What are you doing?” Eugene asks. I feel a sharp tug at my ankle. “Tam. Come on.”

I jump down to the other side, my knee turning and throbbing in quick, hot flashes. “I’m fine,” I shout over the gate. “Just go back, okay? Everything’s fine.”

There’s a long pause and then a shuffling, and at first I think he’s leaving, going back to report that there was nothing he could do. *Tam’s lost it*, he’ll tell them. *She’s finally, totally lost it*.

But then I see two sturdy hands gripping the top of the gate, one laced-up combat boot kicking over the metal knobs.

“What is this place?” Eugene asks, rubbing his palms as he lands beside me with a thud. The yard is manicured and dotted with topiary—strange, shy figures that loom almost demonlike in the darkness. I stay close to the side of the house and climb quietly up the steps to the back porch, a broad wooden deck that’s shaped like the prow of a ship. Thick, painted columns are wrapped in ivy, and a hose snakes from an outdoor shower across the wooden planks. Empty clay

pots are stacked upside down by the sliding back door, and I stand on one to peer inside.

I push past Eugene toward the door and jiggle the spiral brass handle. The door is latched so I try a window. The two in the kitchen are locked, but there's a smaller one that's open just a crack. I drag an empty pot beneath it and throw my weight against the sill. It's stuck.

I look back at Eugene, leaning against a column. "What?" he asks.

"If you're going to follow me, the least you could do is help." I jump down from the pot and stand beside it.

Eugene glances around the yard. He sighs and steps carefully on the pot, reaching up to the casing and easily shoving the window open. He runs one hand along the side of the screen, popping it out and resting it against the outside wall.

I shove past him and lift myself up on my elbows, squeezing inside. The window is in a small guest bathroom, over a toilet. I knock the lid down with my foot and jump to the tiled floor. I stumble through the darkness, bumping into a tall wooden chest, and reach the open kitchen. Moonlight pours in dusty shafts through the windows, over a deep farmhouse sink. I feel for a bolt on the back door and twist it open, leaving the door shut.

I pad across the kitchen to a long hallway that leads to the foyer. I hear Eugene slowly creeping in behind me. Where the hallway opens to the rest of the house there's a stairwell, and beneath it another small door. I pull it open and a blast

of warm air escapes. The smell of chlorine is sharp and familiar.

When Noah told me about the indoor pool, I didn't believe him. That's the thing about vacation homes on the island: people are so obsessed with history and maintaining these crumbling, storybook facades, while at the same time insisting on every modern convenience inside.

I fumble along a wall for the lights. The lap pool glows in shimmering neon blue, a row of buoys bobbing between two lanes. A smaller, kidney-shaped Jacuzzi bubbles to life beside it. "No way," Eugene says. "How'd you know this was here?"

"Don't worry about it," I say, kicking out of my boots. The room is damp and sticky. I peel off my coat, then my flannel, and quickly unbutton my jeans. Everything lands in a heap by the shiny metal ladder. Wearing only my bra and underwear, I stand at the edge for a long moment, staring into the still, quiet water. Then I dive in. The water is sharp and bracing.

I stay under for as long as I can. I open my eyes, the distorted light fixtures rippling against a wavy pattern of blue and white tile on the slick pool wall. I hear a high-pitched whistling, a steady underwater gurgle that is interrupted, suddenly, by the muffled alarm of Eugene's voice. There's a tightness growing in my chest that swells to an ache. I wait until it really starts to hurt, until my eyes burn and it feels like my ears will explode, before I kick up through the shimmering surface.

There's a puzzling splash and I feel some part of Eugene's body tangling in my legs. He pushes up behind me, his black hair stuck to the sides of his face. "What the hell?" He spits, his thick lashes dripping, his blue eyes big and frantic. "I thought you weren't coming up."

I swim to the ledge and lean my forearms against it, gasping for breath. Eugene slaps at the water around him, like he's mad at it. He's wearing all of his clothes, and his heavy wool coat balloons up under his arms. "Jesus, Tam," he says. "What is this?"

"What do you mean?" I ask. I dip my head back and smile up at the mural of dolphins and mermaids painted on the ceiling. "You don't like swimming?"

"I like swimming," he says. "I don't like breaking into people's houses and jumping in their pool with my clothes on and potentially dragging you out of some suicidal stupor."

"Nobody told you to follow me," I say. He swims up beside me, flopping his arms up onto the ledge.

"I know." Eugene shrugs. "I just . . . I wanted to say . . . I'm sorry. I know it sucks, getting somebody new, but . . ."

I take a breath and plunge back beneath the blue. I push off the wall and glide from one side of the narrow pool to the other. I keep my eyes closed, feeling ahead with the tips of my fingers, waiting to touch the stubbly, underwater wall. But all I feel is floating, weightless nothing, and I wish I never had to feel anything else.

There's a dull thudding sound, and when I finally come

up for air, a swirl of lights on the wall. At first I think maybe I've done it. I've stayed under so long that the world is different. Magical. Far away.

But the voices are real and gruff and Eugene is splashing around for his coat, which floats beside him in a puddle, clawing at my arms and dragging me toward the ledge.

“Great,” he whispers.

Two fat cops are swinging flashlights from the bottom of the stairwell. One of them flips a switch, turning off the Jacuzzi, and the room plunges into a cold and unforgiving silence.

“Party's over,” he says.

FIVE

JULIET STARES AHEAD, THE WINDSHIELD WIPERS slicing back and forth, a relentless, rhythmic squeal. It started to hail when we got to the station, hard, sharp pebbles pelting our necks as we walked in handcuffs toward the door.

I turn back to look at the dim yellow light of the office, where Eugene still sits, slumped against the wall. Eugene is twenty-one, which means he's legally been an adult for years and has to spend the night in jail before we can be arraigned in the morning. "Jail" on the island is a two-room office with a dinky little cell in the back, but still. It's my fault we're here, and I—because I'm seventeen and still straddling the line between juvenile and adult—get to go home.

Home.

Juliet stabs at the radio console with her manicured fin-

gers, attempting to shut off the all-Disney sound track that is constantly on loop in her bulbous, immaculate minivan. Somebody at the station must have called the house. She was here before I was processed, and I watched her from behind the glass half-wall, perched on a stiff plastic chair and clutching her purse to her lap.

I've never been arrested before. I've never been in real trouble before. The whole charade felt so over the top and ridiculous that I had a hard time not laughing. While a female intake officer was pressing my finger into a rectangular pad of ink, I asked if we were on a school field trip. She pressed a little bit harder.

"Did you hear me?" Juliet asks. She stops at an intersection and tilts her head to one side. I can see the charms on her bracelet glinting in the headlights from an oncoming car. It's a thick silver chain that Dad gave her just before they got married, adding a charm on every special occasion since—a heart for their anniversary, initials when the babies were born, a dog that looks just like her tiny, lunatic terrier, Mac. Either she sleeps with it on, or she took the time to search for it in her jewelry box before coming to get me. I'm not sure which is weirder.

"No," I say. I tuck my fingers into the pockets of Noah's coat. My hair is bunched inside the collar, still wet and dripping in an icy stream down my back.

"What happened?" Juliet repeats. "What were you thinking?"

I stare at the tops of my boots and shrug. *What was I thinking?* For the first time in months, I wasn't thinking. And it felt great. "Where's Dad?"

Juliet holds in a tight breath. "He needed time to cool down," she says, which makes me feel strangely pleased. I imagine him sitting up in bed when the phone rings, shouting obscenities at the wall. I imagine him stomping around the room, fumbling to get dressed in the dark, Juliet insisting she should go instead. Before I know it, I'm laughing again, a strange, gurgling chuckle.

"None of this is funny, Tamsen," Juliet says as we pull into the driveway. Albie's tricycle is on its side near the garden, and I watch as Juliet eyes it with growing irritation. There's a light on in the kitchen and I can see the gleam of the countertops, the alphabetized spice rack, the fruit bowl with a neurotic pyramid of clementines on top. Pre-party order, restored. "I'm not staying here," I say.

Juliet turns off the engine. "Tam, it's late." She slips the key from the ignition and clutches it in her slender palm.

I stare at the glove box and try to guess what's inside. Manual. Registration. Neat stack of napkins. Packaged snacks for the kids.

"Why don't you sleep in your old room?" Juliet puts a hand on my knee, Grace's G charm resting on my thigh. "We can talk more in the morning."

I turn to her, my eyes heavy and tired. "We're not talking

about it in the morning,” I say. “I’m done talking. Can you both just try to understand that?”

Juliet opens her mouth to say something, but I push the door open with my knee and slam it shut behind me. The wet snow falls in angry sheets and I can hear Juliet calling my name. She opens her door and her voice gets louder, but I’m already sprinting, already halfway down the block. I run through a yard across the street and into a wooded trail that cuts away from the road.

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The sleet turns to a soft rain and I walk for an hour in the cold and dark, out of town and deeper into the part of the island that’s nestled in thick woods. Noah’s neighborhood is full of winding dirt roads and tucked-away houses. At the bottom of the driveway I’m careful not to trip the floodlights, on a sensor from the roof of Mitch’s house. I follow the crooked stone path that winds behind the garage to the little A-frame cabin in the back of the lot.

I climb up two cinder blocks and push open the front door. The chemical smell of oil and primer stings my nostrils. There’s a table saw in the living room and a towering pile of two-by-fours stacked in the kitchen where the breakfast bar was going to be.

Noah insisted we move out here as soon as the bedroom

upstairs was finished, or finished enough to put a mattress on the floor. Before he died, we lived out of suitcases and showered outside. I got sort of addicted to seeing the sky while I rinsed my hair, and it took me a few days after the plumber showed up to stop taking my towel outdoors.

I step over a multicolored web of extension cords and carefully climb the staircase, which is, at this point, a glorified ladder. The upstairs loft is buried beneath a tarp, and it looks like Mitch has been painting. I vaguely remember being asked last week about colors, but it was hard enough to care about that stuff when Noah was around. Mitch chose something innocuous in the taupe family, which somehow still doesn't feel right.

Mitch announced that he was giving us a piece of his land right after we told him we were engaged, and before the guys left for tour. The timing was not a coincidence. Mitch would never dream of telling Noah to stop playing music—nothing made him prouder than hearing his son sing the songs he'd written himself, seeing his picture in the paper, collecting flyers from the shows he'd played—but it was no secret he was terrified. Terrified that Noah would leave one day and never come back. Terrified that music would open his world up so big that the island would disappear inside it.

There was always something about the idea of building a house that made me feel a little off-balance, like we were on a train that had suddenly, without warning, switched tracks.

Making our world bigger was exactly what we wanted. It's what we'd talked about practically every night we'd spent together, starting that first night on the roof of the Howard House. Touring was our ticket out of here—or Noah's ticket, at least. I was just along for the ride.

But I knew that saying no wasn't an option. Noah could see how much it meant to his dad, not just the promise that a piece of him would always be next door, but the process of building something together. Mitch had never looked happier than when he showed up every Saturday morning, two steaming mugs of coffee in his hands and a tool belt sagging around his hips, ready to work.

And it was hard not to be a little bit excited. We were getting married. After I left Dad and Juliet's, I had assumed we'd stay with Mitch and Molly whenever we weren't traveling. But now we were going to have a place of our own. A place to come home to, after months of living on the road, sleeping in seedy motels or on the retired school bus Ross was converting into a rustic RV to take us all cross-country one day.

There's a twisting near my heart. So many things have died. None of them hurt as much as Noah, but together, they add up. Everything we wanted to do. All the plans we made, the cities we'd see, the parks we'd camp in, the food we'd eat. Every hour I spent researching routes, making notes in my planner about famous diners or must-see roadside attractions,

like the dinosaur park in California or the imitation Stonehenge made out of junked cars. All of it is gone. None of it will ever happen the way it could have happened, the way it should have happened, when Noah was here and we were just getting started.

In the bathroom, I peel off my clothes and leave them in a damp heap on the floor. I turn on the shower, as hot as it will go. I stand beneath the scorching spray and feel my bones start to tingle, thawing one by one.

I thought I could do it. I thought I could stay. I was starting to get used to the strange and solitary life I had accidentally carved out for myself, my own little Young Widows Club, Membership: One. A few nights a week, I'll hang out with the band, or check in with Max at the Royal. But usually it's just been me, all day, all night, binge-watching Noah's favorite shows and listening to songs that he wrote, over and over again.

But now it seems so obvious. There's no reason to be here anymore. I live in a house with no furniture. Dad has a new family, a new life. The band has no use for me. I could go anywhere. Nothing is holding me back.

I dry off and pick out one of my old T-shirts. I look at the bed and for a second I think I'm so tired, so physically spent, that I could do it. I could climb in. But even six months later, one pillow is still creased with the vague imprint of Noah's head. I haven't touched that bed since the paramedics pulled

his body out. I fumble for the sleeping bag and spread it out beside the bed. At first, sleeping on the floor every night made my back ache and my shoulders throb, but now I'm used to it. I curl my legs inside the slippery bag, and sleep creeps in like a fog.