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My thesis is a novel about two adolescent girls who, after the death of one of their mothers, run away. They leave Virginia for Atlanta, Georgia and move into an apartment with other youth who have fled their homes.

ADRIFT

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER ONE	1
CHAPTER TWO	10
CHAPTER THREE	17
CHAPTER FOUR.....	24
CHAPTER FIVE	31
CHAPTER SIX.....	39
CHAPTER SEVEN	51
CHAPTER EIGHT	66
CHAPTER NINE.....	71
CHAPTER TEN.....	73
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	88
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	97
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	105
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	113
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	122
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	131
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	135

ADRIFT

CHAPTER ONE

I sat half-naked in the changing room, knees curled to my chest, staring at three black dresses that hung from a hook on the wall. The metal stool was cold against my thighs. The dresses had all looked the same when Sue picked them out for me, but close up, each was a different shade of black, like shadows of shadows. The girl in the three-way mirrors' reflection looked like someone else. Underneath the harsh lights, my summer tan faded to papery white and the skin below my eyes bloomed purple. My newly short hair drew a ragged hem across my neck. It had become unbearably heavy the past few days, so I cut it myself in the bathroom I now shared with my best friend Lainey, and it was her mother I was alone with at the mall. Lainey already had a dress.

I heard the urgent clack of Sue's heels before her feet appeared under the dressing room door. You could always hear Sue coming. Sue shopped the way she did everything else—expertly and as quickly as possible. Today it seemed that the faster she pushed me, the slower I became as we went from store to store to store and I tried on black dress after black dress. She rattled the knob, but I had locked it. “Do you have one on yet, Meg?”

“Just a minute,” I said, not moving.

“Which one are you trying on first?”

“The black one,” I said.

“What?”

“I said I don’t know.”

“Come out when you’re ready,” she said. When she did not walk away, I unfolded myself from the stool and took the first dress off the hanger. Its fabric felt like sandpaper against my fingertips. I pulled it over my head, feeling it settle over me, heavy and cold as a snowdrift.

I could only get the zipper halfway up. “Let me,” Sue said when I opened the door. Her hands were cool on my back. Her touch took me from being seventeen back to being a little girl, my own mother’s hands on my skin. Hers had always been warm. I could not remember the last time I had felt her touch.

“Go look,” Sue said. I walked stiffly toward the big mirror at the end of the row of closed doors. We were in a woman’s store and it was a woman’s dress: the waist too high, the skirt too long. I was a child playing dress-up. “Well?” Sue said. I shrugged. “It’s very sophisticated,” she said.

“It’s a grandma dress,” I said.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s try the others.”

The next one looked too much like a prom dress and the last had long sleeves and would be too hot. “We’re coming out of here with something,” Sue said as she ushered me into another women’s store. She stopped to answer her cell phone and I wandered down the rows, touching the silky blouses. The mannequins had on rust-colored cable knit sweaters and dark pants, already dressed for fall. Their faces were blank and white.

Sue held the phone away from her ear and waved me on. “Go try something on,” she said.

I picked two black dresses from among the tank tops and shimmery summer skirts on the sale rack. The first was layered with soft gauzy fabric and covered me like a sigh. I felt guilty, realizing that in the dress I looked almost beautiful. I slipped it over my head and let it crumple soundlessly to the floor.

“Meg? Find anything?” Sue said, yanking aside the curtain.

I covered my breasts and turned away. “I’m not dressed,” I said. She let the curtain fall back into place but I could hear her just outside the dressing room.

The second dress was shapeless and hung over me like a tent. Underneath, I could have been anyone. I walked out of the dressing room, feeling it brush the tops of my bare feet. “A little big, don’t you think?” Sue asked.

“I like it.”

“I’ll look for a smaller size.”

“It was on the sale rack,” I said. “The very last one.”

“What about this?” She lifted the dress from the floor and shook it out, brushing away lint and dust. “It looks perfect.”

“It didn’t fit.”

“I just think we could find something that’s a little prettier.”

“It’s not like I’m going to a dance,” I said.

She did not look at me, but placed the dress back on its hanger. “No,” she said.

“I guess not.”

At the counter, she paid with a credit card and handed me the plastic bag, the dress folded neatly at the bottom. Even on sale, it was expensive. “How about shoes?” she asked.

“I’ll borrow Lainey’s.”

“And I still can’t convince you to get your hair evened out? Just a bit?”

“No.”

“You know that I’m here. I also know of a good counselor,” she said. “Maybe in a few weeks, when you’re ready...”

“I’m fine,” I said.

A wave of heat enveloped me as we walked outside. The smell of hot asphalt rose from the parking lot and the hazy air shimmered with mirages. When I was younger, my mother used to spin stories for me of deserts and sultans and secret blue pools. Today there were only rows of parked cars glinting dangerously in the sun. The silver puddles I saw in the distance were not really there.

My mother was already dead when her car went through the guardrail and rolled down an embankment only a few miles from our house. They assumed at first that she died on impact. I did not want to know how they discovered that a rare, undiagnosed heart condition had stopped her heart. I could not imagine my mother lying naked on a metal table, doctors bent over her with their silver scalpels or their saws. Sue told me this later, after I had stopped crying, after she and Lainey had come to get me at the bookstore

where I worked. They had to walk me between them, carrying most of my weight. My feet would not obey me: they seemed glued to the ground.

I remember Lainey leaning over me, her long hair brushing my cheek as she struggled to fasten my seatbelt. When we got back to their house, Sue gave me a pill from one of her prescription bottles. I did not ask what it was. Hours later I woke up in their guest room, not knowing where I was or why I was still wearing my nametag. Having to remember that my mother was dead was worse than hearing it the first time.

There was a picture of her car on page seven of the *Times Dispatch* under the headline “Local Teacher Killed in River Road Crash: Fourth This Year.” Only the first few paragraphs mentioned my mother. The rest of the article was about the dangerous road and the traffic these accidents cause. In the photograph, her green Geo was crumpled like paper.

I found the newspaper buried in the trash can in the garage, still in its plastic casing and flecked with coffee grounds. Sue must have taken it straight from the end of the driveway to the trash. The obituary was only ten lines and had no picture. I cut it out and folded it into tiny squares, the soft newsprint staining my hands. I had overheard Sue on the phone, choosing the wording: “‘She is survived by one daughter, Margaret Ann Barrett.’ How many words is that? Maybe it’s better to leave out her name—she is a minor. ‘She is survived by one daughter.’ That’s better.”

I was supposed to feel sad, but anger had been churning in my stomach, making me feel sea-sick. Anger at whom or what, I did not know. It was nameless and faceless.

Sometimes sadness came like the prick of a needle, like relief, but it wore off. Then I was left with the anger or something worse: numbness.

Sue was on the phone as soon as we got back from the mall. She held her hand over the mouthpiece and told me to hang up my dress. The past three days she had been on the phone with lawyers and funeral home directors and what seemed like hundreds of other people. I only caught snatches of conversations before she would shoo me away, words like *arrangements* and *tragic* and *casket*. She used her realtor voice, quick and professional, only without the wide smile found on signs in yards all over the West End. That was Sue's expertise: details, taking care of business, getting things done. Not comfort or compassion. When she hugged me, her arms felt like bars around me. She told me what to do the same way she told the funeral directors. I knew nothing about the will or anything else so I nodded and did what I was told, feeling my limbs and body grow slack from disuse.

I pushed two winter jackets aside in the guest room closet to make room for the dress, hoping the wrinkles would smooth out by themselves. Otherwise, Sue would ask me to iron it. My other clothes were zipped up neatly in a duffle bag by the side of the bed. Sue had packed it for me. I would need to go home in a few days if I was going to stay here longer. I did not know where else I would go. There was no one else.

I had never known my father. He had left before I was born and my mother spoke of him as little as possible. If I had been unhappy, maybe I would have thought more

about him, but my mother had always been enough. Lainey's father, a thick and meaty man, saw her twice a year and sent checks every month. I met him once or twice and nothing in him made me feel like I was missing something. Now I was plagued with questions and thoughts of my father: where was he? Did he know? I pictured him as a tall, thin man with a neatly-trimmed beard and hazel eyes like mine. He would come to the door and I would know him immediately, feel the invisible pull of blood. In some of my daydreams he crushed me to him in a hug so tight it took away the distance of seventeen years. In others, he begged me for forgiveness, tears in his eyes, and I shut the front door in his face.

Lainey was on the couch watching television when I came back downstairs. She looked the same, corn silk hair and heavy black eyeliner, but it wasn't Lainey carving out a rut in front of the screen. She possessed the same tireless energy as her mother, though I never would have told Lainey that. They ran at the same speed, only in opposite directions. Her hands were never still, always busy creating. She sold paintings, jewelry and hand-sewn stuffed creatures through a crafter's website, starting a new line every few weeks. In the three days I'd been here, her hands had been clamped around the remote. Her stillness was disconcerting at first, but I had grown used to it, just as I had grown used to this uneasy routine of living there.

Lainey was my best friend, my only real friend, and yet we kept between us the tension and assumed familiarity I imagined between sisters. There was little in common between us, but the bond of our mothers' friendship passed down to us in the womb,

connecting us by something deeper than likes and dislikes. We knew each other so well that we spoke without looking, talked without saying. We did not talk about my mother.

“Anything on?” I asked, sitting down at the opposite end of the couch.

“Lifetime movie,” she said.

“Catch me up.”

“Husband falls for co-worker, has affair. Wife leaves him, moves to small town and tries to pick up the pieces.”

“Who’s that?”

“House painter with a painful past. You find a dress?”

“Yeah. Can I borrow shoes?”

“You can wear my sandals.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Flip flops.”

“Your mom won’t let you wear flip flops.”

“Sue won’t notice,” she said.

“She notices everything.”

“Are you going to talk through the whole movie?”

“I’m just saying—she’s going to care.”

Lainey turned up the volume until the speakers crackled. I went upstairs and away from the television, where all the bad things that happened to people were simply means to a happy end.

The guest room seemed vast and strange to me, color coordinated wallpaper and bedspread and curtains. Even the lampshades matched. I had left the closet doors open and the black dress was all I could see. When I was younger, I went through a phase of sleeping in my closet. I remember my mother climbing in with Lainey and me one weekend, kneeling at the foot of our shared sleeping bag, telling us stories until we fell asleep, her words coloring our dreams.

I lay down in the closet now, my back pressed against shoe boxes, hearing the dry cackle of paper grocery sacks filled with odds and ends. Every bag and box was labeled with permanent marker in Sue's handwriting, letters straight like daggers: candles, Christmas decorations, Lainey's shoes. I fell asleep there behind the slatted doors, beneath the rows of old clothes, my new black dress hanging above me.

Sometime after midnight I awoke, disoriented, my back sore. I climbed into the guest room bed. The sheets were cool against my skin. I heard Lainey's sewing machine whirring through the wall behind my head. The sound was familiar and comforting, reminding me of all the nights I'd spent here. At my house we slept together, but Sue always made me stay in the guest room. When we were seven, Lainey had gotten the idea to learn Morse code. She tired of it before getting through the alphabet, but I still remembered every letter. I knocked softly now, three shorts, three longs, three shorts: S.O.S. The hollow sound passed through the wall and disappeared under the hum and clack of the sewing machine.

CHAPTER TWO

The day of the funeral was the hottest so far that summer. The brown cemetery grass crunched like glass under my feet. Tree branches bent toward the ground as though they all wanted to be willows. Among the limp flowers, bumblebees droned fat and slow. The sawing of the cicadas rose and receded, my favorite summer sound, the moon a pale scar above the tree line.

Lainey and I stood in the shadow of an oak tree, watching Sue greet people like they were prospective buyers looking for great property. As she shook hands, bracelets rattled on her thin wrists. My mother always said Sue had hummingbird bones, so tiny and light they could have been hollow.

The principal of mom's elementary school had come, looking stiff in a blue suit and tie. Even in black I could pick out the elementary school teachers. Neat, sensible shoes. Summer sweater sets. Only a handful of her former students came, clutching their parents' hands and looking terrified. I had never met any of her students, though I'd seen the crayoned cards and notes they had made her. She hung them up alongside my report cards and school photos on the fridge so it looked as though we were a family of thousands instead of only two.

Sue waved everyone toward a guest book the funeral directors had set on a wooden podium. It looked cheap, like the maroon canopy over the gravesite and the fake rug of grass laid out beneath it. Everything could be folded or rolled up and put in the trunk of a car at the end of the day. Even the flowers in the arrangement on the coffin

looked plastic. I hated everything Sue had chosen. It was like she didn't know my mother at all.

One of the funeral directors held out two dripping bottles of water to Lainey and me. His face was shiny with sweat. "Would you like some water?"

"Thanks," I said.

"Which of you is the daughter of the deceased?" he asked. The bottle slid from my hand to the hard, dry ground. I bent to pick it up and stared at the man's leather dress shoes, scuffed and worn at the toe. He probably wore the same clothes to every funeral.

"We don't need your sympathy," Lainey said. The funeral director looked like he wanted to lean her over his knee and spank her. He composed himself, regaining that practiced expression, and walked away. "I hate those guys," Lainey said, before he was out of earshot.

"You don't even know him," I said, but I hated him too.

"Not him specifically—I mean funeral directors in general."

"You know a lot of them?"

"Forget it," she said, as Sue placed a hand on my arm.

"Meg," Sue said, "I think we're going to start. Are you ready?"

Teachers and parents and children clustered awkwardly together in their dark clothes, waiting and sweating. The world was a machine, the wheels continuing to grind forward without my mother, metal upon metal. I wanted to struggle against it, but every time I did something normal like eating or sleeping or even breathing, I moved away from her. The past two mornings when I woke up, the first thing I felt was guilt.

A man in a dark blue work uniform steered a yellow lawnmower through the headstones, weaving in and out among the dead. I nodded to Sue, because it was expected of me.

She took my hand, but when we got to the folding chairs I let go and stood with Lainey behind the single row of metal folding chairs. The canopy trapped the heat and it was sweltering underneath. The fabric of my dress clung to my back.

The minister wore a heavy robe with purple silk panels. I had never met him and he had not known my mother. He read from a book of common prayer and even the Bible verses seemed tinged with something unholy. My mother had been quiet about her faith, kept it like a secret: a Bible at her bedside, whispered prayers behind her closed bedroom door. She had not spoken to me much of God, but when she did it was with a conviction that was somehow gentle and true. This man made every sentence sound like a sales pitch.

The coffin stood behind him, the centerpiece of the day and yet also the very thing everyone seemed to be avoiding. I had not been allowed to see my mother and now I wanted to throw back the lid to find her there, however broken and mangled, to breathe the scent of death. I did not want to be protected, a child behind a fence. I wanted to know what it meant to grieve.

In the distance I saw an old woman pushing a man in a wheelchair. Her face was blank like a cement wall. She stopped the wheelchair by a tall stone cross and stood with her hands on the man's crooked shoulders. His mouth was twisted and the left side

of his face sagged. A stringy thread of saliva hung from his chin. His hands shook in his lap without ceasing.

The minister droned on without pause. I clutched the empty water bottle, peeling the soggy label from its side. One of the children began to wail and I could hear a few others sniffing. The mother of the crying child carried her back to the car. Another mom held a Kleenex to her son's nose for him to blow. The sound was thick and wet.

"Bow your heads," the minister said. I did not close my eyes. A girl with white knee socks was looking at the coffin. She caught me watching her and stared back at me. I looked away first. Beside me, Lainey had her eyes squeezed tightly shut and her lips were moving. Her whispers were too faint for me to hear. Lainey was so self-reliant that the thought of her praying caught me off-guard. Despite the heat, I shivered.

With Sue working so much, Lainey practically grew up at my house, my mother playing mom to us both, long after Lainey was old enough to stay at home alone. My mother had been the one who taught us to ride a bike: in my front yard, holding onto our seats and touching our backs, never letting go without telling you the way parents do in the movies. She always held us until we were ready. I remember Sue watching after work the day Lainey and I both finally rode on our own. She stood with her heels sinking into the ground, looking awed that we were actually doing it, awed at the fact that this was the kind of thing my mother could teach us to do. I could not picture Sue ever running along beside a bike.

This past year, I had come home from work more than once to find Lainey and my mother at the kitchen table, feeling like an intruder, even though it was my house, my

mother. With my mother was gone, in some ways it was like her only mother was gone too.

“Amen,” the minister said, and it was over.

Lainey and I stood to the side while people processed by the coffin, trying not to look hurried. I stared down at my feet, pale against the fake green turf. I slid one foot out of its sandal and dragged my toes across the stiff plastic grass. Lainey had been right—her mother did not say anything about her flip flops. Sue waited just outside the canopy, saying goodbye. *It was a lovely service*, they said to her. *The flowers were beautiful. We're sorry for your loss. She was a wonderful teacher. She will be missed.* No one spoke to me.

“Do you want to wait in the car?” Lainey asked. I nodded and we walked out of the canopy’s shade, past Sue and the last of the guests. I stumbled over a grave marker and grabbed Lainey’s arm to keep from falling. Black dots expanded in front of my eyes, covering Margaret and Sue, William in his chair, the coffin behind them. My ears were ringing.

“Meg?” I could hear Lainey’s voice faintly but could no longer see her. Hands gripped my shoulders and arms, one on my waist. I’m fine, I tried to say, but I was powerless to move even my lips. Everything was dark. I was frozen in a well.

I had passed out once before in fourth grade during play practice. I had been on the second step of the bleachers when I blacked out and got a knot on my forehead. I could hear the shuffle of feet around me and the music teacher shouting. When I opened

my eyes, I was still clutching my yellow plastic recorder and all the faces hung round and white like moons above me.

I remembered that feeling as my eyes cleared. My back was against a stone grave marker. Sue stood in front of me, the funeral director hovering behind her. I tried to stand, but could not. Lainey was in the front seat of the car. "Drink this," Sue said, handing me a water bottle. My hands shook.

"It's the heat," the funeral director said. "Happens all the time during the summer."

"I'm fine," I said.

"Let's get you home," Sue said. She helped me to my feet. Her fingers were a vise on my arm.

"I'm okay," I said again, but no one was listening to me. Sue helped me into the backseat. Lainey had her bare feet up on the dashboard and was picking at one of her black-painted toenails.

I stared out the window as Sue walked around to the driver's side door. The canopy was deserted save for the coffin with its heavy saddle of flowers. My head began to ache. I pressed my palms into my eyelids. My damp, sweat-soaked dress quickly became cool against my skin in the air conditioning. "Turn it down," I said to Lainey, curling my knees up to my chest. Grass was caught along the hem of my dress.

Sue sped through the winding drive of the cemetery and hit a dead end. A flowering vine grew through the chain link fence at the edge of the property. She cursed under her breath and turned the car around. As we passed the gravesite again, I saw the

old woman standing in front of the stone cross. The old man had fallen asleep slumped in his wheelchair, peacefully unaware.

CHAPTER THREE

When we got back, Sue dropped Lainey and me off, saying she had errands to run. Her car sped down the street past driveways and yards and houses, the families inside all hidden behind the mirrored glass of the windows. Upstairs, Lainey shut herself in her room and I peeled off my dress to take my second shower of the day. I stood with my face directly under the needling spray as steam billowed around me.

I pressed my cheek against the cool, slippery tile of the wall. My hands clutched for something, anything, but I felt nothing beneath my fingers. At the funeral I had been so brave, wanting to feel something, thinking I was ready to see my mother lying in that wooden box. Now I was being crushed under an emptiness that spun through me like a saw blade. I clenched my jaw and heard my teeth grinding, a sickening bruise of a sound. My mother was washing away from me, circling down the empty eye of the drain. People whose names and faces I did not know were lowering her into the ground, even now.

I turned off the water and wrapped myself in a towel. Steam made a snowdrift of the mirror. I wiped a circle in it with my palm. The night before, Lainey had walked into the bathroom to find me standing at the mirror, holding a fistful of hair.

“I like it,” Lainey had said. “Very punk rock. What are you going to do with it?”
I hadn’t thought of doing anything with it. It was dead.
“I could stuff a pillow or glue it into a painting or something.”

“That’s okay,” I had said. It was still there now underneath some balled-up tissues, tangled into a mass, as though cutting it loose made it grow wild. I took the handful and leaned close to the mirror, holding it next to my neck. It did not look like it belonged to me any more.

Lainey was on the front porch smoking when I went downstairs. She had started earlier this summer. “Sue hates it,” she said when I had asked about it. “Not that I smoke, just that I do it where all the neighbors can see.” Four butts, smoked down to the filter were neatly lined up across one of the bricks on the top step.

“I’m going for a drive,” I said. The black dress was balled up in my hand, still damp with my sweat.

“Need company?” She did not meet my eyes, as though we were both aware of some secret held tenuously between us.

I shook my head no. “But thanks.”

She stubbed her cigarette out lined it up with the others. Her eyes were not red, but her jaw, usually resolute, trembled as she spoke. “I’ll be here,” she said, shutting front door shut behind her.

The trashcans were still out by the curb, empty. I’d heard the truck’s guttural rumble while I was still in bed. I dropped the black dress in one of the metal bins. It fell soundlessly to the bottom and lay on the bottom like a stain.

I had not driven my car since the day of mom’s accident. I thought it would feel strange, but the only strange thing was how automatic it was. I drove to the 7-11 where Lainey and I often spent summer nights, parked near the dumpsters and the burned-out

streetlight. We would sit with cold drinks and candy, watching the kids from school hang around the parking lot smoking and drinking Slurpees and setting off firecrackers and peeling out in their four-wheel drives. Today the lot was almost empty.

It felt strange going inside by myself. I bought a bag of M&Ms and a grape Slurpee. My hundredth that summer, but my first without my mother. Everything was suddenly significant—the first this, the last that. The Slurpee was the only thing in days that I could actually taste. I didn't bother to open the M&Ms.

I drove down Patterson past the Friendly's where our mothers used to take Lainey and I for ice cream sundaes. The Food Lion where mom and I bought groceries now stood empty, a large yellow *For Lease* sign in its window. A Kroger had moved in less than a mile away with wide, clean aisles and Preferred Customer cards. I crossed the bridge over the shallow swamp until strip malls and neighborhoods dissipated into rolling hills and old farms. If I drove far enough, I'd pass the minimum security prison where the prisoners worked in fields, no barbed wire in sight.

Bunches of fake flowers tufted up like toadstools in the brown grass of the cemetery as I pulled through the gates. A canopy near the road was for another funeral. A man was setting up folding chairs, the back of his shirt marked with sweat. Every grave looked the same as I followed the winding drive. I finally saw some men in work uniforms standing together and recognized the large oak tree.

The casket was just being lowered. I parked in the shade along the road and turned off the engine. Without the air-conditioning, the late afternoon air was sweltering. Condensation ran down the sides of my Slurpee. Two men stood by the

grave smoking as the coffin inched down. It looked so bare without the heavy drape of flowers. I wondered who had taken them away.

My mother was in there, I told myself again and again. But a part of me simply could not believe it. Three days before she had gotten up like it was any other morning. She had spilled coffee on her shirt, went back upstairs and changed. I don't think I saw her—*really* saw her. I had been reading movie reviews in the paper before getting dressed for work and probably did not even look at her when she said goodbye.

Living without knowing my father was the kind of emptiness that did not know what it felt like to be full. It was not loss. The space my mother left was yawning and cavernous. I was unanchored now, untethered. I could become anyone. The thought terrified me.

My mother had always been so strong for both of us. I remembered suddenly our cat, Tigger, run over by a car right in front of our house. My mother had buried him in the backyard behind the shed. *Tigger*, I wrote in crooked block letters on a cardboard headstone, and below that, *beloved cat and friend*. I was seven. At first I did not realize that the thing there among the rotting leaves, that *thing* was Tigger: the pink-gray flesh and the dull white bone among tufted clumps of tabby hair. My mother came running as I screamed. She led me back to the house and held me until I stopped crying. Then she went out for a second time to bury our cat.

As the top of the coffin sank out of sight, one of the men flicked his cigarette into the grave. I clutched the steering wheel. Sue would have marched over to lecture him about the inappropriateness of his action and Lainey probably would have thrown her

Slurpee in his face. A few weeks or even days ago I would have done something cowardly, like honking the horn or shouting out the window, but still something. Today I did nothing. Behind the fence, trees swayed back and forth in the wind, their leaves like thousands of tiny angry fists shaking at the sky.

The air conditioner was wonderfully cool as I turned the engine back on. My back was damp against the seat and what was left of my Slurpee had melted. A funeral procession passed me on the way out, led by a great black hearse with its lights ablaze. I did not move until every car had passed me. Most of them were solemn in their black dresses and suits, but every few cars, someone was smiling or laughing or had a hand extended out of the window.

A car behind me honked. Across the street was a miniature golf course, where once Lainey and my mother and I had played. Even from here I could see that its plaster animals faded and crumbling. Instead of heading back to Sue and Lainey's, I drove straight across into the gravel parking lot next to a bald eagle, its wings outspread.

A man with thinning brown hair sat at the window of the only building on the property, a white cube of painted cinderblocks. Fans whirred all around him and a box of colored golf balls sat on the counter. He smiled as I stepped up to the counter, his teeth straight and white like the even symmetry of the cinderblocks. "Eighteen or thirty-six," he asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"You want to play eighteen or thirty-six holes? We have two courses."

"Eighteen, I guess."

“What color ball?”

“Black,” I said.

“We don’t have black. How about blue, like your pretty eyes?”

My eyes were brown. I flushed and tried not to look at his too-straight teeth. “I’ll take orange.”

His fingers brushed mine as he handed me the ball, a club with a rubber handle, and a scorecard with a miniature pencil. “Three dollars,” he said. “Another dollar if you lose the ball.”

“I don’t plan on losing it,” I said. I set three crumpled bills on the counter so I would not have to touch him. My hands were shaking.

He winked at me. “No one does.”

I stuffed the scorecard in my pocket and walked to the back course, which had smaller animals and more shade. I could feel his eyes on me as I walked away. A wooden cutout of a clown stood near the end of the first hole. Its paint was faded, the blues looking gray and the yellow a muddy gold. The shot was harder than it looked. I had to aim the ball perfectly between the clown’s feet to get to the back stretch with the hole. My ball clunked against the its feet twice before I got through.

The course backed up to the driving range and half a dozen men were swinging. There was something satisfying about the solid whack of club striking ball. Most of them were in shorts and running shoes, but one lone woman who looked to be in her seventies stood over her ball in full golfing attire—black and white shoes with spikes, khaki pants,

and a tucked in polo shirt. Every one of her shots sailed out towards the sign near the trees that read 500 YARDS in red painted letters.

I passed from hole to hole, stopping after each to write down my score. I made each hole in five or six strokes a hole. The mossy-looking turf on each hole was dimpled and uneven, scattered with dead leaves and twigs. Some of the wooden rails had rotted away completely and the plaster animals were faded from the sun. A lion's open mouth was filled with crumpled napkins and discarded soda cans. A pink and white zebra had holes about the size of a golf club. I traced one of the openings in its side and felt a sharp prick, as a piece of the metal framework underneath the plaster cut my fingertip. Blood beaded on my skin and I dragged it along the side of the zebra, writing my mother's name there. I had to squeeze my finger to keep the last letter from fading away.

I left my club and ball by hole twelve but stuffed the scorecard and pencil into my pocket. My car tires skidded as I pulled out of the gravel lot. The sun was setting behind me, hidden in the clouds. A yellow-green light fell like the color of dried up fields, a sickly color, the kind of light that comes before dusk on the hottest days in summer. I sped past the cemetery and farmlands until I reached the familiar asphalt parking lots and strip malls. Neon signs blinked on like garish stars and the sun gave way to the resounding gray hush of dusk.

CHAPTER FOUR

When I got back, Sue was asleep on the couch with the television on mute. An infomercial for acne medicine flashed before and after pictures where the faces changed from a scarred red terrain to clean, perfect complexions. They were new people in the after pictures—smiling and beautiful, a hard white line on the screen separating the old from the new. In the glow of the TV, Sue’s legs were the blue-white of skim milk. She still wore her dress but her stockings were rolled into doughnuts on the carpet. I could smell alcohol from the doorway, sharp and medicinal against her cloying perfume. A glass made wet rings on the table. I lifted it up to my nose. Water.

I had never actually seen Sue drink, but Lainey told me that was one of the marks of a high-functioning alcoholic. She had found the term on the internet when we were in middle school, telling me as though it were some fact for a history test. I had not wanted to believe it, but it explained the wide arc of her moods. I had immediately remembered the time she tried to French-braid my hair once when I spent the night. Her hands rough and only rougher when I told her it hurt. My scalp had been sore for days. When I asked my mother about it, she did not deny it, but told me that labels made things seem too simple, cut and dried—an answer that only confirmed it to me. The ice cubes clinked in the glass as I set it down on a coaster, but Sue did not stir.

I heard music playing as I knocked on Lainey’s bedroom door. She was in her pajamas already, her face washed clean of makeup. Without mascara, her eyelashes

were so pale they were almost invisible, making her look child-like, vulnerable. “Hey,” she said, opening the door. She went back to the sewing machine and I sat on her bed.

Lainey’s room was all clean, straight lines. Boxes of art supplies stacked neatly in the closet, their corners meeting at perfect right angles; her books were arranged by size and color, their spines flush against the edge of the bookshelf like we kept them at the bookstore. She probably used a level to hang her art prints. A piece of purple fabric lay draped over the table. She pushed it through with careful patience, the needle moving so quickly I could not see it. “What are you working on?” I asked.

“A new line of softies. They’re called Misfits,” she said, tossing me one from the basket next to the sewing table. It was a garish plaid octopus. Two of its legs were little more than stumps and it only had one button eye. Where the other should have been Lainey had sewn an X with yellow thread.

“Looks like he had an accident,” I said, the words falling from my lips without thought. A wave of guilt washed over me. The sewing machine paused, but Lainey did not turn.

“That’s why they’re Misfits,” she said.

“What’s his name?” I asked. Lainey named each softie and created a story that went beneath its picture in the online store.

“He doesn’t have one,” she said. “None of them do.”

I could not bear looking at the octopus’ single button eye. I set him back in the basket alongside a pink dog with two missing legs and a striped mouse that had long guitar-string whiskers, but no eyes. They looked both pitiful but somehow too desperate,

almost clingy. I did not know how Lainey could infuse so much personality into a stuffed animal she could sew and stuff in a few hours. Normally her creations were off-beat, but not unnerving the way the Misfits looked to me. I wondered when she had started them.

“You did all these today?”

“Some last night.”

“Do they have stories?”

“Kind of. A list of what they’re missing and how it happened,” she said. “Like stats.”

“That’s really....” *Messed-up*, is what I wanted to say. But I think that was her point.

“Really what?”

“Nothing. Do you want to smoke?” I said.

She looked up. “Do you?”

I had only smoked with Lainey once, one of our nights in the 7-11 parking lot, and had coughed through the whole thing. Tonight I was feeling restless and the evenness in Lainey’s room was putting me on edge. “If I can bum a cigarette.”

She laid the purple fabric across the desk and turned off the sewing machine.

“Three days here and you’re picking up my bad habits. Sue will love it.”

“I know,” I said.

We sat out on the front porch with the lights off to keep the bugs away. It was still hot, and it seemed unnatural that without the sun, it still felt like a sauna. Cigarette

after cigarette we smoked, the glowing tips like close familiar stars. I liked the feel between my fingers, but I could not get used to the taste. There were no mosquitoes butting up against my bare legs, which was strange. Usually they flocked to me, leaving scabs along my legs and arms. My mom had always had me put on Calamine lotion before bed so I wouldn't scratch in my sleep. It left my sheets pink-tinged every summer.

Lainey sat with her arms crossed over her knees, staring down the dark street.
“Do you think your mother hides things from you?” I asked.

“She thinks she does,” Lainey said.

I thought of the glass of water in the living room that stank of alcohol. “Like what? Besides the drinking.”

Lainey took a long drag and blew the smoke toward the sky. “She goes on dates, for one.”

“How do you know?”

“She’ll come home late, smelling like cologne. Says she’s been at the office.”

“A boyfriend?”

Lainey shook her head. “Different colognes.”

“I can’t think of our mothers dating,” I said. My stomach dropped as I realized I spoke of my mom as if she were still alive. Those moments were the worst part of the day—when I remembered that she was gone, as though I had been thinking of her still as alive in some part of my mind. I closed my eyes. “Why doesn’t she just tell you?”

“I don’t know,” Lainey said. “Sue likes to keep things hidden. You’ll see.”

“I’ve known your mother my whole life,” I said.

“You didn’t know about her dates. There’s a difference between just knowing someone well and actually living with them,” she said. We sat without speaking for a few minutes, the only sounds distant cars and the shrill chorus of insects. A cricket began to hum near my feet but stopped as I flicked the ash from my cigarette.

“Do you think my mother kept secrets?”

“Everyone keeps secrets.”

“Not everyone’s like your mother.” I took a long drag and held back a cough. The cigarette shook in my fingers and I stubbed it out on the steps.

“Would you be angry if she did?”

“Of course not. No. I could never be mad. Like you said, everyone keeps secrets,” I said.

“So, what then? Why are you asking?”

A lone streetlight flickered and I could see insects swarming around it. “It’s just that...now I’ll never know.” A dark shape scurried across the street—a cat or a raccoon. It was too dark to tell as it moved from shadow to shadow. Moments passed.

“Looks like that’s it for my stash,” Lainey said, opening and shutting the empty box of cigarettes.

“I’ll give you a few bucks tomorrow,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Where do you get them, anyway?” Most places were strict about checking IDs, and Lainey didn’t look eighteen, even in makeup.

“Steve Hamnet.” Steve had graduated in June, a football player who had looked at least twenty-five. Rumor was he’d failed a few times. He spent a lot of time cutting class, smoking in his jeep in the parking lot. Not just cigarettes. I had only been to one football game, and I still remember the way players crumpled to the ground as he pushed through the line. I could not imagine Lainey speaking to him, much less buying cigarettes from him.

“You know him?”

Lainey smiled. “Study hall my freshman year.”

“So, you’re friends with Steve Hamnet.”

“Not friends exactly.”

“I never would have thought. I guess you’re right—everybody does have secrets.”

She looked at me. “It’s not a secret. You never asked.”

The front door swung open and light spilled over the porch. “Girls? Are you out here?”

Lainey stood. “We were just heading up to bed.”

Sue tried to lean against the doorway, but faltered. Her pantyhose trailed from her hand. “Meg, don’t you get sucked into that dirty habit,” she said, wagging a finger at me. Her syllables slurred together like she was speaking through syrup. The pantyhose fluttered in the air.

Lainey walked past Sue into the house. Her voice carried down from the stairs. “You should talk.”

“I don’t smoke,” Sue called up to Lainey. She looked down at me. “I don’t smoke.”

“I know,” I said, realizing as I said it that I did not, in fact, know. I stood and took Sue’s arm, guiding her into the house. “Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

“I don’t smoke,” she said, clutching me as we climbed the stairs together. She was so light. I was overwhelmed with a strange sense of pity and thought suddenly of Lainey’s Misfits.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

She climbed into bed still clutching her pantyhose. The hem of her dress rode up her thighs revealing her white underwear. I pulled the sheets up around her. From this close, I could see the lines in her face, usually caked over expertly with concealer and foundation. She was so still, asleep before I closed the door. I thought about what Lainey had said, how the secrets Sue thought she kept so well were not secrets at all, while my mother, who I thought kept none, might have hidden more than I would ever know.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sue and Lainey began the job of packing up my house. I had not been home since the day my mother died. The thought of Sue and Lainey touching all of my things, my mother's things made me feel nauseated and weak-kneed. But the thought of walking through the door was worse. Sue said she understood, that I could take my time. "Couldn't we wait?" I had asked, gripping the counter in the kitchen.

"I know it's soon. This is going to sound very callused, and I don't mean for it to, but there are certain practical realities to face," Sue had said, putting her hand on my arm. She was putting my house on the market. Someone else at her office was going to be the agent. Sue's face had never been on signs in any of the small yards in my neighborhood, connected by chain-link fences down every block.

I sat at the kitchen table, fraying the edges of the newspaper, as Sue and Lainey got ready to leave. "I hope you know I'm not trying to rush you," Sue said.

"I know," I said. She could only take a few more days off work and then all the packing and cleaning would have to wait for the weekends. My fingertips were turning gray from the newsprint. Lainey stood by the door, waiting, not looking at me. She and I had not talked since the other night. I was not angry with Sue, but I could not understand why Lainey was helping her. Lainey had a choice. This should have been just another excuse for rebellion. I threw the battered newspaper in the trash as soon as they were gone.

They came home late that afternoon with white plastic trash bags full of my mother's and my things. I could hear the crinkle and sigh of plastic from the couch.

I was watching but not really watching a soap opera, and had not changed my clothes after my walk.

"Fine," I said. Lainey sat down next to me and took the remote from my lap. "I'm going to make a quick run to the grocery store," Sue said. "We've got nothing to eat and we need some boxes"

"Don't get banana boxes," Lainey said.

"Why?"

"They carry poisonous spiders from South America," Lainey said.

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"Where did you hear that?" Sue said. "Why banana boxes?"

Lainey shrugged. "Mrs. Phillips told us in Bio last year. Stores are not supposed to give them out, but they do anyway."

"Didn't you make a C in that class?" I asked.

"Doesn't change the fact that poisonous spiders like bananas," Lainey said.

"Whatever," I said.

"Fine—no banana boxes. If you get hungry, there's leftover Chinese in the fridge," Sue said.

"It might not be true," Lainey said, after we heard the slam of the door. "About the spiders. Mrs. Phillips is pretty stupid. What do you want to watch?"

“Nothing.” A commercial for a local lawyer played on the screen. *Injured on the job? Don’t let those big insurance companies bully you!* The soap opera returned at the end. “Put it in SAP,” I said.

“What?”

“It makes everything in Spanish.”

“I know what SAP means,” Lainey said. “How do I do it?”

“There’s a button on the remote.” She found it and the voices switched, suddenly more vibrant. I watched the mouths of the characters, trying to read lips. I could only recognize a few words, despite two years of Spanish. *Amor. Padre. Esposa. Loco.* After a few minutes, Lainey said, “I put a bag in the guest room closet for you.”

“Thanks. I’m running out of shirts.”

“No—your clothes are in the dining room.”

“What’d you put upstairs then?”

The voices from the television filled the room with sounds I could make no sense of. “Some of your mother’s things,” she said.

I opened my mouth, but couldn’t settle on words. I should be the one kneeling in her closet opening shoe boxes, looking through her dresser drawers. Not Sue, not Lainey. “You packed up my mother’s things?”

“Sue is putting everything in storage. I took a few things I thought you’d want: her Bible, a few photos.”

“Those are personal things,” I said. “*Her* things.”

“That’s why I brought them,” she said. “For you.”

“I can’t believe you went through her room, her things. Our house.”

“You make it sound like I wanted to do it, or like I’m some stranger snooping through your stuff. I didn’t have a choice. You’re the one who should have been there.”

I got up from the couch and walked away, feeling the beat of blood against my temples. I clamped my mouth closed, not trusting myself to speak. Lainey looked down at the carpet, her hands clenched into fists so tight that I could not see her fingers. I left her there, the soap opera continuing on the screen, the Spanish firing out in rapid syllables like gunshots. I passed the dining room on the way upstairs, seeing the bags hunched under her dining room table, their mouths pulled tight and still knotted.

In the guest room closet I found the bag Lainey had left. I sat on the bed for a few minutes, staring at it, in there among the shoe boxes. I heard Lainey’s footsteps on the stairs, slow and heavy. The sound of her door shutting, her sewing machine humming to life. Sue had come home and faintly, I could hear the sound of cabinets opening and shutting downstairs. In my room, there was no sound but my breathing.

The knot was tied really tight and I had to pull the drawstrings until they stretched and broke. The bag sighed open the smell of my mother enveloped me. I didn’t even know she had a smell—my mother never wore perfume or scented lotion, everything simple, plain and clean. But there it was—something sweet and warm and familiar. I reached down, my fingers inches above the opening. I could not bear to touch anything.

I shoved the bag back in the closet behind the long winter coats and closed the doors, leaning limply against them as I waited for the smell to fade and disappear. I wiped my face with my hands again and again until my cheeks were finally dry.

When they left the second day, I went into Sue's room, a bed perfectly made with the comforter and pillows matching the window treatments, an expensive-looking blue pattern. Everything in her closet faced the same way. I looked through her dresser drawers and her medicine cabinet, finding only expensive underwear and department store cosmetics. Nothing that felt like it was personal enough to even out the score for what she was doing at my house.

I could bring myself to go into Lainey's room. Instead, I left the front door unlocked and started walking, the heat descending over me like a heavy blanket. The sun was so bright that all the colors seemed washed out, dim. It had rained a little during the night and that hot asphalt smell rose up from the steaming streets. That was the smell that most reminded me of summer.

The richest neighborhoods in Richmond are the ones that look the oldest, least planned. No sidewalks cut their even lines through the lawns. Instead the grass edged right up to the streets, the houses hanging back, looking pleased with themselves, smug in their ivy and brick. Everything was green on Lainey's street, but I never saw anyone here with a garden hose in hand, only ChemLawn trucks and underground sprinkler systems. I thought of my yard, whether it was dying now or if one of the neighbors had watered it, just to be nice. Probably not.

I was the only person in sight and I imagined for a moment families gathered at the windows of the homes I passed, watching me walk alone up their shady, winding

streets. There was no sign of children, no crack of bat to ball or whir of bike tires. In my neighborhood, rollerblades and baseball mitts and tricycles were scattered across the yards even on the hottest days, shouts echoing against the vinyl siding. Nothing echoed against brick.

A few streets away I found an elementary school, the yellow buses lined up in rows, waiting for September. The blacktop with its painted hopscotch squares and basketball half-court was empty. The swings did not stir on their chains in the still summer heat. I sat down in a swing, trying to avoid the puddles that had formed in the worn ruts in the dirt below from dragging feet. I rocked back and forth, watching my reflection as I passed over the puddle.

“Hey,” a voice called. A boy stood a few feet away, band aids on both knees, one flapping open like a sleepy eye. He was maybe around eight or ten. I hated babysitting, was terrible with children—the shrieking, the crying, the runny noses.

“Hi,” I said, trying to sound unfriendly.

“You’re a stranger,” he said. “I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

“So don’t.”

He nodded. “You’re not going very high.”

“I don’t want to go high.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t.”

“Are you scared?” he said.

“No.”

“Swing higher then.”

“I said I don’t want to.” I could not believe I was arguing with him. Where was his mother? I looked down at my feet, hoping he’d go away if I stopped talking.

“Swings are for kids. You’re too big. You might break it.”

“I’m not going to break it.”

He watched me for a moment. “I’m Billy,” he said. I wondered if he’d ask people to call him Bill or William when he got older. Billy would disappear, lost after the football games in high school and the college frat parties. When he had a boring job in an office and a wife and kids, Billy would be the name of a little boy he left behind.

“Billy’s a good name,” I said.

“I know,” he said. He scratched his leg and then stood on one foot, his arms out like plane wings, dipping and moving to keep his balance.

“My mother’s dead.” I had not said this out loud yet, and once I had, my chest caught as though the wind had been knocked out of me. I could not breathe.

He nodded, looking serious but not surprised. “My mom says that angels come and take you away if you’re good, but my dad says that when you die, you’re worm food.”

I began to laugh. I could not remember the last time I had laughed, and I did not know why I was laughing now. Billy frowned at me, his eyebrows pointing down like arrows. My eyes blurred with tears and I leaned over my knees, gasping for breath and shaking.

“You’re too old for the playground,” Billy said finally, and then he turned and walked away.

There was a package in my room when I went up to bed that night, wrapped up in leftover Christmas paper. When I ripped off the paper, inside was a folded quilt. I wasn’t sure what the squares were at first, and then I smelled it. My mother. I took the corners and shook it out, laying it across the bed. It was large enough to cover the double bed, the squares made of fabric from my mother’s clothes. I recognized the red plaid shirt she wore Saturdays around the house, the blue chenille robe from her bathroom, the pinstriped gray from one of her blouses. I pressed my face to it and took deep shuddering breaths.

Lainey’s door was shut and her lights were off. I thought about knocking, which I never would have hesitated to do before. I used to sit in her floor for hours, flipping through her magazines while she sewed or painted or updated the photos on her site, but now that I was living here, we spent most of our time together downstairs in the den. I put my hand to the knob, but could not turn it. Instead I went to sleep, throwing the flowered comforter in the floor and wrapping myself in the quilt, cocooning myself in the scent and the feel of my mother.

CHAPTER SIX

Sunday morning I awoke to the sound of Sue singing in the kitchen. I went down in my pajamas and found her flipping pancakes in heels and slacks. The room was hazy and smelled like Pam and burning. A smoke detector lay on the counter, its battery cavity empty. Memories washed over me with the smell. I leaned against the pantry door, seeing my mother in her bathrobe. Once or twice a year she made pancakes from scratch and we would eat until we were more than full. She knew just how I liked them, flipping them when they were golden yellow, still doughy and moist in the inside. Nausea curled around my stomach.

“Good morning!” Sue said. Her eyes gleamed as though feverish, and her cheeks were flushed underneath a dusting of flour. She could not keep her hands still.

Lainey walked in behind me. I did not look at her. We had not spoken since the other day. “What is that smell?” she asked.

“I made banana pancakes,” Sue said. “I just had this craving.”

“I didn’t know we had bananas,” Lainey said.

“They were in the mix. Doesn’t that look good?” Sue held up a box. On the front was a photo of perfect golden pancakes next to a glass of orange juice and a plate of bananas. “They have macadamia nuts. It’s from Hawaii.”

“So they’re not real bananas?” Lainey said.

“They’re real. Just freeze dried.” She handed Lainey and I each a plate stacked with pancakes. “Isn’t this fun? I’ve got the table all ready for you,” she said. Bright red

placemats set two places, complete with white cloth napkins, silverware, and a bottle of syrup. She had even picked a few flowers from the late-blooming azalea that sagged limply in a bud vase at the center of the table.

“Thanks,” I said, sitting down. The pancakes looked stiff and brown like cardboard in the center of my plate.

“Coffee?” Sue asked.

“That’s okay,” I said.

“I’ll stick with toast,” Lainey said. She set her plate in the sink and got a loaf of bread from the pantry.

The spatula sagged in Sue’s hand. “You’re not even going to try them?”

“I don’t like nuts,” Lainey said.

“Since when don’t you like nuts?”

“Since people started putting them in pancakes.”

“Fine,” Sue said. She dumped the dishes into the sink and filled it with water. The hot skillet hissed and sputtered. She stuffed her apron in a drawer and sat down beside me with her coffee. Her nails clinked against the mug.

“Go ahead—try them,” Sue said.

“You’re not having any?”

“I don’t like breakfast.”

I poured syrup over the pancakes until it filled the plate. I could make out my reflection in it, a shadow moving through an oily sidewalk puddle [stagnant pond water].

The syrup oozed as I cut through the stack with my fork. Sue watched as I lifted it to my mouth.

The syrup could not mask the taste of the pancake's black skin. I felt it working its way down my throat as I swallowed. "They're good," I said.

Sue smiled and sat back in her chair. "I thought they would be," she said.

"When are we leaving?" Lainey asked, scraping butter across her toast.

"Half an hour." Sue looked at me. "Is that okay?"

I nodded. "That's fine."

"I'll be in my room," Lainey said. A few moments later I heard her footsteps heavy on the stairs.

Sue was staring out the window. An empty bird feeder hung in a tree branch just outside the glass. "Are you sure you're ready?" she asked.

I pushed the pancakes around my plate, careful not to let the syrup spill over the sides. "I've got to go home sometime," I said.

"There's no rush."

"There is if you want it ready by the end of the month."

"Ideally, I do. But I don't want to push you."

"I want to go," I said.

"You're handling everything very well," she said, patting my hand. "I'm proud of you. Your mom would be, too."

I dropped my fork and it clattered against the plate. A sticky puddle formed on the placemat. "Sorry," I said, pushing my chair back. I picked up my fork and plate.

“Don’t worry. We’ll just put this right in the wash,” Sue said. She folded up the placemat and took it into the laundry room. I heard the rush of water as she started the washing machine.

“Thanks for breakfast,” I said, but she didn’t answer.

I scraped my plate into the trashcan and then let it slide into the sink. The water was slick with grease. Chunks of food clumped among the pots and pans. My stomach cramped and lurched. I clutched the edge of the counter, heaving into the mess, but nothing came up.

I was sweating in the back seat as Sue drove the familiar roads to my house. The houses got steadily smaller as we got closer to the high school. My neighborhood was a shortcut for all the kids driving to school from Lainey’s neighborhood, their cars passing me in a shiny blur as I walked home in the afternoons.

I stared out of the window. Mothers pushed strollers along the edge of the road. Push-mowers roared from yards. Birds flew. The sun shone.

Lainey fidgeted with the radio, going from station to station so that the notes all jumbled together. “Could you pick a station?” Sue said. Lainey turned it off. We turned down my street. Sue was going exactly 25 miles an hour.

There it was: the grass needing to be watered and mowed, the eaves of the house sagging, windows like open wounds. I never understood why houses seemed to collapse without their owners. When I was little there had been an abandoned house on my bus

route in a clearing with trees grown wild all around, every board on the front curved downward. The windows had been broken out and the door hung open at an angle. Only the chimney stood erect. A gas station had replaced it a few years ago.

My house was already beginning to have that abandoned look. Or maybe it had been looking that way for a long time and I just hadn't noticed. The metal swing set out back was rusted over, the one Lainey chipped her front tooth on. I could see it when she smiled—it was one of my favorite things about her. Dirt created heavy shadows on the siding and paint was chipping on the shutters. The bushes crept halfway up the windows in front and the curtains looked gray and dirty.

"Here we are," Sue said. She parked in the driveway by the steps to the side door. It was where my mother always parked.

Every sound became suddenly magnified as Sue and Lainey got out of the car: the jangling of keys, the slamming car doors, the ticking of the still-warm engine. I sat with my hand on the door. Sue had her key in the lock by the time I climbed the porch steps. The door to the kitchen sighed open with the creak that Mom could never get rid of, even after she sprayed WD-40 until the kitchen stank like cold metal.

The lights seemed dimmer overhead casting dull shadows on the freckled formica counters and linoleum floor. The walls looked water-marked, as though the house had been through a flood. I could see where the deluge had risen above the kitchen table, leaving rings of gray-brown on the walls. Mold spread up the walls like moss and the smell of mildew filled the room. I could feel it creeping into my lungs, billowing out in wispy clouds, making my breaths shallow.

“Meg?” Sue said.

I blinked and the colors came back. There were no watermarks. The walls were faded, but still a leemony yellow. Gauzy curtains and glass sun-catchers hung in the window scattering light over the floor and cabinets. I took a breath.

“Lainey and I are going to bring some things down from the attic.” She set down a stack of flattened-out boxes. I could see the Jack Daniels and Schmirnoff logos printed on the sides.

The pantry door was open and I saw the lines my mother and I had made every year to mark my height. She would write it first in pencil and then let me trace the line with marker, the only time I was allowed to write on the walls. We stopped at my twelfth birthday, but I don’t remember why. I had grown another six inches since so that she and I had almost stood eye to eye.

I walked through the den and the dining room, running my hands over the furniture and the walls. I felt like I was being watched, even though I could hear Sue and Lainey moving around upstairs. There I was, sitting on the couch beside my mother who was asleep, an afghan over her legs and papers to grade stacked in her lap. I could see Lainey and I camped out in sleeping bags in front of the television watching Disney movies late into the night. My mother playing the worn-down, out-of-tune piano, a song called “March of the Wee Folk” and me dancing in pajamas, the kind with the built-in feet. The kerosene heater sat under the window, still showing a trace of blue at the top where I’d accidentally left a plastic cup to melt. Mom had tried to scrape it off, but there it was, a blue ring.

I went upstairs where the three bedrooms were crowded together. My room smelled different, that new carpet smell, though we'd never replaced any of the worn carpets. Mom kept a wish list of things she wanted to update in the house: new flooring, new dishwasher, new faucets. We never had the money for that list, so we made do with cheap improvements, things single mothers could do by themselves on a teacher's salary. We watched shows on faux finishing and designing on a budget on the weekends sometimes, mom getting more excited than I could imagine over the smell of a fresh can of paint. I could see her in a University of Richmond sweatshirt with a messy ponytail and a bandana. The past year, I had spent most of my Saturdays at the book store, tired of painting trim with my mother, bending over until my back hurt. I thought of her now alone, screwing on new drawer pulls in the bathroom.

My books were stacked in the floor, no longer carefully alphabetized. The shelves had been dusted. I pulled open the empty desk drawers, now strangely light . My bed was stripped of sheets and comforters. She had not taken down the pictures on the walls, though they were few. A framed one of the four of us: Sue, Lainey, mom and me when and we had gone up to the zoo in DC for the day. The sun was shining and all of us were squinting, except for Sue, whose eyes were hidden by large brown sunglasses. The cherry blossoms were blooming, so impossibly white. We had spread out a picnic blanket and I remember a rat nosing its way out of a nearby drain and edging through the grass near our blanket. That's the only animal I remember from that day.

I set the boxes down in the floor and walked across the hall to my mother's room. The door was wide open. Her bed was neatly made but her bedside tables, usually

cluttered with books, were empty and clean. Sue had taken down the two framed Van Gogh prints and the pictures of me from her dresser. I doubled over, staring down at my feet until the feeling faded.

I heard humming. Sue knelt in the deep closet dusting the baseboards with a damp cloth. “I thought you were in the attic,” I said.

“Lainey is,” she said. “How are you doing?”

“You’ve done a lot of work.”

“There’s a lot left to do before the painters come next week.”

“Mom and I just painted,” I said. We had painted everything in pastels so that our house was like an Easter egg, bright and cheerful.

“You did a great job. It’s just to get everything fresh,” Sue said. “Buyers like to see neutral colors.”

As I looked around my mother’s pale yellow walls, I saw brush marks in some places, a swipe of paint here or there on the ceiling. For us, it had been enough. “What are you doing with all the furniture?” I asked.

“I’ll leave most of it for now. I want it uncluttered but furnished.”

“It’s not cluttered,” I said.

“I know—it’s just an expression. Let me know what things you want to keep so I can put in storage after it sells. We could have an estate sale if there are enough things you don’t want,” she said.

I pictured strangers walking through the taupe and oatmeal rooms smelling of fresh paint. Bidding on our things, trying to get a good bargain. Estate sounded too

fancy for what we had. I don't think my mother bought anything new, other than the comfortable couch in the den, which did not look new any more.

She finished dusting and began taking my mother's clothes off the hangers. The dark green dress she wore every year to the Christmas Eve service she made me go to, the cream sweater she wore at least once a week, her worn khaki pants. Sue folded them neatly and stacked them in boxes at her feet. I stared up at the ceiling, smooth and white. The metal hangers rattled. She looked so composed, as if packing up her dead best friend's closet was part of her job, something she did every week.

"Maybe we should just sell everything," I said.

"Not everything. We'll set aside the things you want. You can bring what will fit to our house and then the rest—"

"Sell it all."

Sue stopped and looked at me. "You don't mean that. Give it some time. You may not think so now, but you'll want it one day. Once you sell it, it's just gone. Let's put it in storage, at least until you're a little older. Then you can decide what you want to do," she said.

"I already decided. It's just stuff."

Sue put a hand like she was going to touch me, then changed her mind and it fell against her pant leg. "Think about it for a few days," she said.

"I'm not going to change my mind."

"You many not be in the best place right now to make a decision."

“It’s my decision to make,” I said, leaving her in the half-emptied closet. I shut myself in my room and climbed into my bed, right on top of the bare mattress. I stared up at the ceiling and could hear Lainey up there moving around. The staircase was in the third bedroom closet. That had been my room at first because it was bigger, but I was too scared of the stairs leading up in the dark.

Lainey and I snuck up there once, looking through old boxes and riding on the horse on springs that I had long outgrown. We had been looking through a box of old letters when I saw my mother, frozen at the top of the stairs. I can still remember the fell of her hand as she spanked me, shouting about how we could have fallen through the ceiling and how the pink stuff was filled with tiny pieces of glass. She spanked both of us, then shut her self in her room. Lainey and stopped crying after a few minutes and played a board game. When my mother came out, she got down in the floor and joined in our game, then took us out for ice cream so that by the end of the day we had almost forgotten.

I awoke to the sound of knocking. I was disoriented, used to opening my eyes to the walls of Sue’s guest room after only a week. It took me a moment to realize where I was. “Meg?” It was Lainey.

“Come in.” I sat up too quickly and my vision went dark for a moment. Lainey’s hair was damp, plastered against her head. Her face shone with sweat. “How long have I been asleep?”

“It’s noon,” she said. “You should probably get some of this stuff packed before Sue comes in here. Do you want a hand?”

“Thanks,” I said. We knelt down in the floor together and she put one of the boxes together while I sealed it up with brown packing tape. Lainey stacked the books inside, spines facing up. “Sue left you with the dirty work?”

“It was too hot, she said.”

“That’s nice,” I said.

“There’s a lot of stuff.”

“I don’t even know what’s up there.”

“Some of your kid stuff. Old clothes, toys. There was a box of old photo albums I thought you’d want to see,” she said.

“Did you bring it down?”

“It’s still up there. Go look.”

“But my whole room...”

“Your room will wait. I’ll take care of it.” She dropped a stack of books into a Jose Cuervo box.

“Thank you,” I said. She nodded but did not look up.

The attic stairs were narrower and more cramped than I remembered. The air was thick with heat and my t-shirt was already sticking to my back. The whole room looked smaller: the ceiling lower, the slant of the roof steeper, the area with sturdy boards between the pink insulation thinner. One side of the room was almost cleared out, but boxes hulked on the other side, waiting their turn. One box sat alone, flaps open.

I lifted out the first album. It had a cheap vinyl cover, cracked and dusty. It snapped like twigs breaking as I opened it. I sat cross-legged, so that the covers rested on my knees. The photos were small and square. The colors were off, a burgundy tint staining everything like wine. Several hung at an angle or overlapped on the yellowing pages. I peeled back the clear plastic with a ripping sound and one of the photos fluttered to the floor.

It was a picture of Sue and my mother, standing on either side of a man with a thick mustache and dark brown hair. Lainey's father. Sue had thrown out most of the pictures of him out after the divorce, but Lainey kept a few hidden behind one of her desk drawers. Lainey's father had an arm around each of them. My mother was laughing, her hair the golden brown of fall leaves. She was very thin in tight, dark jeans, but I could see the beginning of a swell in her stomach. Me. Sue was tinier than she was now, which hardly seemed possible, her white-blond hair layered around her face. If she wasn't already pregnant with Lainey, she would be soon. I had never seen the smile she wore in the photo, so unlike the practiced toothy smiles in her advertisements.

I was suddenly aware of the heat in the room, so thick and humid that each breath I took felt wet. My fingers were sticky where they held the photograph by its corner. I stared at away, past the rafters. A cobweb lazily billowed in a draft of air I could not feel. Sweat poured down my face, dripping in my eyes. Somewhere I hear a door slam and from a few houses away I could hear the sound of children playing, a dog barking. I left the box of albums sitting in the middle of the attic floor. When I finally put down the picture, my fingertips were stained red.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Human beings are creatures of survival, my ninth-grade history teacher had said. *People adapt—nothing can conquer mankind's desire to survive.* We had been discussing some brutal act of one people to another—Genghis or Alexander or one of the many others. What had been merely his philosophy about the ghosts of history and that anonymous word, mankind, was now a truth I exemplified. I continued to live. My lungs pushed air in and out. My heart pumped blood through my veins and capillaries and arteries. Cells that I could not see were replicating. The idea of these natural, physical things continuing with or without my permission felt unnatural to me now. These things were no longer true of my mother. But more unnatural was that I still had the desire for life and living. More complex than simple biology, my desire was to live.

Desire felt like betrayal, and yet I *wanted*. I wanted to settle into the guest room and make it feel like my own. I wanted to get out of the house, go to the pool or the beach, to feel the summer sun on my skin. I wanted to see a movie in the theater, to drench my popcorn in butter and then, when I got thirsty, to drink a syrupy soda. I wanted to look at colleges, to finish my senior year and get out of Richmond. I wanted to laugh again with Lainey. I wanted to stop missing my mother.

Desire became synonymous with selfishness and guilt. I wanted to stop wanting. I started simply. When I got hungry, I would not eat until the hunger pains subsided into a sort of queasy contentment. I denied myself the pleasures I wanted. If I felt like

watching television, I would sit in my room instead, or go for a walk in the heat wave that still had not broken. There was a new feeling, one I couldn't place, that had begun like a slow burn a few days after the funeral. The more I tried to suppress it, the stronger it became, growing hotter and brighter like a flame, like a restlessness that burned through me.

I went back to work, but was not sure why. Brian, my manager, had been calling for weeks, leaving messages increasing in their urgency. Everyone was sorry about my mother, they missed me, they hoped I would come back, they really needed to fill my position if I didn't come back. I didn't hate my job, but I didn't want to go back. At first I had loved it, touching all the shiny new paperbacks and hardbacks, putting them into place on the shelf—the one time in my life everything was neat and even like Lainey or Sue. I found hope in the sheer number of titles the bookstore carried, how possible it was to accomplish something. Until I realized that the books I took off the shelves every week to make room for new titles meant books that failed, going back to the publisher, who would give back a percent for what did not sell. The prime spots, too, were paid for—there was a list waiting for me so that I knew which covers to face outward toward the store and which sets of books to put on the end-caps at the end of each row. On my breaks, I would wander through the CD section, each enclosed in its plastic case, but that was no better. The sheer volume of titles and albums that moved in and out, or did not move in and out, was overwhelming.

Sue was surprised, but looked sort of relieved at the same time when I told her a few days later that I had called my boss. “You don’t need to work,” she told me. “We have enough money. Whatever you want. Do you need new school clothes? What?”

“I don’t need anything,” I said.

Walking into the store I felt naked. When I had last left, I was crying so hard that I couldn’t even see of walk straight. Even though I had virtually no friends here and no one that I’d talk to outside of work, I knew that I had been the big news for the week among the rest of the staff—that’s just how it was. Brian caught me in science fiction, almost back to the break room where I needed to clock in. He put a hand on my shoulder. There was that look, the one that before a week ago I wasn’t familiar with, but now couldn’t seem to escape: pity, and some kind of curiosity, like I was a creature to be studied. “Meg, on behalf of everyone here, we just want to say how sorry we are,” he said.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to back out of his touch.

“No, really. If you need anything—anything at all. Just let me know,” he said, but I could see him struggling to keep the same tone as he noticed my flip flops. I could tell he was just dying to say something about it. I waited, but he didn’t. “There’s a gift card in your locker, just a little something for you.”

I stared at him. “I lost my nametag.” That same struggling look crossed his face like when he saw my shoes, but he pushed it back to keep the new sorry-for-me one.

“No problem, no problem. Toby’s back there and will make you another one. He also can tell you what areas we’re backed up in. Do you know Toby?” I shook my head. “He works in receiving and stocking. I’ll take you back there.”

He led me through the store and I tried to keep my head down, away from the other employees who also knew, and the customers, to whom it probably looked like I was in some kind of trouble. I’d been given a tour of the store when I first started working there, but Brian had really skimmed over the back, since I was only going to be on the floor, shelving. Someone in the back stacked the wheeled shelves and left them by the door, so I only had to walk through the swinging door and pick up the next cart, leaving my empty one there to be refilled. The back workers were invisible. I thought of them as elves. The back room looked like a warehouse with a high ceiling, cement floors, and metal bookcases to the ceiling, filled with boxes or books or other packages.

I could hear music getting playing and as we got to Toby’s desk, I saw an old transistor-type radio on a desk filled with papers and books, almost covering a computer and hiding the surface of the desk completely. There were stickers and posters of brightly colored superheroes, some that I recognized, some that I didn’t, on the painted cinderblock wall. A really bright lamp shone down on Toby’s shoes, which were faded red sneakers, propped up on the desk. He was reading a comic and I guess because of the music, didn’t hear us coming.

“Toby,” Brian said and Toby jerked in his chair. He clutched his t-shirt and breathed heavily.

“You sure know how to scare a guy,” he said. “Man.”

“Toby, I’d like your help with something. And I see you’re not busy.” Toby seemed completely oblivious to the tone of Brian’s voice and his tight-lipped smile. He looked like some kind of shaggy, happy dog. I could see him laying out in the grass, rolling in the sun, tongue lolling out. Totally content. His blond hair was wild and hung in his brown eyes.

“Sure, boss, whatever you need.”

“This is Meg,” Brian said. He raised his eyebrows and I could hear the part he didn’t say, *Meg, the girl whose mom died.*

“Hey Meg,” Toby said, reaching his hand out. I waited for the look and for the tone, but he had neither. It was awkward, like he didn’t know something that Brian and I did and I found myself blushing. I could see Brian open and shutting his mouth as though he wanted to try and explain who I was so that Toby could act in the correct way, but he didn’t quite know how with me standing there. Toby’s grip was firm and his hand was dry. Giving up on trying to explain the situation, Brian did not look at me again but went on.

“Meg needs a new nametag,” he said. “And can you fill her in on the areas where we’re really lagging?”

“Sure,” he said. “No problem.”

“Great,” Brian said. “Meg, I’ll be out on the floor if you need anything. Anything at all. And don’t forget to clock in.”

“Well, let’s get a move on,” Toby said. The nametags were all in the break room, which held the time clock and all of our lockers. We were supposed to keep them locked,

but I didn't ever keep anything in there, so mine was open. I saw the gift card, still in its cardboard holder, propped up against the sweater I kept in there for lunches. The break room was notoriously freezing and often I ate in the parking lot rather than having to sit awkwardly through conversations around the break table that never seemed to include me. I swiped my timecard, listening for the beep to make sure it went through. Toby had a plastic nametag sheath and a piece of cardboard all set out for me. He held the label-printer.

“Okay, so what do you want your nametag to say?” he asked.

“Doesn’t it have to say my name?”

“Technically. But that’s no fun.”

“Won’t I get in trouble?”

“I won’t tell.”

I wanted the perfect name to put on there, but I could not think of anything but my own name. Plain, boring Meg.

“So?” Toby said, his fingers poised on the buttons.

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Put whatever you want.”

He punched letters in. The white label came out of the side. He tore it off and handed it to me. I looked at the white label, the two letters tiny in the center: ME. “Here’s your new identity. You are now Me. If Brian gives you a hard time, just tell him I can’t spell.”

I smiled and stuck it over the 20% Off Rock CDs ad that was still in the plastic sheath from June. Every nametag was also an advertisement, the current specials handed

out at the beginning of each month just the right size to fit inside our nametags. “It’s perfect,” I said. “Where should I start with shelving?”

“I’ve got the carts all loaded and ready by the back door. I’d say the sections are pretty much in equal disarray, so start wherever you want.” He locked the label-maker back up in the drawer and walked back through the swinging door to the back. “Nice to meet you, Meg.” It was the first conversation with someone I’d had without my mother’s death hanging like a heavy curtain between us, shadowing every word. I longed for more of it, yet I also feared that when he found out that I was the girl he’d probably heard about whose mother died, he’d feel so awkward or guilty for not mentioning it the first time, he wouldn’t want to talk to me again.

I spent the rest of the afternoon out on the floor shelving. Once you learned the system of how things were organized in there, it was easy to keep everything set up. Every book was ordered alphabetically by author’s name, except for the oversized books, which were at the end of each section, alphabetized among themselves. The most important thing was to keep every binding flush against the edge of its shelf, so there was a continuous straight line at the edge of the shelves. The shelves looked like someone had gone through randomly pushing fistfuls of books back so that all the spines were uneven. During my training, Brian had explained the importance of a neat and clean environment. Though I was intimidated by Lainey’s neat and orderly existence, there was something peaceful about the neat spines of the books, so clean and smooth lined up against the bookshelf edge.

I caught the other employees watching me now and again across the store by the register or behind the information desk. Their eyes shifted away usually, as though trying to convince me that they had not, in fact, been looking at me. Sometimes instead of looking away, they would get a nervous look, smile with that same look of pity. I did not smile back.

I met Lainey at the mall after work. School was only a few weeks away, and Sue gave us her credit card for back-to-school clothes. “Whatever you need,” she said. “Both of you.” She did not give us a limit. The thought of a limitless card made me almost breathless, but then I felt that same tightening of guilt in my stomach, now for the fact that I was excited to have whatever I wanted. Back-to-school shopping used to give me stomach pains when I was younger. Mom always tried to hide the fact that we could only buy from certain stores or afford certain things, and I felt guilty for wanting new, trendy, expensive clothes. I was usually limited to a pair of jeans and a few shirts. New shoes were saved for Christmas.

We could hardly walk in the mall for all the people. Every store had a line at the counter and the windows of every store had giant red and white SALE signs. We stopped in the middle near the food court with people spilling past both sides of us like a stream. I felt lost.

“I hate this place,” Lainey said.

“Then why are we here?”

“I thought you wanted to come.”

I stared into the sea of shopping bags ebbing by us. “We might as well buy something. Make Sue happy.”

“Where do you want to go?” Lainey said.

“I don’t know. How about a department store? Then at least there won’t be fifty other people wearing the same shirt at school.”

I could not help looking at the price tags. I was used to sifting through the racks at the back of the stores where all the clothes with red sales tags were clustered in on top of each other. Today I avoided the sale rack and looked at the front of the store, picking not the most expensive things, but much more than I had spent before on clothes.

Lainey and I met back up in the dressing room, holding our things. Her taste was eclectic and she mostly mixed her own creations with store-bought things, never anything too trendy. I tended to stick with basic things that didn’t make any kind of statement. I had picked out different kinds of things today, catching a glimpse of myself and my ragged hair in the mirror. I did not know any more what I liked. I could be anyone.

The lines were ten people long so we shared one when it was our turn. We barely able to stand inside. There was nowhere to put our armfuls of clothes. The hooks were already filled with hangers and mountains of clothes were balled up in the floor.

“Wouldn’t you hate to have this job?” Lainey said, kicking aside a mound of sweaters tangled together. She dumped her clothes on top, hangers and all.

I felt strangely self-conscious taking my clothes off in front of Lainey. I elbowed her as I took off my shirt. She had to grab the wall for balance, pants caught around her ankles.

“Ow,” she said.

“Sorry.” I bumped her again as I bent down to pick up a shirt and her back thudded against the flimsy dressing room wall. She sat down, hard, on a pile of sweaters. Someone on the other side called out, “Watch it!”

Lainey laughed, and I had not realized how much I had missed that sound: her belly deep, totally un-self-conscious laughter. Her hair shook against her shoulders. She did not seem to care that her lime green underwear was showing, probably not only to me, but whoever was on the other side of the partition as well.

“Are you okay?” Laughing felt like something pulled from the back of a closet where it had long lain unused. For a moment it was us as we had been a month before.

“Fine,” she said. She did not get up from the floor or put on the pants she had picked out. She pulled her knees to her chin and looked at the clingy green sweater I had put on. I could see by her face, it was bad.

I looked in the mirror, turning so I could see the top from the back. “What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, but I could tell by her face what she thought, and I had never known Lainey not to speak her mind. That realization dropped like lead to the pit of my stomach. A new haircut didn’t change me to someone else. Losing my mother hadn’t

changed me to someone else. I was the same as I had been, the same as I would be. I balled up the top and threw it on top of the pile in the floor.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Lainey said, but she got to her feet and pulled her shorts back on. I did not answer and we left the clothes we’d brought in on top of the piles.

I walked out ahead, not wanting Lainey to see my face, but as soon as I walked out, I stopped and Lainey ran into the back of me. Amanda Bare and her mother were at the front of the line waiting for a dressing room. Amanda had been my homeroom since middle school but we had never said more than a few words to each other. Amanda could hardly look me in the eye and shifted nervously from side to side, a pile of clothes draped limply in her arms.

“Meg! It’s good to see you,” Amanda’s mother said. She reached out as if to shake my hand but patted my arm instead when I didn’t respond. “I’m—we’re—so sorry to hear about your mother. What a terrible tragedy—it’s just senseless. But you hang in there, be brave. It’s good to see you out here, getting back to normal.” People in line behind Amanda and her mother began to shift and mumble as they did not move forward to take my room. She hardly paused for breath, so I did not have to worry about how to respond. “Amanda, you haven’t said hello.”

“Hey,” Amanda said. Her hair had fresh blond highlights and I could see that she held the same green sweater I had just tried on. I was glad that I left it in the dressing room floor. She was shifting impatiently. The girl next in line cleared her throat and someone in the back said, “What’s the hold-up?”

“You let us know if there’s anything we can do,” Amanda’s mother said.

“Amanda will invite you over for dinner one of these nights, won’t you, Amanda?”

“Sure,” Amanda said. I did not look at her.

“Good to see you, Meg,” her mother said. “And again—we’re so sorry.”

I did not wait for Lainey, but began walking through the store. People were everywhere, but their faces looked blank and dark to me, featureless. Someone jostled me and I bumped a rack, hearing the metal scrape of the hangers against each other. I elbowed my way through the clothing racks. They were closing up around me. Every sweater reached for me, entangling me in its arms. The hooks the hangers seemed to bend and reach out for me. I clawed at the clothes and the hangers like arms, trying to pull myself through and out. I was drowning, my breath coming in shallow pants, all the colors splintering in my eyes until there was only red. And then I was falling and there was a muted clatter as I pulled a full rack to the floor with me, the shirts and hangers and jeans heaping together beside me.

I cut my palm on something, a shallow cut. Faceless bodies surrounded me, their voices forming an electric hum. And then Lainey had me, was pulling me up and I did not know how she was strong enough to do this, but I could see her face clearly beside me and she was moving with me and my legs were moving too, doing what Lainey did. I let her take me away.

The cold water brought me back. Lainey leaned against the gray tile wall next to the small sink as I brought the water from my cupped hands to my face again and again. She had led me to the family bathroom in the back of the department store, a single room with a toilet, sink, and diaper changing table. The cut on my hand stung but was no longer bleeding. I clutched the edge of the sink, letting the water run. I had worn makeup that day for the first time in weeks and now it lay on my skin like bruises underneath my eyes and across my cheek. I wet a handful of brown paper towels and scrubbed at the stains.

“You okay?” Lainey asked. She watched me in the mirror, handed me more paper towels. I did not answer and her lips twisted down in a grimace. “That was a terrible question. Sorry.”

I turned off the water and dried my face. My head felt clear now, but my legs and hands were trembling. I sat down, the tile icy against my legs. Scraps of toilet paper and wet paper towels littered the floor. I could smell a dirty diaper in the trashcan. Lainey knelt down, her hands on her knees. “I’m not,” I said, looking at a tampon wrapper near my feet. It was split up the seam.

“Not what?”

“Not okay. I’m not okay.” I leaned my head back against the wall, staring into the lights above, harsh and white. They blurred as tears puddled in my eyes. If only I kept looking up, they would not fall. My neck began to cramp and I dropped my head, watching my tears dot the front of my shirt. I traced the cut on my palm, intersecting with the other lines there. “What am I supposed to do? What do I say? It’s like

everything has changed, but nothing has changed. I'm stuck here where things just happen to me and I can't control any of it. I have no control." Lainey was so still I was not sure if she was breathing. "I can't go back to school, Lainey. I can't do it."

Someone rattled the door handle, then knocked. Lainey's head swung up. "Just a minute," she called. She turned to me and put her hand on mine, then squeezed it tightly. There was almost a charged feeling that passed between us, that line that so seldom we crossed, was crossed. "You don't have to," she said.

"How? Tell me what to do," I said. My nose was running, but I did not want to let go of her hand so I leaned into my shoulder and wiped in on my shirt sleeve.

"We can go." She was smiling at me, so close I could see that little chip that was missing from her front tooth. There was another knock. "One minute," she said.

"Like run away?"

"Not like that—more like moving. Pick a place, plan it out, and do it."

"What would we do there?"

She stood, helping me up, still holding onto my hand. "Anything," she said. "We could do anything at all." She let go of my hand and opened the door.

A woman with two children in a double stroller stood at the door, hands crossed over her chest. "About time," she muttered as we passed her, but I was not there. I was somewhere, anywhere else with Lainey, where no one but the two of us knew that my mother had died.

“Well, look at you!” Sue said as we came through the door that afternoon with bags from Gap and Express and Dillards.

“We bought a lot,” I said, and we had. Almost giddy after our talk in the bathroom, talking and imagining the places that we could go, we had simply pulled clothing from the racks and shelves, not bothering to try anything on. It was not really for us, it was for Sue. The first part of our plan, set in motion. “We can’t do anything out of the ordinary or she’ll suspect something,” Lainey had said. And so she had picked out a few things that she knew Sue would hate. And that night Sue sat on the couch while we held up the shirts and skirts and sweaters that we had bought with her credit card, that I didn’t care if I never wore. And somehow, it was the first time I had gone back-to-school shopping without feeling guilty when I was done.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning was the first day that I awoke with the knowledge that my mother was already dead. It was both comfortable and horrifying, that already the knowledge was inside me, so final, so true. But whether it was the fact that the knowledge was there, or the idea of leaving and going where I could live somewhere without anyone knowing.

I doubled up on my shifts, thinking of hour of shelving as a few more meals, a few more dollars toward rent. My fingers became lined with an alphabet of paper cuts and I smelled like ink and paper when I collapsed in a Lainey's room at night. We stayed up for hours, stretched out together in her bed the way we spent so many nights when we were younger, close but never touching. Talking was easier while looking up at the ceiling than at each other, the names of cities falling from our lips: New York, Boston, LA. We spoke of highways and moving. Always moving, my mind impatient, every thought a loose end. I something to stop the spinning.

School started in just over two weeks. "I can't go back," I said. "I don't care when we leave or where we go, but I can't go back to school." She grabbed me at the front door one night before I could even get inside. "Atlanta," she said.

"Atlanta? What's in Atlanta?"

"Georgia Tech."

"So?"

“That’s where Steve’s going. Next week. The day before we’re supposed to start school. He’s driving down himself and could take us along. Like you said, no one knows that he and I even talk to each other. It’s perfect.”

Atlanta was a city we’d mentioned, but not considered seriously. It didn’t have the appeal of New York, or even Boston or Philadelphia. The only ideas I had of Atlanta came from that John Mayer CD everyone had been listening to a few years back. I remembered that song about the girl, buzzing like neon on Peachtree Street. The more I thought about it, the more it appealed to me: the city unformed in my mind. It could be anything and we could be anyone.

In the meantime we finished packing up my house. Sue refused to sell off all the furniture and paid movers to take everything to a storage facility. We took the last of the boxes of things over and the sound of that metal door coming down was so final, like a period at the end of that sentence of my life.

I drove over one last time, alone, to walk through the house. A “For Sale” sign was already in the yard, though the painters were coming in the next day or two. I walked through the house, seeing the faded spots in the floor and the carpets where, for so long, our things had lain. The floor in those places looked almost embarrassed to be showing that part of itself, looking almost new where it had been covered and protected from the stains and the spills. It curled my stomach a bit to think about dirt forming layers like years across the floor and walls. I could see things that I had never seen before—the dark gray smudge down the hallway and near the light switches where hands had left their marks. Holes and cracks in the plaster where we had hung our pictures and

prints. I could see dust like cobwebs in the cracks where wall met ceiling. Every room looked smaller and it was hard for me to think of living there as I had, just a month before, as though some hard line had been drawn in my life, forever separating everything from before from me now.

I could not walk into my mother's empty room, and instead shut the door, gently. With our plans solidly in place, even thinking about my mother made me feel guilty. She was gone, but somehow it was like I was leaving her. I could feel her disapproval even still.

My room was tiny and empty. I stood with my hands on the windowsill, looking at the neighbor's house on the other side of the chain-link fence, trying to memorize every part of every thing, mixing my memory with what I saw now, not sure which I'd rather see in my mind. There were so many things I could not remember—I should have more memories than I did, but could not find them among the cobwebs within my mind.

I locked the side door behind me and, not trusting myself to have a key, stuck it up high in the sill of the tiny window above the bathroom beside the side door, where sometimes mom kept a spare just in case we were locked out. I felt safe knowing it was there, as though in five years I could come to the house, drive up the driveway, find the key and let myself back into the life I had.

On my last day of work, my hands were shaking so much that I finally sat down on them during my break. I had brought a package of saltine crackers for lunch, but

could not eat. Instead I stared at the open pages of a magazine without really seeing it. Tomorrow morning after Sue left for work, Steve was picking us up. Lainey insisted that we not pack until late tonight, just in case Sue happened to notice. I wondered how she could not notice anyway. It was too hard to hide the restless energy and momentum Lainey and I had. But maybe she chalked it up to the start of school again. Whatever she thought, she did not seem worried and we wanted to keep it that way.

“Light lunch?” Toby’s voice startled me. He pointed to the crackers.

“Less than light,” I said. “I’m not really hungry.”

“That’s too bad. I was going to ask if you wanted to go grab lunch. Or, maybe tonight, if you’re not hungry now. Dinner.” I stared at him. Since I had come back, I looked forward to my conversations with Toby, the only person in the store who did not know about my mother. I found reasons to go to the back room, feeling my nerves jangling as I spoke with him. I immediately began to sweat. I could not answer.

“Tomorrow night? The next?”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’d love to, but I can’t.”

He looked down at the table, pushing the hair back from his face. “Can’t or won’t? Nevermind—I shouldn’t have asked that. No big deal,” he said. He started to walk away, brushing his hair from his eyes. It was then, for the first time, that I saw the thick ugly scar on his wrist peeking out from the sleeve of his shirt. Jagged and uneven and real, speaking of a pain that I did not know, not even me.

“Wait—Toby,” I said, as he reached the door. He stopped, but did not turn around. “My mother died.” He did not turn around.

“I know,” he said, and left.

CHAPTER NINE

That last night, we drove to the 7-11 parking lot one last time. Lainey parked in our usual spot by the dumpsters, underneath the burned out light. Only the light had been fixed now. The parking lot in was filled with Tahoes and pickups parked crookedly, stereos thumping. Half our school stood around in the bright fluorescence of the convenience store, holding Slurpees and cigarettes. The other stops in the strip mall—a card store, a sub place only open for lunch, and a dry cleaners—were closed, their darkened windows like sheets of black ice.

Tonight was the last evening of summer. Tonight was the last night with no curfews. Tonight people were more reckless, knowing that the next day everything would change. Tonight I felt like I was watching from a greater distance than I ever had before.

“Can you believe this?” Lainey said. “We’re really doing it.”
“No, I can’t. Let’s not talk about it, just for tonight. I don’t want to change my mind.”

We watched the drama unfold across the parking lot. Susan Pitts, a girl who seemed to float above everyone, whose name rolled like a wave down the hallways at school, was making out with some guy I didn’t recognize on the hood of a black Mustang. A crowd of people stood watching, two girls with their arms crossed, words like daggers passing back and forth between them as they stared. Susan pulled back and let go of the guy’s collar, gave him a little shove and he slid from the hood. She crossed

her legs, leaned back against the windshield and lit a cigarette. The two girls stomped off to their car and sped out of the parking lot.

“I can tell you I’m not going to miss this,” Lainey said.

I stared at Susan Pitts, barefoot, her long legs tan against the shiny black hood of the car. Her hand flicking ash to the pavement, every gesture languid, like she moved through honey, sweet, warm, and slow.

“I never pictured you as the high school dropout,” Lainey said.

“Me, neither,” I said. “Are we going to ruin the rest of our lives?”

She rolled her eyes. “What do you think?”

“I hope not,” I said. “There’s one thing—something I want you to promise me.”

“What?”

“You can’t tell anyone we meet about my mother.” As we watched, Susan Pitts got into the Mustang with the boy she’d been kissing.

Lainey nodded. “Okay,” she said. We listened the hum and purr of the motor as he started the engine and they peeled out of the parking lot. The parking lot echoed with slamming card doors and it was a train of cars that followed the Mustang, driving away, like there was only one road they could follow.

CHAPTER TEN

We left the morning before school started. As soon as Sue left for work, Lainey had her stuff by the front door and was pacing in front of the windows, humming. Steve Hamnet pulled up in his olive-green jeep with the soft-top on, its windows just thick sheets of clear plastic that could be unzipped. I was nervous, about the leaving, about meeting him—everything. I had never officially met him—all the talking and parts of our plan were places he talked with Lainey about, not me. I felt like we should leave a note or something for Sue, who would realize right away that we were gone, I was sure of it.

“Meg, Steve. Steve, Meg,” Lainey said, practically running down the sidewalk with several of her bags.

Steve held out his hand to me and smiled, a crooked grin, dimples visible through his shaggy, unshaved face. I was surprised. The idea of Steve Hamnet was so intimidating that I was not prepared for the immediate ease I felt as he shook my hand. “Heard a lot about you,” he said.

“You, too,” I said, though this was hardly true. I looked to Lainey, who was running back up the sidewalk for more bags. Other than his role in the plan, she had told me little about him, but the familiar way in which he looked at her and said her name made me wonder just what was between them.

“You two pack enough?” he asked, carrying a box of Lainey’s. I only had three bags worth of things, plus the quilt she made me. She had a difficult time consolidating all of her art supplies and things into manageable bags. “I’m not coming back,” she had

said, “so I need to take everything I need to make my art with me.” I think when she’d said those words, I had first realized that we were in trouble, realized what it was exactly that we were doing. We were not little kids, running away because of some argument or temper tantrum. We had planned and were planning to move and live. This was not a trip—this was the rest of our life, or the beginning of it, anyway.

I had only packed two duffle bags full of clothing and a few odds and ends. I still could not bring myself to really go through the bag of things that Lainey had salvaged from my mother’s room, but I didn’t want to leave them behind, so I had opened the bag and pulled a few things from it, stuffing my mother’s worn Bible and her address book and the yellow-gold necklace she had often worn down underneath my t-shirts and jeans. I didn’t have a good picture of my mother to pack, but I did find one from a few years back of the two of us, when my hair was still long and so was hers. We were both smiling, but she was looking away from the camera and her brown eyes were the color of honey.

I had realized as I packed that I really owned very little that I cared about and when it came down to it, needed. There was no reason for me to take more than things to wear. I did not care what I left behind because that was, after all, the point of leaving. I would go, the things I did not want to be a part of my life anymore would stay. I felt like we should have left a note or something for Sue, but knew that she would know what we had done, if not the details. She probably already knew. There had been a sort of intensity in the air, a charged and electrical feeling the past few days and I don’t know how she could not have felt it as we passed each other in the halls, a small jolt like static

electricity as we brushed shoulders. Maybe if she felt it, she chalked it up to that nervous, before-school feeling. But no—I think she knew. Not what, exactly, but knew that there was something. I could tell. I did not know how to feel since she didn't stop it.

Steve rearranged the bags that Lainey had put in the back on top of his bags, patting them down to get the most into the small space behind the back seats of the jeep. He only had a few bags, the difference between a guy moving into college for the first time and us. I tried to calm my nerves by thinking of this just like we were going to college, no different than Steve, just doing what he was doing—something perfectly normal and acceptable. “Aren’t you going to need more stuff for college?” I asked him.

“I wanted to leave room,” he said. “I can always come back.”

I liked him, and this surprised me. There was something calming about him, practical. Solid. “Let’s go, let’s go!” Lainey said, practically jumping up and down. Steve opened the passenger door and pulled the lever so the seat swung forward for me to get in the back.

“Thanks,” I said. I felt rushed, and looked through the plastic windows again toward Sue and Lainey’s house, really looking at it for the first time in years the way I had looked at my mother’s and my house just weeks before, saying goodbye, realizing what it had always looked at. It took leaving and losing to make me really look at things.

He did not speak to me and the backseat smelled like cigarettes and something musky and definitely male. A single dirty sock curled up in the floorboards. This was fine while it had been a fantasy, but I did not, after all, want to leave. My mother’s words pinned me to the seat though, hearing the echo of her voice as she told me to look out for

Lainey, the one person I never thought needed anyone to look out for her. Steve started the jeep.

“So, we’ve got around a grand,” Lainey said. We’d cashed the last of both of our checks at the grocery store the night before. She was still fingering through the bills, rattling them nervously against each other in the envelope.

“That’s not going to last long,” Steve said, more concerned than critical.

“It’s enough. It will give us time to settle in, find jobs.” She was fidgeting in her seat, hardly able to keep still. She clicked the lock up and down, up and down in the door as Steve pulled away from the curb. I leaned into my duffel bags on the seat beside me as he shifted gears, staring through the windshield at the road ahead. There was no air conditioning in the car and it became hot almost immediately.

“Take the long way,” Lainey said. “I want to see the city one last time.”

“Aye, aye,” Steve said. He took us down 95, south through the city, and as we passed the sad, ramshackle buildings on the side of the highway, the gleaming tall cubes of downtown far behind the dirty, squat houses, I realized that I did not really believe that we would make it. I could see as clearly as I could see the river, shallow under the bridges heaving and tossing over itself, that I would somehow make this same journey back in a few months. My stomach was an empty pit, my mind a snowdrift.

I leaned against the side of the car, my head against the roll bar, feeling the air flapping the plastic cover of the side of the jeep near my face. It was humid and gusty. I feel asleep before we even reached Petersburg, smelling their cigarettes mixed with exhaust from other cars on the highway. I saw Lainey’s hand slide over to Steve’s thigh

as she thought I was asleep, her skin pale against his dark jeans. Somehow I wasn't surprised, as I drifted off to sleep.

I slept off and on, remembering the hum of a conversation in the front seat that I couldn't quite hear, walking as if asleep to the rest stop bathroom. I woke up fully somewhere in South Carolina. A water tower shaped and painted like a giant peach stood over the highway. *Gaffney, South Carolina*, it read in blue script letters. I wondered how tall each letter was if I were to stand by it, who painted them up that high. My neck was sore from leaning on the car and I could hardly get my fingers through the tangles in my hair. I could always cut it shorter. There were hand-painted road signs for Abbott's peaches and pecans. A row of square houses lined up along the road, porches facing the highway. I saw a dog, chained to a post behind one of them, lying in a patch of dirt. We passed one of the peach stands, a sagging wooden fence lining the empty parking lot. Shutters covered the windows.

"You're awake. Finally." Lainey craned her head around the seat.

My mouth felt like it was full of wadded paper towels. "How long have we been driving?"

"About five hours," she said. "Three to go. You want to stop somewhere?"

"Whenever," I said. Steve exited and stopped at a gas station and pulled up to the pump. Lainey and I got out and went inside while Steve filled the tank.

Inside, it was a one-person bathroom. Lainey waited outside for me. In the mirror I could see creases from whatever I'd been leaning on in the car on my face now, my eyes puffy and small, my hair windblown and fluffy. One corner of the mirror was broken off and there was a dispenser for condoms on the wall: orange, coconut, and grape flavored. The lock on the door was broken. A sign behind the toilet read *Toilet paper ONLY no bath towels*.

I stood by the door while Lainey was in there because of the broken lock and watched Steve park the car out front and lumber into the store as though it were a normal, everyday occurrence to him. No one looked at him twice and I realized that we probably did not look as odd as I felt. This was the kind of place where three teenagers meant nothing unusual.

Steve bought a hot dog from one of those cases with the metal rollers where every hot dog looks like it's been there for several days. He covered it with several pumps of nacho cheese from a machine, sliced onions and jalapeños. I turned away as he took a bite right there in the aisle of the store. He bought Lainey and himself cigarettes and Lainey and I decided to split a Diet Coke and a box of wheat things.

"Welcome to the good life," Lainey said, holding up the bottle of Diet Coke in the car as though offering me congratulations. Already I was lost.

I couldn't fall asleep again. Steve was playing some kind of industrial-sounding rock band and I could hear Lainey softly singing along. I felt like an outsider in the back of the car, witness to something I didn't know existed and that I would never be more than an observer of. I wondered how long this relationship had been going on, if they

were sleeping together, and why Lainey had kept it from me, but now seemed oblivious as to whether or not I knew about it. As the miles passed, the countryside became more hilly. In places the grass had been stripped back by dull yellow tractors that sat idly by. The ground was red-orange, smooth and meaty like bare flesh. We passed the BMW headquarters, the factory with a flat roof and dozens of chimneys, the showroom a round mirror of glass.

With every mile, Lainey seemed to become lighter and lighter, like air, while passing over the border into Georgia, I felt more and more like an anchor. This was a mistake—I could feel it in the dryness of my throat, my wavering heartbeats. Still a part of me hoped for some unknown thing—in Atlanta everything would be new. Whatever else it was, it would be new. My life, though uncertain, had always had a feel of certainty to it, a sense of knowing, if not exactly what, knowing there would be security. My mother's death had ripped away the first layer of that and now my future lay ahead of me unwinding mile by mile like ribbon coming loose from a spool. But it was moving too quickly.

It could still be good, I said to myself. But Lainey's fingers tracing the hem of Steve's jeans told me otherwise. I was heading into something I did not know, and was sure that I would not want.

The rolling country hills and pine trees gave way to billboards as the highway spread out into more and more lanes. We passed Fair Play, Georgia miles before neon signs and stores crowded up to the highway. Cars appeared out of nowhere and then we

were driving under a mass of overpasses. Headlights and taillights spun off in every direction as we passed beneath the twisting concrete roads.

“Spaghetti Junction,” Steve said, as we passed beneath it. I leaned my head against the side of the car again, watching Lainey’s face in the side mirror outside the window. Her eyes looked like two huge olives in that faded—purplish-black and gleaming. She was not afraid of anything. Her face lit red in the setting sun and darkened with shadow as dusk fell.

This was what she always wanted, to break loose. But I was the one who had become unmoored. I wished I could tell her how it felt. For me, this was really nothing—I had nothing I was leaving behind, I had already broken loose, no, not broken loose, been pushed loose. I knew what was coming for her, but maybe for her this breaking loose would be different, because she always did have something under her feet, she did have Sue back at home, no matter what kind of mother she was. She had solid ground if she chose to go back to it, while my life was only air. This trip for me was grabbing, reaching, costing me nothing because I had nothing to lose. Yet I found myself grasping for something as we drove past the baseball field and red neon Coca-Cola sign. A train was a blur moving behind it on raised tracks.

The city lights were pure and clean. This is why I hadn’t wanted to go to New York, a city that was gray in my mind, even glittering, jeweled Manhattan, which I’d only seen in movies and pictures. There was a shiny newness in Atlanta not undercut by something dark and sinister and moldy. At least, not that I could see.

“Can you exit?” Lainey said. “I want to everything.”

Steve did drove through the city blocks, crowded with shiny Mercedes and BMWs, the people along the sidewalk clean-cut and fresh-pressed, moving from bar to bar. Lainey leaning her head against the window so she could look up and see where the tallest buildings, still several miles away, etched their hard geometry into the sky. As he drove, he'd point out important places. Atlantic Station, Peachtree Boulevard, the Fox Theater. "I smoked a joint on the front porch once," he told us, pointing out Margaret Mitchell's house, a white-columned home looking out of place on the busy street.

Lainey picked up the names he dropped like pebbles, put them in her mouth like they were chocolate to melt on her tongue. She was like a child, open wide in a way that I'd never seen her before. The sight of her face made me ache. I knew that it didn't matter to Lainey which city we had chosen, only that we were surrounded by steel and glass, buildings like mirrored rods rising gray, copper, blue from the asphalt streets. Every angle perfect and clean, like the ones in her room at home. It embarrassed me to see the raw emotion in her face, yet I could not look away from her reflection in the side mirror, mouth open, eyes like open mouths. She had never looked so beautiful.

"Can't we go downtown?" she said as Steve turned left. Freedom Parkway, the sign said. I wished I hadn't seen it—the ultimate cliché, somehow reminding me of what we were doing, but cheapening it.

"You don't want to go downtown. Trust me."

"How do you know the city so well?" I asked, leaning forward a little so I could see the road ahead between the two front seats.

“I’ve got family here,” he said. “Aunts, uncles, cousins—the works. Spent a lot of summers here.”

The downtown buildings disappeared behind us. A running trail would along beside the parkway, lit by halogen lights. It was empty. The road ended at a park and Steve took a right at a gas station. A hand-painted hung over a wooden shack in the parking lot that looked like the fruit stands we’d seen along 85. *The earth is a pot and every race has to put their seasoning in it*, it declared. “Little five points,” Steve said. I thought of a star, five points, each reaching out, reaching away from each other. The streets became crowded again with brightly painted houses turned businesses: Nadine’s Tattoo and Piercing, Bemused Art for the Eclectic, the Junkman’s Daughter. The largest store on the street was a Package Liquor store with thick bars on the windows. A row of modern brick condos with metal porches looked out of place next to a Starbucks. These gave way to old-fashioned glass store fronts with bright awnings housing bars, restaurants, a bookstore, a shoe store. Here the sidewalks bustled with wild neon hair and visible tattoos. Graffiti like artwork colored the brick walls of the alleys. A man sat on a bench with no shoes on, a dirty sleeping bag over his head. No one seemed to see him.

The heat here was more sullen, smokier, thicker than it had been a few miles away. It felt crouching and dangerous, coiled to strike. This feeling intensified as we passed through another intersection and below and overpass. The block was lit by Church’s Chicken, McDonalds, and an Exxon. What had been a Pizza Hut with it’s A-line roof was now a Jamaican restaurant and there was a giant blue-painted plaster rooster

standing over cement tables with umbrellas on the patio. A young black woman waited at a bus stop with a pink stroller, empty.

Another block and there was the clean light from new neon and halogen, a fresh shining strip mall with a Target and Best Buy on the left. On the right side of the road, the yards were filled with trash behind chain-link fences. Steve took a right down one of the neighborhood streets and through a series of winding turns, doubled back toward the tattoo parlors and liquor stores. He pulled into the parking lot of a tall brick building that looked both regal and worn-out. “Is this us?” Lainey asked.

“Looks like a hotel,” I said.

“It is. Or was,” Steve said. “Apartments now. My friend Adam’s got a place here, lots of traffic—people moving in and out.”

There was a revolving door chained shut and heavy glass doors with decorative gold handles. Steve held one open for us as we carried our bags through. The lobby had a vaulted ceiling and gilded wallpaper, chandeliers that looked barren, as though they’d been stripped of their glass and crystal. They were not lit, but long rows of fluorescent lights had been added to the ceiling, several of them winking erratically. A group of girls not much older than us passed by, their faces seeming ancient somehow, as though colored by some great knowledge and tiredness of life from the inside. They spoke something that sounded like French. A man was curled up, asleep, in the alcove leading to the stairwell, clutching an army fatigue bag.

We were the only people in the elevator. The walls were a sort of medicinal greenish blue as if the building had been a hospital before instead of a hotel. Steve

pushed the button for the fifteenth floor. There was no thirteenth. I traced the round, black buttons with my finger. "Superstition," Steve said. "Any building built before the seventies is missing the thirteenth floor. It was bad luck."

I thought of that, the idea of builders and businessmen having a meeting about that, deciding in a rational way that there was something too superstitious about the number thirteen—it couldn't even be a floor. As though there were something inherently evil in its very name. As if the fourteenth floor was not, if you counted, actually the thirteenth.

On the jolting ride up, Lainey's face had hardened again, holding everything tightly to herself again. She held Steve's hand now, publicly, not stealthily as she had in the car. Steve's hands were strangely delicate for the size of his arms, the breadth of his shoulders.

The elevator doors slid open, jolting on their tracks, and we stepped out onto faded oriental-style carpet, worn through outside the elevator door. The paint on the walls was faded and you could see the gray, dusty streaks where people had walked down the hall, dragging their palms or fingertips along the walls. We could hear music rising and receding as we passed the different doors. Steve knocked on a door at the end, where the light bulb was burned out so that the doorway was shrouded in shadow. I stood behind Steve and Lainey, leaning against the opposite wall.

I heard a chain being pulled back and a guy swung the door open wide. He looked Indian, with blue-black hair and inky circles under his eyes. An unlit cigarette hung from his lip. "Steve" he said, around the cigarette, giving Steve a slap on the

shoulder. “Let me,” he said, taking Lainey’s bags from her. Nothing about this seemed unusual to him, as though every day he opened the door for two runaway teenage girls and the one who had driven them away. Maybe he did.

“This is Lainey and Meg,” Steve said, once we’d moved into the room.

Adam set the bags down near the kitchen. He shook Lainey’s hand with both of his, then mine. His palms were chalky and dry. “Good to have you,” he said. “Come—sit.” He patted the cushions of a squat brown couch and himself sat on the floor near sliding doors for the balcony. He cracked it open and used a match to light his cigarette.

Lainey and I sat on the couch and Steve joined Adam on the floor and pulled out a cigarette. The room was painted a dull gray over wallpaper. The walls pimply with ripples underneath and I could see the line where two pieces of the wallpaper had connected. A small TV sat across from the couch resting on a wooden crate. A new program was on, the red ribbon of breaking news moving across the bottom of the screen. Adam leaned in to adjust the antenna, made of a wire whisk and bent coat-hanger. There was no volume, but he watched the screen.

“This has been going on all day,” he said.

“What?” Steve asked.

“Some guy escaped the courthouse from his trial, shot a judge and a couple of cops. There’s a manhunt all over the city. You didn’t hear it?”

“Nope,” Steve said. We were all watching the screen now, where aerial pictures of the city during the day flashed on, showing the courthouse steps, a blue car driving away, helicopters circling, a mug shot of a heavy-set man with a scar over one cheek.

“Where’s your bathroom?” Lainey asked.

Adam did not look up from the television. “I’m sorry—I should’ve given you a tour. I got all caught up in this. Have a look around. Bathroom’s at the end of the hall. Your room’s the second on the left. Make yourself at home.”

Lainey and I got our bags and went down the dim hallway. Through a half-open door to the right, a girl with a metal bar through one eyebrow leaned against a chest of drawers, talking on a cell phone. She kicked the door shut as we walked past.

Lainey dropped her bags in the doorway of the our room. “Be right back,” she said, and went into the bathroom at the end of the hall. I walked into our room and felt for a light switch. I flipped it, but nothing happened. “There’s a fan, but you’ll have to buy a lamp or something,” Adam called from the other room. “Sorry!”

Crooked mini-blinds at the window let in the artificial yellow light from streetlamps and signs outside. I could hear cars down below. As my eyes adjusted, I could see two bare mattresses. The carpet had a worn patch in the middle. I set my bags down by one of the mattresses and lifted the blinds to look outside. I could see the tops of trees and buildings, people moving down below along the sidewalks, streetlights turning green, yellow, red.

“This is it, huh?” Lainey said, coming in behind me. “Home sweet home.”

“I guess so. How’s the bathroom?” I asked.

“It’s a bathroom. No closet?”

“Doesn’t seem that way. And we have to buy a light. Did you bring sheets?”

“Nope. We’ll have to make a run back to that Target or something. Pillows and towels, too. I didn’t bring a towel.”

“Are sheets expensive?” The list of things we needed to buy was growing longer and I thought of our stack of money, how we were already spending it.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But we need them, so it doesn’t matter, does it? We’ll get Steve to drive us. Go check out the bathroom.”

It was at least clean, though the fixtures were old porcelain and showed stains and wear. I looked through the medicine cabinet above the toilet: prescription bottles missing their labels, shaving cream, two kinds of toothpaste. On the bottom shelf, behind a box of hair dye was a packet of hypodermic needles. I picked them up, noting how clean and clear they were, the misleading innocence of their sterility.

Steve took us to Target and then to dinner where Lainey ate ribs with her bare hands, the juice and barbecue sauce trailing down her wrists, and all I could think about was the needle I’d found in the bathroom. Lainey and I went to sleep a few feet away from each other on our respective mattresses and we lay in silence like strangers until we fell asleep, the sound of the city fifteen stories below us.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We lived like vampires those first few days. Steve started classes at Tech and had told us to lay low. During the day we slept or watched television, waiting for the early evening when he would come by after his classes and we'd all go to dinner. We tried a new place every night, discovering where the best deals were. Mexican restaurants where you could order off the side menu, getting a taco or an order of refried beans for few dollars. All-night diners that served platefuls of greasy eggs and bacon with buttery toast and grits for five bucks. I was so hungry that I'd eat anything.

The tension of waiting to eat all day was comforting somehow, tangible and fixable in a way that the tension of this new life and its strangeness was not. Adam provided us with warnings our first day before leaving for his job as a short order cook at an Italian restaurant in mid-town. It was mostly common sense stuff: don't make eye contact with the dealers standing on the street corners; never believe anyone who approaches you and says they're with a talent agency; don't give money to the pan-handlers; chill out when you see cops . If someone sketchy approached us, go inside of a business, call him on his cell. His only two rules were to pay the rent on time, and no drugs.

Our whole building was full of runaways, he said, runaways and junkies. I'd seen the vacant-looking girls stumbling through the lobby, eyes milky and pale as though they were blind, their arms bruised or scabbed. "Every so often the cops raid the place," he

said. “They have to pretend they’re doing something. Look like you know what you’re doing, where you’re going—here and when you’re out. As long as it looks like it, no one cares if you really do.”

“What do they raid it for?” I’d asked. “Drugs or runaways?”

“Underage prostitution mostly. But other than that, yeah, drugs. If they happen to recover some runaways in the process, bonus. Makes happier six o’clock news.”

I felt guilty, thinking of all the people here who were probably running away from something real, who really were trying to survive. For me, knowing that Sue was still out there, was like a safety net. Our act was not so rebellious, so dangerous, so risky after all. Underage prostitution and drugs seemed so far from where we were, I thought as I sat on my mattress, watching Lainey arrange her art things in plastic bins. We’d blown almost a hundred bucks at Target that first night on those and other things she considered essential. I hadn’t wanted to say anything, not yet, with Lainey so excited as we went up and down the aisles, throwing things in the basket that we needed: pillows, sheets, an alarm clock, a modern-looking floor lamp, a folding table and chair, more bins for our clothing. After years of living on a budget, I knew we’d be in trouble if we didn’t get jobs in a few days. Though Lainey had been making her own money for several years from the website, she had always had Sue’s credit card. I caught Steve’s eye as he pushed the cart down the toiletries aisle, Lainey tossing in shampoos and lotions and a plastic basket with suction cups to attach it to the shower wall. He winked at me, not a flirty wink, but the kind that let me know we were co-conspirators. I had smiled back at him, shaking my head at the mountain of stuff in the cart.

Lainey took the lid off a bin she had just filled, fingering tubes of glue and clear plastic boxes that held tiny metal clasps. “I need some ideas,” she said, shaking a box of clasps. “Something new, something to get me started. Let’s go out, maybe I’ll get inspired.”

“Adam and Steve said to lay low,” I said. It was ten-thirty. I would have been in third period. Math or English or government, I would never know, since I didn’t show up the first day to get my schedule in homeroom. I thought I would have felt more mature or something, being seventeen and on my own, but it didn’t seem like a real life at all. Here I was laying across a mattress in the floor of an apartment with no air-conditioning that reeked of smoke and cumin.

“I didn’t leave Richmond to hide out in an apartment in Atlanta. Come on, get dressed,” Lainey said, closing the lid on the bin with a snap.

I didn’t feel like arguing, and I was starting to go stir crazy myself in that tiny room after two days. I was surprised Lainey had lasted that long, but the fact that she had should have scared me more: she was in it for the long haul and didn’t want to screw it up the first or second day. But going out meant that we could look for jobs, which made me feel a little better about the money situation.

The main part of Little Five Points was only a few blocks away from us, but through blocks where trash lined the streets and the porches were falling off of houses, mean-looking dogs chained to poles in the ground, dirt front yards. At every corner store a group of men stood around like they were waiting for something. But always, when we were out we saw people our own age, boys and girls, and I wondered about their stories,

how they came to be where we were. No one seemed to notice us or care, and there was something painful to me that it was so possible to be unaccounted for. It made me think of my mother, who could not have walked down these streets without noticing, could not have seen the junkies in our building without doing something. I wondered what she would have thought of me, walking down the street just fine.

We stopped in several funky boutiques so Lainey could see what they were carrying. She hadn't told me, but I knew she was planning to try and sell her artwork instead of getting a real job. I figured we'd have that battle when the time came. Not that her stuff wasn't beautiful and unique, but I wasn't going to support her and she needed to realize that there was a responsibility that came with making this choice—some sacrifices would have to be made. I hated most of the stuff in the stores. It was ugly art, more about the idea than the execution. The girl behind the counter in Bemused stared at me with her dark-lined eyes and black-dyed hair, unsmiling. "I'll be outside," I told Lainey.

It was hotter in Atlanta than Richmond, which I never would have thought possible. I wondered what the weather was like there today. Lainey joined me in the shade of a withered-looking maple growing from the sidewalk. A metal sign declared *Another Planting by Trees of Atlanta!* "Anything inspiring?" I asked.

"No," she said, bending down to pick up a rusty screw that lay on the sidewalk. "Can we stop in the bookstore? It says they're hiring," I said, pointing across the street. At the edge of the row of stores, there was a bookstore with no name, but a sign taped with notebook paper to the window advertising help wanted.

“You’re going to get a job at another bookstore?”

“So?”

Lainey turned the screw over in her hands. “I mean, nothing. I just thought you would have wanted change, to do something different. Not just do the same thing in a different place.”

“A job’s a job,” I said. “This is what I know. And the sooner we start working, the less we’ll have to worry.”

“Who’s worried?” she said. I didn’t answer as we crossed the street and went inside the store. It was a used bookstore, with books piled from floor to ceiling on different kinds of shelves, some metal, some wooden, no two alike. On the bottom shelves, the books spilled out onto the floor and sometimes sat in stacks four deep on top of the shelves. The walls, where I could see them, were painted a bright turquoise. It was hot in there, almost as hot as outside, and a fan turned lazily in the ceiling.

“Help you?” a voice called. A light-skinned black man frowned at us over half-rimmed glasses. He leaned on the glass counter by a cash register, reading a book. I could not see the title. Lainey kept walking toward the back of the store where I saw boxes of records in wooden crates like the kind Adam kept the television on in the apartment.

I pointed to the window. “I saw the sign. Are you still hiring?”

“Oh, that.” He took the sign down and dropped it in a trash can next to the counter. “I don’t know if we need anyone just now.” He waved a hand at the store.

Lainey, crouched over the records in the back, was the only customer. "We're not exactly booming."

"I have experience," I said.

"Oh?"

"A year at a big bookstore. I can get you a reference."

He snorted. "One of them chains. Some experience. More like a black mark on your record."

"I don't care what you pay," I said.

He stared at me for a moment that seemed to last forever. I could feel sweat beading on my lip. "Get me that reference," he said, finally, "and I'll see about an application."

"I don't have the number on me," I said, and he raised his eyebrows. "But I'll get it."

"Best do that," he said. "Walt Porter, by the way." He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"I'm Meg."

"Just Meg?"

"Just Meg," I said, feeling my face flush. I still wasn't used to saying Chambers, the new last name on the ID Steve had gotten me. I was so afraid I'd slip up, that I found myself avoiding it altogether.

Lainey walked up to the front of the store with a couple of records in her hand. "How much are records?" she asked.

“Dollar apiece,” the man said. I didn’t want to dissuade her from spending money when I’d just tried to get a job, so I waited until we were outside until I hissed, “We don’t even have a record player. Why are you buying records?”

“I might need them,” she said loftily. “You never know.”

There was no way that I could use Brian as a reference—I’d just said that because I wanted the job. So after looking up the number for my old store in the internet café down the block, I called Toby from a pay phone outside the Indian grocery store, using a phone card I had bought at the counter inside. I could see Lainey wandering the sidewalks, crouching down every now and again to pick something up and put it in her canvas bag. She held the records she bought balanced against her hip like a baby. I listened to the hum of Muzak while waiting for Toby to pick up in the back room.

“Hello,” he said after a moment. He sounded breathless and I imagined him climbing down from one of the tall ladders leading up to the top of the metal shelves.

“It’s Meg,” I said. There was silence. I could almost hear behind him the big echoing room with its cement floors and metal shelves and high ceilings like a warehouse. “Don’t hang up.”

“Where are you? Your friend’s mother called—the one you were living with. She told Brian you ran away. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Where are you?”

“Look—I was hoping maybe you could do me a favor. I applied for a job at this bookstore and they need a reference. I didn’t know who else to call.”

“A job? Meg, what are you doing?”

“He might be calling,” I said. “I don’t know his name. Please just don’t tell him anything about this. Or tell anyone there that you talked to me. Okay?”

“Why are you doing this? You should come home,” he said.

“I can’t.”

“Is it your mother?” I picked at a bumper sticker that someone had stuck to the inside of the metal wind-guard around the phone. I could smell exhaust, sharp and smoky in the air. “Do you know how dangerous this is? Do you?”

“Toby, please. His name is Walt Porter, and he’ll be calling in the next few days, if he calls at all. It’s just a reference. I need this.”

“I can’t promise anything. You should come home,” he said.

I got a corner of the sticker off, but it shredded into layers, leaving a solid white strip on the surface. “I don’t think I can,” I said.

I went back to the bookstore and gave the man behind the counter Toby’s name. He did not ask me to fill out an application. I was not sure if that was a good or bad thing.

“I got it,” Lainey said, as I came back out of the bookstore. She held an empty beer bottle in her hand, the records pinned under her other arm. Her canvas bag was so full that the flap would hardly close over it.

“Put that down. Do you want to get us in trouble?” She stuffed the bottle into her bag. “Got what, exactly?”

“A new line of jewelry. It’s going to be amazing,” she said.

“Does it have to do with beer bottles?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” she said, “but trust me, it’s going to be fantastic.”

“Will it sell?” I said, thinking again of our thinning stack of money.

She waved a hand in the air. “It’s art,” she said. “That’s not the point. But yeah, it’ll sell. Bemused and some of those other stores will definitely take it.”

If those stores would want it, I wasn’t sure what to expect. But I let myself be convinced to go out to lunch anyway, with Lainey’s assurances that soon we’d be coming into money, don’t worry. I ordered only a side of hummus and pitas, watching as Lainey devoured an entire lamb schwarma, a drop of tahini sauce staining the front of her canvas bag. She didn’t even seem to notice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lainey cocked her head from side to side, scissors in hand, examining my hair. I had asked her to cut it and now sat on the edge of the bathtub, waiting for the verdict. My skin prickled and itched along my neck and shoulders where the pieces fell. "Turn," she said and I sighed, swiveling so my back was to her, my feet in the tub.

"How much more can you cut?" I said. "I said a trim."

"I'll leave it like it is if you want, but you're the one who'll have to live with it. Your choice."

When I didn't move, she started in again. I closed my eyes, feeling her fingertips strong and sure on my scalp. Like I was one of her creations, being bent and shaped into something only Lainey could see in her mind. She said I couldn't see until she was completely done, but I wanted to see the final product, what she would turn me into.

She had finished the first pieces in her new line of jewelry, working through the night while I tried to sleep, a corner of the sheet over my eyes. They were dangerous and beautiful, made from things she collected on the street: bottle caps, glass, twisted pieces of aluminum cans and scrap metal. Mostly she was working with glass, which she had separated by color into mason jars, lined up against the wall of our bedroom. She twisted copper or silver strands around the jagged pieces and affixed them to sterling silver or copper chains. I was amazed at how she could turn even trash into a work of art, like she could redeem even the most worthless of things.

It had taken more money for the chains and clasps and spools of copper wire, but Bemused and Fetish both had taken several of the pieces and asked for more. She made one for me with a piece of sea-green glass at the center. “It’s the only one of this color. I have no idea what it came from,” she had said, holding it out to me. I loved how it became darker resting on my skin, like I had a little pool of ocean around my neck. But I had to take it off halfway through the day because it was rubbing a raw place just below my collarbone. A tiny scab had formed there, pink and raw.

“Look down,” Lainey said, leaning close. I could smell her skin, sharp and sweet.

“Do you miss it?” I asked her.

“Hold still. Miss what?” I could hear the polite snip of the scissors close to my ear.

“Home, I mean. Do you get homesick?”

“What would I miss?”

“Sue, maybe. School. Your car. 7-11. Your room. I don’t know—just home.”

“No,” she said. I shivered as her fingertips brushed my neck.

“So you don’t regret it at all?”

“Do you?”

I stared down at my feet, among the loose bits of hair near the drain. “I don’t know. No. Sometimes. I mean, what are we doing here? Really?”

“Living. You can always go back,” she said. “I won’t stop you if its what you want to do.”

“I don’t want to go back. But I think it’s okay to miss it. Everything’s not always a yes or no.”

“That’s very deep, Meg. Chin up. And if you keep talking, don’t blame me if your hair is crooked.”

I did not speak again until she finished, enjoying the closeness of her touch, such a rare thing. “I’m done,” she said finally, standing back. I went to the mirror while she rinsed my hair down the bathtub. It was a blunt cut, an inch or two shorter than it had been with bangs running straight across the middle of my forehead. She had made me what she wanted me to be, like one of the people that would shop in the funky stores, that would buy her necklaces off the rack. It was a haircut for someone else. “What do you think? Pretty cute, I think.”

“You did a great job,” I said. “Looks professional.”

“We could always dye it.”

“That’s okay.”

“Or maybe get your nose pierced. You’ve got the perfect nose for it.”

“You think?” I said, looking at my nose.

“I’ve always been jealous of your nose.”

I had never known Lainey to be jealous of anything, especially not anything about me. She seemed so self-sufficient, so secure. I was always the one watching her, longing, if not for the specific things that she did, for the boldness and surety that marked every action, every word.

“We should go tomorrow,” she said. “I was thinking about getting a tattoo.”

“Since when have you wanted to get a tattoo?”

“Since forever. You have something against tattoos?”

“They’re just so...permanent.”

“That’s the whole point. Something that stays with you no matter what you do, where you go. I love that. So, tomorrow?”

“I start work tomorrow,” I said. I had gone into the bookstore again today, afraid that Toby might have told Walt the truth and Walt would have called the police or told me to go back. Instead he offered me the job. “Your manager had great things to say about you,” he had said, and I felt a vague discomfort along with my relief.

Lainey put the scissors back in the medicine cabinet. “Maybe later in the week, then.”

“Maybe. Thanks for the cut,” I said. “I’m going to take a shower, get all this hair off me.”

Lainey closed the door behind her and I could hear the news blaring from the television in the living room. Even the skin that had been hidden by my clothes was covered in tiny hairs. I watched them darken the drain, and as I ran my fingers through my hair, there was a strange sense of lightness, as though I had lost something more than a few inches of hair.

At my old job, training lasted a full week, complete with a two-hundred page policy handbook, instructional videos, and register practice. Walt didn’t

even have me fill out an application. His training consisted of a five-minute summary of buying and pricing used books. His method for buying and pricing was simple: give store credit of two dollars or less per book, depending on its condition, and charge half the cover price, with a minimum cost of three dollars. Sometimes this meant haggling. “You’ll get the hang of it,” he told me, dismissing my questions with a wave of his hand. He pointed out the different sections of the store, labeled in permanent marker on pieces of cardboard; his office, which was an avalanche of loose papers and books; and a tiny bathroom with a key he kept behind the counter.

He set me to work organizing the sections, a daunting task despite the fact that the store was about the size of my old employee break room. “Where should I start?” I asked, looking at the crowded aisles and overflowing shelves.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “The whole place needs some organizing, so you’ll eventually hit all the sections.” He went down the street to grab coffee and a newspaper, leaving me alone, kneeling in the classics section. When he came back a few minutes later, he settled behind the register and flipped on a battered radio, settling on a station playing classical music. Straightening the shelves meant taking down every book, arranging them in piles at my feet, and then trying to find a way to make them all fit. I missed the clean lines of the books, their unbroken spines and sharp-edged pages. Here that smell of new paper and fresh ink was replaced by dust or smoke or something like age.

Walt caught me lifting *Great Expectations* to my face, fluttering the pages so that the smell rose up around me. “What are you doing—smelling the books?” He stood over me, frowning down through his glasses.

“I guess so,” I said, putting the book back on the shelf.

“Well—how is it?”

“Smells like smoke,” I said. “I’d never buy it.”

“Good thing most people don’t smell before they buy,” he said.

By lunch, my knees and back were aching from crouching down and bending over. I had only completed the top few shelves. Walt gave me a half-hour break and I walked down the block to the Mediterranean place Lainey and I had eaten at the other day. I sat inside, trying to escape the heat, and found myself transfixed on the huge slabs of meat that turned slowly under heat lamps, waiting to have slices shaved down for schwarmas and gyros. Here, corporate suits stood in line next to the girls in fishnets and blue hair who probably worked in the Junkman’s Daughter or Fetish. As I finished the last bite of my pita, I caught sight of Lainey across the street. She walked slowly, head down, scanning the sidewalks and the gutter, stopping every few feet to pick something up and put it in her bag.

I threw away my empty plate and was about to call out to her when a guy with bleached hair skeletal arms grabbed her around the waist. All the warnings that Adam and Steve had given us filled my mind and I froze there in the middle of the sidewalk, unable to make a sound. But as he picked her up and swung her around, I saw her smiling and laughing, even as she struggled in his grip.

He set her down and I watched as she opened her bag, pulling out the things she had been collecting. He nodded, listening, every now and then reaching out to touch something. The items were too small for me to see from this distance, but I imagined bottle caps and bent nails and washers and jagged bits of glass. His skin was pale against the stained white T-shirt he wore and I could see a red and black tattoo creeping down below his sleeve. I was struck with the warm and sickening feeling of jealousy as she closed her bag and they started off down the street. Lainey and I had hardly been apart the past few days and yet there was this familiar intimacy with someone I didn't know, or worse, didn't even know about. I wondered if Steve knew.

She laced her arm through his and the two of them walked off down the street, never looking in my direction. As they disappeared around the corner, a city bus rumbled past, the smell and feel of its gritty exhaust washing down over me.

That night, Lainey came home after eleven. I lay on top of the sheets on my mattress in the dark, sweating and listening to the hum of our box fan, which only stirred the hot air in the room. "Good, you're awake," she said, turning on the lamp. I did not answer, and she kneeled down next to me in the floor and began to peel off a square white bandage taped to the inside of her arm. "Look what I did today."

She carefully pulled off the last bit of tape and lifted the bandage. Underneath, a black rectangle took up most of her forearm. Inside its hard black edges, there was a design that reminded me both of a stained glass window and the hieroglyphics on walls in

Egypt. Without thinking, I reached out to touch it, shiny and raw against the soft, pale skin there, but she caught my hand. “Wow,” I said.

“I know—it’s kind of big,” she said.

“No, I like it. Really. Did you design it?” I stared at the pattern weaving together on her skin. I wondered how long it took, how much it cost.

“Yeah. I’ve got to keep Vaseline on it,” she said, sitting down on her mattress and pulling a small tub of the stuff from her purse. I winced as she smoothed it over her skin.

“Looks like it hurts,” I said.

Lainey capped the Vaseline. “No more than anything else,” she said. I watched her reapply the bandage and flatten the tape along its edges with her fingertips, her words echoing in my head as she turned off the light again: no more than anything else.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The smell coming from the stove where Adam was cooking made me think somehow of skin and sun and the mirages my mother used to tell me about, though I knew India was not like the deserts and sultans that I pictured. He had been working for a few hours when I got home from work, and I could smell it when I got off the elevator, the heady thickness of it wrapping around me when I unlocked the door. Lainey was out and Steve was coming to pick us up at eight for a show, some band called The Pits that I'd never heard of. While I waited for Lainey to get back, I sat on the counter across from the stove, where on every burner, something simmered. When he threw in the dried chilies and cayenne, my nose burned and my eyes watered. The labels on his spice jars were not in English, nor were they the familiar logos I was used to seeing in my kitchen: McCormick and Sauers.

“How’d you learn to make all this?” I asked. I’d always been curious about Adam, but usually he was parked in front of the television, watching some news program, smoking. He was friendly enough, but not exactly open, either.

“My mom,” Adam said. “Usually it’s only the daughters that learn—have to learn—but I was the only one interested. My sisters know how, but don’t care, which makes their food bitter.”

“Really?”

“That’s what my mother says, but I believe it.”

“Where is your family? Did you grow up here?”

“They’re back in India,” he said. “My parents and my sisters. We came here when I was five. My father found a job and had always wanted to America.” The way he said “America” made me think that whatever his father thought about it, and whatever he thought about it were two different things.

“Wasn’t what he expected?”

“Yes and no. He and my mother thought they wanted to escape the traditions they found controlling, but they were young. Once they got here, got a little older, they realized that they were holding more tightly to them than they knew.”

“Is that why they went back?”

“My dad hated his job and my sisters were at the age for marriage arrangements, but there was no one suitable here. So they went back home.”

“Wow. I didn’t know people still arranged marriages.”

He shrugged. “Not everyone still does. Things have changed a lot, but they also have changed very little. Finding a suitable husband from a suitable family is still of the utmost importance to some. Keeping up the family line and name, all that.”

“What about you? Did they try to arrange a marriage for you?”

Adam turned off the burner and took off a bubbling pot, setting it on a trivet on the counter. “No,” he said. He scooped a plateful of the stuff from the pots, something green and brown with unidentifiable chunks. My stomach growled. He turned and went into the living room without looking at me. “There’s enough for you if you want some,” he said. I heard the sound of the news start up in the other room.

Lainey came home an hour after they said they'd pick me up. I felt awkward sitting in with Adam after asking him the question about marriage, so I sat in our room, reading a book that Walt had let me take home from the store. He basically told me it was like lending library and that I could take home two at a time, just to bring them back in the same shape as I took them. It was only nine o'clock, but after spending the past few days working, my eyes kept closing. I jolted awake as Lainey opened the door.

"Steve's downstairs," she said, leaning her head around the doorway. Even from there I could see that her eyes were red and bloodshot, lids half-closed. Over the tang of Adam's dinner, I could smell the earthy scent of pot. I was groggy and irritable and my stomach felt queasy. I'd had a heaping plateful of Adam's dal, and the roof of my mouth and tongue were still burning. I could taste the cumin. I had never heard of this band and considered telling Lainey I was going to stay and sleep, but in the same way that I was feeling exhausted and not like being around people, I was also longing to get out of the apartment.

"Where have you been? I've been waiting," I said as we rode the elevator downstairs.

"Sorry," she said. "The show doesn't start until ten anyway. We're fine." She had taken the bandage off her arm and the tattoo gleamed on her arm, looking raw and shiny. Steve waited in his jeep by the front door, engine running and loud music playing. I folded myself into the cramped backseat.

“Can’t we walk? Where is this place?” I asked.

“Not far,” Steve said. “But not the kind of place you’d want to walk to, either.”

We drove through Little Five Points, where the evening crowd was just winding up. Steve went past the Jamaican place with the giant rooster that we’d seen our first day. That seemed like forever ago. He kept going past the Target and Best Buy and just before we got to Highway 20, he turned down a side street, past houses with chained fences, somehow more ominous than the ones in my old neighborhood, and I thought about my house, if it had sold, who lived there now. If someone had torn down the swing set or painted over the bedrooms in more neutral colors. My stomach lurched and I started feeling something like carsickness, or maybe indigestion.

The dingy neighborhood turned to a commercial area with storefronts and gas stations, and I could see a line of people standing on the sidewalk outside what must be the club. Steve parked the jeep around the corner and we joined the back of the line. It was shuffling slowly forward toward the open doors and music pulsing out. A bearded man in a stained t-shirt walked down the line, holding out a cup for money. When he got to us, I found myself staring into his eyes. One was brown and the other blue.

“Spare some change?” he said, stopping in front of me.

Steve stepped closer. “Keep moving,” he said. I looked down at the sidewalk, littered with cigarette butts.

At the door, we showed our IDs and paid ten bucks to have our hands stamped with an X showing we were under twenty-one. It was hard to breath. The club was dark and smoky and packed and I followed Steve and Lainey through the crowd toward the

front of the room. I almost lost them and tried to keep my eyes on Lainey's hair, so light in the darkness. We stopped, crushed between people. I couldn't see the stage over a guy in front of me as the opening band came out. Lainey raised her arms above her head, shouting, but I could not hear her voice above the crowd or the crunch of electric guitar. We were only a few feet away from the speaker and I could feel the bass and drums pulsing through my chest. I was already beginning to get a headache and my stomach was still churning uneasily as we stood through the first set.

The crowd was not still, but moving and writhing as people danced and pressed closer to the stage, jumping up and down or dancing. Beside me, Lainey was moving with the crowd, her eyes fixed on the stage. I could not hear it, but her lips were moving as she sang along. I had never heard of the band or this music before. Steve was out of sight somewhere on the other side of her. Someone elbowed me in the back and I felt something cold spilled down my bare leg. Beer. I turned, but behind me was a mass of faces and clear plastic cups. I was shoved again, from the side.

"I'm going outside for some air," I shouted to Lainey.

"What!"

"I need some air," I said again, leaning inches from her ear. She nodded, eyes already back on the stage. It took me almost five minutes to get from our spot near the front to the door. It reminded me of being young and at the beach, struggling against the surge of the tide as I pushed my way through the crowd of people, all moving in the opposite direction from me. When I finally reached the door and went out to the sidewalk, the music fading behind me as the door closed, it was so still, yet my ears felt

like they were full of static still, or cotton, like my ear was pressed against a shell, hearing the echoing rush of distant ocean. The sound of the band still made it out to the street and I could actually hear it now, but it was just noise.

I leaned against the brick of the building. What was I doing there? Not just the club. Atlanta. Everything. This had never seemed like a good idea, but only like an escape, something that I needed. And now that I was here, it was like the bottom had fallen out of my life. More so than my mother's death, which inevitably changed everything, but by leaving, I was taking the course of my life into my hands, moving in some uncharted direction, moving in no direction. The parameters of a normal life, just of living had seemed so confining, but now I longed for their constriction—the stable rules and expectations that normal life held. Now the future was so open, so free, and that freedom was frightening to me. I had felt so out of control in my life there, the idea of going to school, moving on without my mother and having to deal with the questions and the stares and the same life, marked differently only by her absence. But this idea that I could somehow take control of my life and change it, make it what I wanted was silly. I was not an adult.

The door opened again , music suddenly increasing to unbearable levels again, and two girls stumbled out, obviously drunk. They hardly made it a few feet out of the building before one of them leaned over and vomited into the gutter. The smell of smoke, like dirty cement came out like a cloud as the door shut behind them. I could not go back in there. I did not want to see the band or hear them, I did not want to breathe

that air again. My head hurt and my stomach hurt and my face felt weak and crumbly, like any moment I might burst into tears.

I started to walk. It was a long way back to our place, but not too long to walk. There were only a few turns and I was good with directions. Lainey and Steve would figure it out. I could leave Steve a message when I got back anyway. The sidewalks became deserted after a few blocks when I crossed the last major street. Cars thinned out, too, and there was an eerie evening silence as I walked past houses, most of them dark, without streetlights. A few of them had vicious looking dogs who snarled and bared their teeth through the wire of the fence as I passed. At one house, a curtain was drawn aside and I could see the silhouette of a figure watching me. I hurried past.

I was a few blocks from Mooreland and could see the lights of the new strip mall when I heard someone walking behind me. I sped up, keeping my eyes fixed on the red sign for Target, but could hear the steps continue behind me, moving closer. Don't look, don't look, I told myself, but I could not help it. I turned my head and recognized the homeless man who had stood outside the club, asking for money.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, girl."

I began to run. I was wearing rubber flip flops from Old Navy and could feel them slipping off my feet as I went. I stumbled a little as the strap broke and kept going, barefoot, leaving my shoes behind on the sidewalk. There it was: the artificial light of the shopping center in front of me. The light turned green and I ran straight across, not looking behind me again until I reached the front of Best Buy, where I knew there as a

pay phone. The parking lot was empty, save a few cars near the Waffle House. Only then did I look around, out of breath, sweating. I was alone.

I always kept some change with me in case I need to make a call, and I called Adam. I had memorized the number that first day after the warnings about child prostitution and everything else. Thankfully this was his night off, and he told me to wait at the open Waffle House for him to come get me. I sat on the curb outside, my head in my hands, my stomach still feeling hot and queasy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We'd been living in Atlanta for about a month and it was starting to smell like fall. I always noticed the smell first—something smoky like fires, a sort of musky, warm smell. It was still sweltering hot, hotter than it needed to be in October. On the first day where the temperature dropped a little, it was like a release, like the city had been holding its breath, waiting for a break. It was something I could feel, walking on the way to work, passing the deli and the urban chic store where Lainey had been selling her jewelry. As I walked past the parking lot to the bookstore, I noticed a guy sitting on the trunk of his car, reading a newspaper. I had never seen him drive anywhere, but every once in a while saw him walking by the front of the store, a leather backpack slung over his shoulder. His car hat not moved from the spot in days—I had seen it coming in and out of the bookstore. I was not sure if he ever slept anywhere else or where he changed and showered, but he looked surprisingly clean. He wore the same worn gray shirt with writing so faded I could not read it and jeans with a hole in the right knee. But they, too, seemed clean.

Seeing him sitting there, I decided to walk past the cars, go in the back door instead of the front. I told myself that it was so that I could avoid the woman I saw through the glass of the front window—the red-haired cat woman that gave me a hard time after my first day. He did not look up as I approached. I kept looking at him and then looking away quickly, wanting to say hello or smile if he looked up, but not wanting

to look like I was staring at him. I was disappointed when I walked by him without so much as a glance up at me. I caught a brief scent of something like dryer sheets as I passed. How was it that a guy living in his car that seemed to always be wearing the same clothes, smelled so fresh and clean?

Walt had me unpacking boxes most of the day while he watched the register. He got a huge group of them raiding a church yard sale, buying paperbacks for twenty-five cents each and hardbacks for a dollar. That was where he spent his time when not working, buying books from the cheapest places he could find. I bet there wasn't much money in used books. I wasn't even sure if he added up daily totals or how he did the books—his office was a complete mess of papers. But he didn't seem concerned about the money or the business or anything else, just walked around every day with the same perpetual frown on his face, not an unhappy frown, I had realized after some time, but just a look like a shell. I bet he'd been doing it so long that he didn't know.

I unpacked a plastic bag full of Babysitters Club books, looking at the worn and dog-eared pages, yellowed at the edges. My mother had bought me one of the books once, probably also at a yard sale or used store. *Amanda B.* was written in pink highlighter on the inside cover of my copy. I was in sixth grade, only a few years younger than the girls in the books, and it took me til the end of the first book to realize that I hated them. I wasn't sure whether the problem was that the books were a little dated, or if they were just another case of an adult writing about what they think teenager's lives are like, but their was a huge disconnect between the lives in the pages,

worries about grades and kisses and difficult children, and what I saw at school and knew from my own life.

I pulled out book after book—it looked like someone had collected the whole series and I wondered who had owned them, had she been waiting for her life to turn out the way that Kristy or Dawn or Mary Ann's had? Did it ever become that? Or had she, like me, felt like something was missing in her life because the world that she saw when she walked out the front door was nothing like the lives of those girls with their insufferable cheer and small scale, suburban problems? Just looking at those pastel blue and pink and yellow covers made my hands shake and I did not know exactly why.

Walt was at the counter haggling over prices and could not see me back her in the young adult section. I stuffed every last one of those books back into the plastic bag. Walt probably hadn't even looked at what he bought, just saw cheap books and brought them home. He wouldn't miss them. I stuck the wooden block in the back door to prop it and walked quickly to the dumpster where I lifted the lid and with one smooth toss, let go of the Babysitters Club, hearing a satisfactory clump sound as they settled in among the garbage from the restaurant next door.

I was careful to turn my head away as I let the lid fall so I wouldn't have to smell that sickly sweet rotting food smell.

“Must have been bad books.”

My head snapped up. It was the guy from the parking lot, leaning against the side of his sedan. He smiled at me, his arms crossed over his chest. I could see the sinewy strength and thickness of his biceps. I realized that I was staring, with a dumb smile on

my face. “They were old,” I said, feeling lame. I gave a little half-wave and rushed back through the door, kicking the wooden block harder than necessary, feeling like I was twelve again, but not sure why I cared what a twenty-something guy living in his car thought about me.

“Miss? I gave you a twenty.” The forty-something mother holding the hand of her little girl stared at me.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, fishing change out of the drawer. I must have dropped all the change in the wrong slots as the penny tray had nickels mixed in while dimes were floating among the quarters. Walt came up beside me, glasses hanging down on his nose, frowning into the drawer as I switched around the coins.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “One of those days, I guess.”

“Why don’t you take your lunch. I’ll sort this out,” he said. Often I’d forget and work all day without thinking about, lost in the stacks.

I punched my card through the ancient metal time clock. The time was wrong, but Walt said it didn’t matter because the hour totals remained the same. Though I was only a few blocks from the apartment, I usually sat at one of the concrete outdoor tables in front of the Greek café next door. I could order a side of hummus and pita for two bucks and they never minded how long I sat outside. I would bring a book or just watch

as people passed by on the street, wondering where they were going and what their stories were.

The cement bench was uncomfortable and the wind was blowing, knocking the faded green umbrella against the table with a clanging sound that reminded me of ships bells. I thought of my mother often during the day, wondering what she would think of me. I hadn't changed or become someone different—I just felt like me in a new life. True, I would never have imagined myself living this way months ago, but it was more than the circumstances of her death changed my life, not me. Surely I had not changed.

Today was different. I felt guilt hanging off my shoulders, weighing me down. When I thought of my mother, I thought of Sue and realized suddenly what today was: October 8. Sue's birthday. She was probably not even celebrating her birthday today, alone. I wondered if anyone in her office would do something nice—a grocery store cake with her name in curly-cued icing, a card with nothing personal, but simply names of coworkers signed, left in the break room of her office. I wondered who might call her and remembered how seldom the phone rang at her house. Without Lainey and me, she was totally alone.

My hummus looked clotted today, the drizzle of olive oil on top pooled on top in a greasy puddle. A fly buzzed around my styrofoam plate. My crumpled napkin blew down the sidewalk. I was no longer hungry and I could not sit still.

I threw my still-full plate in the trash and started walking. I turned a corner down one of the side streets, a little less busy at lunchtime than Moreland I passed a bead store,

a bed and bath boutique, and then a corner store with several different countries' flags in the window. I recognized only Mexico and Italy.

Heavy bells clanged as I pushed open the door. A thin woman with dyed-red hair, almost fluorescent, stood behind a glass counter, smoking. "Do you sell phone cards?" I asked. She gestured to the counter with her long, thin fingers, black-painted fingernails. Underneath the glass were several cards with varying number amounts and country codes.

"You pick one," she said, a slanting accent marking her words. It sounded Russian.

"I just want to call here—the US," I said.

"How long? Half-hour, hour, two?"

"An hour is fine," I said. She picked through a box of cards on the counter and pulled out a green plastic card with a lot of numbers on it and writing in Spanish.

She slid it across the glass to me. "Ten dollar," she said.

I wondered if that was a good price or not, but had no idea. I pulled a crumpled bill from my wallet. Walt would be paying me later that afternoon and I was glad—my wallet was almost empty. "Are these traceable?" I asked.

"Traceable?" The woman stared blankly at me.

"If I use this at a payphone, could someone find out where I called from?"

She shrugged. "I don't think so. Connects to another number to another number," she said, gesturing with her cigarette hand. Bracelets rattled together on her arm and ash fluttered down to the counter, where she brushed it away.

“Thanks,” I said. There was a pay phone on the corner by the bookstore. Not the fully-enclosed kind, but one on a pole with metal sides around it, like this offered some kind of privacy. The phone book had been ripped from its metal cord, only the binding still attached.

I used a penny to scratch off the silver stuff that covered my pass code on the back of the card and began dialing. There was a series of clicks and a mechanical operator’s voice asking for my code. After that, I dialed Sue’s cell phone by heart. Voicemail, voicemail, I prayed silently.

“Hello.” I froze at the sound of her voice, clutching the shelter around the phone. I could not say anything and faintly I could hear the sound of cars passing and horns honking near me through the earpiece and wondered if she could hear them. I waited for her to hang up, the silence stretching out. “Meg? Is that you?”

I was caught. “Happy birthday,” I said weakly.
“Where are you?” she said, her voice all business. I didn’t say anything. She sighed. “Fine. How are you? Is everything okay?”

“We’re fine,” I said. I could hear sounds of her office in the background, phones ringing, distant tinny voices. I could see her in her three-inch heels and a fitted suit, twisting a piece of hair around her finger as she held the phone to her face. “I’m sorry,” I said.

She sighed again, the sound like air being let out of tires, a defeated deflated hiss.
“Sorry enough to come home?”

“I don’t think so. Not yet.” Her words shamed me. This was not a new life we had run away to, but a girl’s dream. An adventure. I could see it as she must, now, sitting at home waiting for us to give up, to return. And suddenly I knew with great clarity that it would end. “I don’t know,” I said.

“I’m sure you’ve thought about the fact that you’re throwing your life away, so I won’t give you a lecture about it,” she said.

“You just did,” I said.

She was quiet for a moment. Then she surprised me. “You’re right,” she said.
“Do you blame me?”

“No,” I said. “Maybe. I understand.”

“Just promise me something,” she said. “Please bring Lainey back safely. Take care of her. I don’t worry about you.”

I had not seen Lainey in several days. She had told me last week that she was hanging out in some artists’ lofts, getting work done, but her supplies sat untouched in our room. I had never worried about Lainey’s determination to make it on her own, but at the same time she was missing something like a conscience that kept me grounded, knowing when to stop, to slow down. I could feel Lainey rushing toward some edge, wanting to leap right off, leaving nothing underneath her but air.

“I’ll watch out for her,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “I could always trust you.”

“Happy birthday,” I said again.

“Thanks,” Sue said. And with that, we said our goodbyes. Something in me had changed toward her and I found myself suddenly wracked with homesickness. But what home it was I was missing, I did not know.

When I got back to the store, a plastic bag full of books sat on the counter by the register. Walt did not look at me as he made notations in one of the little notebooks he always kept in his pocket. “Some books to shelve,” he said. “Someone found them in the dumpster.”

I felt my cheeks flame, but he did not look up at me. Surely he knew. And who would have brought them in but the guy living in his car? “Sure,” I said, carrying the bag of discarded and now-rescued Babysitters Club books back to the young adult section.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I went home that day with my wallet filled. Walt had counted out my pay (after adding in the two hours where I forgot to clock in) straight from the register. I wondered how much he really suspected or knew about my life here. He'd never offered me a choice, letting me know when he hired me that he would pay me straight in cash. It was still light out, but beginning to cool down, that nice blue-gray color of evening and I was almost cold in my t-shirt with the breeze picking up, blowing a few scattered leaves by my feet. The trees hadn't started turning yet, but they were that sort of faded color just before. I wondered if fall would look differently here.

Adam was parked in front of the television as usual, flipping between news stations. "Hey," I said. I could hear the music pounding from behind Kim's closed door.

"Rent's due," Adam said, getting up to adjust the bunny ears.

"Is Lainey here?" I asked.

"Haven't seen her," he said.

I had covered last week's rent and the week before that. The stack of money we came with was long gone. We hadn't packed much when we left—soon we'd need winter clothes. We did not even have coats. I shivered, thinking about winter, and realized that I was dreading the cold, spending winter with its bare-limbed trees in a strange place, in a city where everything would be gray in winter.

I counted out the money from my wallet and set it on the coffee table for Adam.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Anything good coming on tonight?” I asked.

“Just the usual,” he said.

I took off my shoes and carried them into our bedroom. The sheets were neatly tucked underneath Lainey’s mattress, each corner pulled tight. Her boxes of supplies sat closed and stacked on top of each other. The sheets were twisted together on my mattress and the quilt that Lainey had made for me was in a heap. I realized that I had hardly looked at it in days, I was so used to the sight of it that I had not thought about the fact that my mother had worn every piece of it sometime in her life. It was just another thing I owned. There were a few books piled next to my mattress that I’d brought home from the bookstore.

I didn’t feel like reading though, and wondered when Lainey would be back. I didn’t want to worry about money or let it come between us, but I couldn’t help that natural pull I felt about money, the worry that I inherited from years of living with my mother, trying to scrimp and save, knowing that every dollar we spent was carefully calculated and denoted in my mother’s bankbook. I had paid the last two weeks’ rent and she owed me. She talked like her jewelry was selling, and if not, she needed to get another job. I didn’t want to make her do that since I knew she could be successful in her art and wanted her to pursue her dream, but I didn’t want to be the one stuck footing the bills. I scrawled a note on a piece of paper I ripped out of a small notebook and left it on her pillow: *You owe me for rent! Where are you?*

With nothing else to do, I went to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, I heard the door open and saw light filter in. “Lainey?” I mumbled, too tired to lift my head and look.

“Shhhh,” she said, closing the door, and then I was asleep again. When I woke up to my alarm, she was gone and there was a note added to the bottom of my note, sitting on top of my books. *Will have it soon! Be back later.* I sighed, wondering what words like “soon” and “later” actually meant to Lainey and if those words ever really arrived at *now*.

The rest of the week anger burned me from the inside out. She still hadn’t given me any money and now was avoiding me. I couldn’t go more than five minutes without thinking about it and every time I thought about it, I got matter and felt worse. I had not spoken with her face to face in over a week, and did not know where she was or what she was doing.

I did not want to alarm Adam, so I didn’t ask him. I also wasn’t sure if he’d try to get someone else moved into the space. Whenever I came home and smelled Adam cooking, I hurried past the kitchen so he wouldn’t see the worry in my face.

Once the discontent set in, it would not let up. What was I doing here? The timeline of my life that had seemed so sure and so suffocating before now made sense again: school then college, then job or marriage or something else. I had skipped out of that process, moved ahead when Lainey and I left, and now I wanted to go back. Girls

came into the store from the Catholic school down the street, wearing their uniforms, backpacks slung over their shoulders. The sheer ease with which they walked in their skirts and button down shirts, the unfaltering steps made me weak with regret. If I went back now, could I still graduate? If I didn't, what path would my life take?

The same restlessness began stirring that had started before we left, only this time I wanted to go back. I tried not to cry into my mother's quilt at night, not out of sadness but sheer frustration that I could have no idea what I wanted from my life. I longed for the clarity and trust I had when my mother was alive, then felt guilty for missing those things sometimes more than I missed my mother herself. The memory of her funeral felt false, like a dream or a movie I had seen. I wondered if, as time went on, I would miss her more and more or less and less.

On Wednesday, Steve was waiting outside the building when I walked home from work, leaning against the front steps. When he saw me, he jumped down and crushed his cigarette beneath his shoe. I scowled at him and did not slow down. "Is she upstairs?" I said. I could not say her name.

He reached for my arm, fingertips brushing my skin as I started up the steps.
"Wait," he said. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I need to catch her before she leaves," I said, pushing through the lobby doors. He followed me. I punched the elevator button, but could not wait. The light was burned out so you never knew what floor it was coming from. I pushed through the door to the

stair well. The only other time I had thought about using the stairs, I heard whispers from the shadows beneath the stairs, in the corner where the light was burned out. Today I did not care. I had to keep moving. I could hear Steve behind me. I did not look back.

“Meg—she’s not there,” he said. I slowed down but did not stop, my feet feeling heavier.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“I was hoping you would tell me,” he said.

I set my bag down on the landing and sat on the top step. Steve sat next to me and pulled out a cigarette. He offered one to me and I took it, thinking of the night that seemed so long ago, smoking with Lainey on the front porch, the sound of cicadas in my ears. Steve leaned over and lit the cigarette for me. I could smell his aftershave. We sat there, smoking, looking ahead through the cinderblock wall of the stairwell. The buzz moved through my head like a comet and then was gone, leaving just the stale taste of smoke in my mouth.

“How long?” I asked.

“A week,” he said. “We had a fight.”

I thought back. A week ago I had seen her, she was still sleeping at the apartment a few feet away from me. But still going out, with Steve, I had assumed. But I had been wrong. “She didn’t tell me.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said. I looked at him. He looked somehow older than he had a little over a month ago when he picked us up for the drive down. “It was about drugs.”

I remembered Lainey coming home, eye ringed red, the sweet earthy smell. The rumors I'd heard about Steve. "I didn't think you had a problem with that," I said.

He shook his head. "It's not pot."

Something in me fell when he said that. The ash from cigarette fell on my foot. I waited for the sting of burn, but the ashes were cold. I had a sudden image of Lainey, the day that she chipped her tooth on the swing set in my backyard. We'd been swinging, so high that the whole metal frame shook and lurched from the ground, as though it, too, wanted to fly. Lainey always knew the exact right time to jump, at the swing's perfect arc up, but that day her shirt somehow caught in the metal linked chains of the swing. It caught her and pulled her back, finally ripping free. She landed on her feet still, but stumbled, knocking her teeth and lips into the ladder in the center that climbed up to the monkey bars. I had been terrified, seeing her fall and had stopped my swing and stood waiting for her to cry, waiting to go get my mother. Her shirt hung in tatters. She felt her torn lip with her finger, ran her tongue over the now-crooked edge of tooth. Then she had wiped the blood on her arm and climbed right back into the swing.

Steve stared down at his hands. "I thought—I guess I thought she came down here for me."

She left to get away from her mother, I wanted to tell him, but I could not say those words because I no longer knew if they were true. Steve thought she left for him, I thought she left her mother—maybe neither of us were right. Lainey had her own reasons, kept her hand close, face impassive, not wanting to show her hand. Even to me, to Steve.

“I saw her,” he said. “She didn’t see me, but I saw her. She was laughing, with a whole group of people I’d never seen before. Walked right past me, looked right at me. But it was like she didn’t see me. At least, I didn’t think she did. But then I kept coming here, waiting on the steps, and she didn’t come back here. The thing is,” –he stopped and lit another cigarette—“I think she did see me. Which was worse, because if she saw me, but could walk right past...”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“So you didn’t know?”

“I’ve been working,” I said, feeling guilty even as I said it. “And I thought she was with you. I’ve been angry with her.” As I said it, I realized that I was no longer angry. “She owes me for rent, took the rest of the money we brought down.” Taking the money, owing me money, wasn’t as bad as how she was spending the money she took.

“What are you going to do?”

He looked at me. “There’s nothing I can do. I came so that I could let you know what was going on.”

The weight of this pressed down upon me. I was the only one left to take care of Lainey. It was like trying to hold onto some wild bird—painful, impossible. “I don’t know what you think I can do for her,” I said. I left Steve there on the landing with our cigarette butts and the cold ashes and began a slow climb to the fourteenth floor.

My mother would not have given up. There was something about her that was simply so solid. But I did not have that in me. I thought about where Lainey and I were now, what we had done, how I had conspired with her in this demise. In our room the

stillness and the evenness of Lainey's things spoke to me already of loss. Even with so few possessions, there was a visible order to it all.

Maybe Steve was wrong. There was no way of knowing what Lainey was really doing—maybe she got a new boyfriend, that was it, and Steve had been left behind. But the stillness in our room, the missing money, Lainey's absence all told me something else. I could not deny it.

I was too young to deal with this. I had no idea what to do—this was the kind of things that adults always swooped in and took care of. Who was to take care of it now that Adam was the closest thing to an adult in our life? Adam, who probably would have been arrested or charged with something if ever it came to light that he was renting out rooms to runaways, to minors.

The apartment was too still and I could not sit in my room. I stood out on the balcony, feeling the first cool night on my skin, and in its sudden absence, realized the humidity that had been soaking the air for months. It was gone. I wandered up and down my hall, listening for signs of life behind the numbered doors, tracing the smudged line along the wall where so many other people had put their hands. I took the elevator down, pressing the button at random, getting off on the seventh floor, pacing that hallway too. A girl was at the end of the hall on a cell phone, blowing her cigarette smoke out the window. She did not look up at me. She could not have been more than thirteen.

The whole building couldn't have been runaways, but there were so many. Behind each of these doors was a story, stories that I could not have imagined if I tried. I sat down near one of the doors, leaning against the wall. Closing my eyes, I could see the

building as though there were no walls, people moving behind the closed doors I could not see past now. They were eating and sleeping and having sex and shooting up. Purposeless, we circled around and around, thinking we were moving forward in some direction, but I wasn't going anywhere at all.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I did not sleep well in the empty room. If Steve was right, Lainey would need money. She would come back for money, and this is what I was counting on, what I hoped for and what I feared. I would be ready when she came, but I did not want to miss her. When I did sleep, it was fitfully, with dreams I could not remember.

It had been a week since Steve came by when I awoke in the dark, Lainey's knees pressing my arms down into the mattress. I struggled at first, not knowing where I was in those first few moments of wakefulness. As I recognized her face in the dark above me, I quieted and grew still.

Her whisper was a saw grinding through the darkness. "Where is it? Where's the money?"

"It's time to go home, Lainey," I said.

She shifted, her knees digging into my arms. She leaned her face close to mine and I could smell her, both sharp like salt air and soft like rotting fruit. It was only then I saw the glint in the darkness, felt the prick as she pressed something to my neck. A piece of broken glass "Where?"

I had never seen such intensity, such desire, in any person before. It was animalistic, pure and raw and simple. "Don't do this," I said. "Come back with me."

"I need that money," she said, her voice a hiss, her face blue and black in the moonlight through the cheap blinds. I could see a scratch across her cheek, thin and ragged. Her pupils were so fat they seemed to take over the blue of her irises, forming

oily pools. The glass at my throat moved deeper and I could feel it pierce my skin, the soft ease with which she pushed it through. The pain was warm and sharp and distinct. Still, I did not cry.

“The jar with the green glass,” I said, and instantly she was off me and I could breathe again. She still did not turn on the light, but went to her jars of broken glass. The green glass was mostly that deep green of Rolling Rock beer, a few brownish green, my very favorites the sea-foam green like the one she’d made me a necklace from. In the dark it all looked the same. I lay still, my throat catching as she stuck her whole hand through the mouth of the jar.

She did not seem to notice the pain. I could hear the crunch as she pushed her hand through, reaching. She could not get her fingers all the way to the bottom and she drew them out, shaking loose shards of glass that hung from her fingers. She lifted the jar to the ceiling, saw the bills folded at the bottom, and without hesitation threw it against the wall by the door.

There was a popping crash and a sound like bells as glass scattered across the room. I felt it in my hair and on my skin. Already she was reaching for the money, stepping on the fragments, grinding them into the carpet. She leaned against the wall as she picked it up and when she took her hand away, a smear of blood stayed behind on the wall, I could see it. Glass crunched and popped under her feet as she went to the door. She did not look back. There was nothing for me to say.

She left the door standing open and Adam stuck his head in moments later and, without asking, flipped on the light switch. He stared at the carpet, covered by colored

pieces of glass, jagged and unforgiving. Then he looked up at me. “You’re bleeding,” he said. “Are you okay?”

I lifted a hand to my neck, feeling a dampness there. “Yeah,” I said.

“Here—put these on. Let’s clean that out.” He took off his shoes and tossed them to me. They landed near the end of the mattress and I slipped them on, so large on my bare feet, still warm. I shuffled to the door, holding the cut in my neck. Adam took my arm, led me to the bathroom. In the mirror, my cheeks were stained with tears I had not felt falling.

The cut was deep enough to bleed, but not close to any major veins or arteries. It was more of a gouge. Adam dabbed at it with hydrogen peroxide and the intermittent sharp sting was more painful than the glass had been. “I need you to lean your head over the sink,” Adam said, guiding me with his hands. “I can’t get it clean like this. You don’t want to mess with dirty glass.” I leaned over at an uncomfortable angle so that the wound was more or less on the upper part of my neck. “This is going to hurt.”

I closed my eyes and gripped the counter as he poured hydrogen peroxide straight from the bottle over my neck. It sizzled and bubbled, working its way in, cleaning, healing, hurting. Adam did not ask me what happened, did not ask me anything about Lainey. When he was satisfied that it was clean, he gave me a square band-aid to put over it and sent me to bed on the couch with a blanket. “We’ll worry about everything tomorrow,” he said.

Only after I heard his door close down the hall did I weep. For my mother and for Lainey. I had thought there was nothing more painful than losing my mother, but seeing Lainey lose herself was far worse.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two days later I was on a greyhound bus, paid for by Shelter, a hotline for at-risk youth. Adam had given me their number the morning after the Lainey incident. When I dialed the 800 number from a payphone, I spoke to a woman who sounded young, who sounded like she cared about those people who were lost. People like me. She took down my location as well as Sue's name and number. Someone else from the agency called Sue and passed along the message and then passed it back to the woman I spoke with. Sue's message said she would pick me up at the bus station. She would be looking for me. She was glad I was coming home. The woman on the phone did not ask about my relationship with Sue and I did not correct her when she referred to Sue as my mother. Sue did not ask about Lainey. I wondered if this was because she was afraid to ask, or if she already knew.

Adam took me to the bus station because I didn't have any money left to get there. He packed me a foil wrap of flat bread. I got a box from Walt for Lainey's things and he agreed to keep them for me. Adam didn't have room, he said. Another girl was taking our place at the end of the week. He would have to change the locks. I bought the box, filled with Lainey's clothes, art supplies, and toiletries, to the bookstore.

"Thanks for doing this," I told Walt. He put her things in his office among the boxes of books and stacks of paper that were overflowing there. "It belongs to Lainey, if she ever comes in for it. I'm leaving a message for her about it."

He nodded, and like he was, did not ask any questions. “You’ll be hard to replace,” he told me, frowning as he always did. The grooves in his face must be permanent. “I’d be glad to be your reference if you need one.”

“Thank you,” I said, and impulsively, reached out and gave him a hug. He stiffened, unsure of what to do, but he let me hug him, his body still and not reciprocating, but not rejecting my touch.

I carried only my mother’s quilt on the bus with me, stowing everything else underneath. I did not want to be cold. Our bus went all the way to DC, Richmond the second-to-last stop. The whole trip would take almost twelve hours. The bus was crowded and I sat down next to an older black woman rather than take an empty seat. I was afraid of who might sit down next to me. “Is anyone sitting here?” I asked.

“Sit, honey,” she told me, only her voice and the fine white of her hair revealing her age. Her skin, up close, was flawless and buttery, and her eyes were kind. Adam stood next to his car and waved to me as the bus pulled out. “Is that your boyfriend?” she asked.

“A friend,” I said. This was normally where I would stop talking to someone I didn’t know, put on headphones or go to sleep. I wrapped myself in the blanket, but did not close my eyes.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“To visit family in Washington,” she said. “It’s been so long, I’m not sure I’ll know how to get anyplace.”

“It will come back to you,” I said.

“That’s pretty.” She traced one of the quilt squares. “Did you sew this? Looks like a lot of care went into it.”

“It did. My best friend made it for me.”

“What are the squares from? I hope I’m not being too nosy. You just tell me.”

“No, it’s fine. These were all clothes of my mother’s,” I told her, as the bus pulled onto the highway. “This was her favorite sweater. And this one was a birthday gift from me.” As I told her about each square in the quilt, the buildings disappeared behind us. I sank into the rhythm of the wheels on the highway, the heavy throttle of the engine pulling the bus along. When I looked over, I realized that the woman was asleep, but I continued in a whisper. And while she slept, I leaned close, smelling her skin like magnolias. I did not need anyone to hear me, so long as I could find the words to say it out loud.