



A NOVEL

AMONG
OTHER
THINGS



OLIVIA SIMONS

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Among Other Things

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About The Author

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This book is for Judith Ann Leonard.

Prologue

You're pregnant.

Two words that changed my life.

Time stopped at that very moment as I suddenly became aware of my surroundings.

The flicker of the light above the door. The clang of the blue pen residing in my doctor's hand whilst she tapped away on the table, awaiting my reaction. I was wrapped in layers of clothing after a cold start to the morning, but the day had inevitably heated up and I now clawed at my scarf as sweat beaded across my forehead.

This has to be a mistake, I choked out.

The doctor awkwardly shifted in her seat before she replied: I understand that this may come as a shock, especially if it was not planned. However, I can assure you that you are, in fact, six weeks pregnant.

Unable to process the news, I found myself staring at the face of my doctor. Her initial look of joy at the discovery now twisted into a shade of pity, whilst my own face mirrored the look of horror I was feeling. My eyes snapped into focus as the doctor delved into a series of questions regarding family history. I could have told her that my father wouldn't know his family history if it slapped him in the face—but that would be the pot calling the kettle black. I said we have no known illnesses within the family because the truth was that I

never really knew my father and never bothered to ask my mum.

Is next week okay?

Stunned by the question, I replied: Okay for what?

The doctor, whom I, admittedly, called Sad Sally, planted both feet down in impatience. The pen dropped from her pale hand as she leant forward and said: It is essential that we book a follow up appointment to run some tests and eliminate any concerns regarding your health and, more importantly, the health of the baby.

The baby.

The thing that was supposedly growing inside me this very minute. Shaking my head to clear the thought, I took a steady breath before replying: That won't be necessary but thank you for your time.

I stood and began to collect my things but the doctor followed me and said: I trust that this has come as a shock to you but, at six weeks, you need to start thinking about your health and the options that you have going forward. The scarf that I was still wrestling loose from my neck, now clung to me uncomfortably as if the temperature in the room had risen further. Breathing out my thanks, I slung my bag over my shoulder before adding hastily: I understand completely. Thanks again for your time.

I pushed past the doctor and left the room hurriedly, stumbling out into the foyer. The beads of sweat from my forehead began to drip down the sides of my face as distasteful nausea pushed further up my throat. Strangers piled into the waiting room sat in stunned

silence as I barrelled down the hallway, past the toilets, through the front doors and towards the bus stop. I hadn't ingested a single crumb of food all morning, so the idea that I was capable of vomiting felt so foreign to me that I didn't even pause to think.

A half hour of dry retching and a very sweaty, damp set of clothes meant that I had made it home. Stumbling my way from the bus stop to my front door proved to be the hardest task. The wind was a welcomed reprieve as my damp clothing started to cool. A series of concerned looks from a group of women pushing strollers in their activewear provided all the motivation I needed to prove that I was fine and that this was all just a misunderstanding. I begrudgingly typed in the code at the entrance of the apartment building and cursed when the door refused to budge. My body sagged against the door frame as I tried to type the code in again. Wrong. My teeth clattered against one another as the cold from my clothes began to seep into my skin. I thought it was warm outside? Bile rose up, forcing me to bend over and brace for another wave of dry retching. Before I had a chance to crumple into a ball beside the welcome mat, a shadow fell across my face.

What the hell happened to you?

Wondering if this was me crossing over to the other side, I received my answer when the overwhelming scent of someone doused in perfume assaulted my nostrils. Thankful that I was still alive, I recognised that the eye-watering strength of that particular perfume belonged to none other than Rose—my landlord and, occasionally, mother-figure. Standing there with her hand on the other side of a now partially opened front door, Rose

stepped forward hesitantly. I swallowed the saliva in my mouth before replying: Ah, long story, are you going to help me or not?

Two attempts and one dry retch later, Rose and I made it up to my apartment. My ex-boyfriend used to joke that you couldn't swing a cat in it, but where he saw something small and claustrophobic, I saw comfort and warmth. From the front door of the apartment, a small hallway, with a bedroom and bathroom on either side of it, led to an opening that housed a basic lounge room and kitchen. Two thinly curtained windows at the end allowed the sun to spread its afternoon light across the uneven floorboards and over the sofa, highlighting the remains of last night's party. Empty plates with notes rolled up were left abandoned on the coffee table among half-eaten pizzas and cigarette butts. The thought of the leftover pizza made my stomach clench as another bout of nausea hit me.

As I shuffled through the doorway, Rose spoke over my shoulder: Go lie on the sofa love, I'll make you some ginger tea to settle that tummy of yours.

A smile was all I could summon as I sunk into the cushions. Rose registered my exhaustion and turned towards the kitchen, switching the kettle on as she walked into it. She opened an overhead cupboard and placed two mugs on the bench.

You know, I had morning sickness for months during my first pregnancy, Rose said. She moved on to the jar resting beside the kettle, wrestled the lid open and then dropped a tea bag into each mug. At first, she continued,

I thought it was food poisoning until my mother hit me over the head and told me I was pregnant.

Her laughter filled the kitchen whilst I looked over from the sofa and watched as Rose waited for the kettle to bring the water to a boil before pouring it into each mug. Her smile was still there and she shook her head in fondness over the memory.

A slight woman, Rose had been my guardian angel over the last few years—from getting me a job as a waitress down the road, to riding in the ambulance beside me when I almost OD'd in my apartment. I looked at her now, with her short muddy hair, electrifying blue eyes and two hideous dragon tattoos that wrapped themselves around her forearms, peeking out from underneath a pink long-sleeved dress that swayed against her slim figure.

You know Rose, I don't think I ever said thank you to you all those years ago.

She had a sharp tongue, but her eyes usually did all the talking; even now, as those blue eyes cut across the kitchen and pinned me down. There was a familiarity in her smile as the skin around her eyes crinkled.

Yes, you did, love, and you have paid me back more times than I could be bothered to count.

She had a knack for racking up with shitty men who thought it was okay to throw her across the room every now and then. My apartment was a place to hide when they wouldn't leave, or the bruises needed time to heal. It didn't happen often, but when it did, she slept on the couch for a week or so.

Well thanks, again. I smiled as she came to sit down beside me with two cups of tea.

Anytime. Now, this drink should help settle your woes for at least a few hours.

Handing me the one with ginger, I took a sip and relished the relief it brought.

I didn't even know I had ginger tea in the cupboard.

Now, tell me, Rose inquired. How far along are you?

Six weeks, I mumbled.

Does Jack know?

No, I replied.

Jack is an ex-boyfriend. He was kind, funny and devastatingly handsome. The problem was, he was married. If disdain was a flavour, Rose just had a mouthful.

Right, well, are you planning on telling him?

Rose knew I was sleeping with a married man. She didn't exactly approve but she wasn't about to give me a hiding either. I was old enough to make my own decisions and, despite being like a mother to me, she wasn't my real mother.

Sinking back into the cushions and nursing my cup of tea, I answered: Yes, I will tell him tonight over dinner.

Rose could sense my irritation at the intrusion because she clapped her hands at my response. Good. Now drink up and get some rest. I was leaving to run some errands before I almost fell over your fat ass at the front door.

I winced at the memory and merely inclined my head towards her retreating body before I sunk further into the sofa and let sleep claim me.

Chapter 1

The vibration of my phone under the pillow roused me from my sleep, forcing me to open my eyes to a room blanketed by darkness. Eyes still coated by sleep, I blindly fumbled under the pillow to retrieve the phone, quickly answering the call before it stopped ringing.

Hello?

Well, it's about time you answered your phone! Let me in already, it's raining outside!

Confused and still masked by the darkness in the room, I questioned: I'm sorry, who's this?

The voice on the other side of the phone breathed heavily in frustration. Marle! It's Jack! Now stop playing and let me up!

Wondering why he was here so early, I said okay and buzzed him in. I was still sitting in darkness as I looked at my phone to check the time. SHIT! Not only had I slept till 8:00 p.m. but I hadn't even bought the food for tonight's dinner! I hurriedly switched the lights on as I quickly dashed back to the living room, scooping up the mugs of the now cold tea and last night's pizza before I hastily tossed them into the sink. I then ran along the hallway into my bathroom to check my appearance. The embroidered pattern of the cushion I had been laying on was imprinted squarely across my face, along with some smudged eyeliner and dried saliva. Great work, Marle, I mused. Just marvellous. My thoughts were quickly

interrupted by a knock on the door. Just a minute! I yelled. Ripping off the shirt that reeked of dry sweat, I quickly swiped a shirt off the lid of the clothes dryer and haphazardly threw it on. I scanned the shelves in the bathroom, looking for any perfume to hide the smell of my body odour. I was rummaging through the cabinets when another knock pounded against the front door, followed by Jack's impatient voice: Marle I don't have all night!

I said I was coming!

Without any more time to spare, I grabbed the nearest bottle, which most likely read 'Linen Spray', and covered myself in its suspicious sandalwood scent before running to the front door.

Hi, I breathed.

Hi yourself, Jack replied as he pushed past me into the apartment.

I closed the door behind him and paused so I could really take the time to look at him. Pushing 6'3", he was utterly gorgeous. Short, sandy blonde hair was interspersed with strips of grey, framing a face that looked kind of weathered under the lights above his head. The way he frowned as he looked over and saw last night's activities still scattered across the coffee table, made his eyes seem dull and vacant. As he walked towards the kitchen, he bent down and picked up an ashtray that lay face down on the floor. I watched as his stomach bulged over his pants, fighting against the restraint of his belt that looked two notches too tight. I used to love the way he looked, but maybe it was just his height. Or maybe it was the idea that we might be having

a baby that forced me to realise how average this man really was. Following him into the kitchen, I watched as Jack placed a plastic bag onto the bench with one hand and dropped the ashtray into the sink with his other. Before I could apologise for the pizza in the sink, he turned on his heels to face me.

I figured you hadn't been shopping this week, so I thought takeout was the safest option.

We'd been sleeping with each other on and off for two years, so it was heartening whenever he showed that he had noticed traits of my personality, like forgetting to go shopping for food.

Pulling at my shirt in discomfort, wishing that I'd had time for a shower, I replied: Ah, yeah, sorry about that.

He seemed unfazed by my smell as he turned back to the dinner and began pouring each dish into a bowl.

All good, Marle. I got your favourite—red curry.

Just the thought of Thai food made my stomach clench, but I smiled regardless and took my bowl over to the sofa with Jack close behind me.

Every mouthful made me want to puke but I knew that I needed to eat something today and, seeing how Jack went through all the trouble to get me dinner, it was the least I could do. We ate in silence, then I placed my bowl onto the table and leant back into the sofa, turning the TV on for some white noise. I had called to invite him over on my way home from the doctor's. Despite having called it quits between us just weeks earlier, he deserved to know that I was pregnant. The thought of that alone produced a sour taste in my mouth, but a part

of me was quietly hopeful for what could be. What we could be. As Jack draped his arm around me, I thought back to one time when we were tangled in my sheets. The light had just broken through the curtains, beaming directly onto our warm bodies. In a moment of silence after sex, he had rolled over to cup my face with his left hand. He stroked his thumb along my cheek before confessing that he was prepared to leave his family for me. At the time, I laughed uncomfortably and told him he was crazy. We were just having fun, I admitted. A heartbeat later, he gathered himself and agreed that it was just a fantasy.

Sinking lower into the sofa, my stomach started to rumble in discomfort, so I slid my legs over his lap to ease the cramping. Jack then placed his second hand onto my leg, running his fingers along my skin.

We had been seeing each other occasionally for the last two years. It was only a few weeks ago that I'd decided to end it. I noticed that one of his children had started to stalk the videos I posted on social media and knew straight away that our affair had gone on for too long. Jack was disappointed but understanding. We were adults, after all.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when his hand slipped between my legs. What are you doing? I laughed. I used to love how we'd fool around in this apartment but knowing that his children were starting to figure it all out, I wanted it to end. Didn't I? How would Jack react knowing that his fourth child was on the way?

I tried to push his hand away. The resistance only made him want it more so he tightened his arm around

my shoulders, lowering me against the cushions. I was about to tell him no but his mouth smothered mine before I had a chance to do so. I lifted my hips against his body to try and push his weight off me but collapsed back against the sofa. The weight of his body against my stomach forced the bile to slowly rise up and burn my throat. With one free arm, I managed to grab the back of his head, pulling at his hair to lift his face away from mine.

Ouch! What the fuck was that for? he yelled down at me.

I pushed him back off me so that we were now in a seated position. I took a moment to breathe and said: I don't want to have sex right now.

Confusion clouded his face. Then why did you invite me over?

Uneasy from nausea building up within me, I thought: No time like the present.

I'm pregnant, I blurted.

I sat there like a lost child who expected a smile or maybe a loving hug but, instead, I got nervous laughter and a cold and calculating tone.

You're joking, he spat.

No, I replied evenly.

The sweat on my brow line told me that the curry was definitely on its way back up. I was sitting there, trying to read his thoughts and wiping my palms along the hem of my pants when he said: Get rid of it.

I had no time to react before my stomach contracted and my mouth opened to expel the entire contents of my dinner over Jack. Not knowing what to do or say, I sat and watched as shock and pure rage ballooned across his face.

What the fuck Marle! He yelled as he made an effort to stand and unbutton his now curry-soaked shirt.

I, ah, it's the morning sickness, I said.

Just my fucking luck, he muttered as he shook his head and walked into the bathroom.

With nausea no longer a pressing issue, I stood up to follow him.

Did you really mean what you said before? I asked.

With a wet towel in hand, he stopped to look at me.

Marle, you can't be serious? I'm 47 years old. I already have a wife and three kids. I didn't have an affair with you just so I could fall into the same trap.

Guttered by the words, I replied: It's not the worst thing to happen—

No, Marle, it IS the worst fucking thing to happen, he spat.

The sting of the venom in his words forced me to take a step back, especially when he had confessed that he would leave his family for me only months prior.

I, um, I guess I can take care of this child on my own.

Placing the towel down and buttoning up his still stained shirt, Jack looked down at me and asked: You and what money?

Still ringing from his earlier words, I just stood there staring at him. At the person I was seeing for the first time. The man who used to buy me little gifts when we first started seeing each other. The man who would appear at my apartment without warning because he was too drunk to go home to his wife. The man who used to kiss me goodbye in the mornings as he tiptoed out to work and back to his family. He was only ever looking out for himself and it hurt to realise this just now. Only now, when I was already pregnant with his child.

He stood in front of me and gestured towards the kitchen: Because last time I checked Marle, you can't even afford to buy yourself food, let alone support a child!

My eyes swelled with tears as I walked back towards the doorframe for some support.

I can manage, I sputtered.

Noticing my fragility, he moved closer and softened his tone.

No, you can't Marle. And that's okay, he said as he rubbed my shoulders. I will pay for the abortion.

It took every ounce of strength I had left to stay standing. To continue looking into the eyes that I used to stare at longingly. To feel so unwanted and pitied. Our brief silence was broken by Jack's ringtone going off in the kitchen. He dropped his hands from my shoulders and stepped into the kitchen to grab his phone. Seeing that it was his wife on the other end, he cursed and sent it to voicemail. I stood in the doorway to the bathroom, watching him as he gathered his things, preparing to leave. Still in shock from how quickly this day turned to

shit, I stayed where I was whilst Jack walked past me, suggesting that I call him when it's done. Then the front door closed behind him and I was left alone.

I didn't have time to register what had just happened before I started to cry and my legs shook with fatigue. Without an ounce of strength left in my body, I crumpled. I slid down the bathroom doorframe and onto the floor, where I lay crying. Curling my legs towards my body, I stayed there, weeping as the walls grew colder and the night darker. Nausea was quickly forgotten as the pain of my chest heaving through each breath took control. The heavy silence of the room was only interrupted by the sobs that escaped my lungs. Too exhausted to move, I lay there, staring at the ceiling, until sleep claimed me once again.

Chapter 2

A thundering sound stirred me from my sleep and I slowly opened each eye. Pain in my right shoulder shot down my back and I discovered that sleeping on the floor had not been the wisest decision. Last night's event came flooding back as I worked my way to sit up. My anticipation of a possible happy ending with Jack had backfired. I was confused and alone and, with barely enough money to cover rent and food, I was left with no option but to terminate the pregnancy. The thundering sound started again but did not come from the clouds outside. I looked over my shoulder and realised that the sound was coming from someone knocking on the front door.

I picked myself up and shuffled over to the door. Twisting the latch, I was quickly pushed back against the wall as the door was thrown open and Rose stormed into the apartment, her red kaftan willowing behind her. She took one look at the place and swirled on her heels to face me.

Dear God, Marle, what the hell have you done?

I shifted from one foot to the other, stumbling for an explanation but, before I could provide one, Rose exclaimed: And more importantly, who died!?

The stench of last night's vomit and yesterday's sweaty clothing, which I was still wearing, became offensively apparent to her senses.

Without an iota of strength in my body, I just stood there and stared at Rose, trying to keep the need to cry suppressed. Hoping that Rose would break the silence did not yield the desired result—she just stood there, arms out, waiting for my answer. Hungry, alone and in a desperate need of a shower, my chin quivered and then the rest of my body collapsed. Tears streamed down my face and I tried to explain what had happened last night, but the pain written across my face said it all instead. Taking two steps, Rose enveloped me in her tiny arms, uttering that he was a coward for leaving a woman who was pregnant with his child. Hearing those words only made me cry even harder. Ugly, uneven and hard-to-breathe sort of sobs.

After ten minutes of standing there in Rose's arms, sobbing, I eventually settled into silence. With Rose's arms loosened around me, I stood back to wipe my face, trying to muster up some courage. She looked at me with such compassion, then lifted her chin and smelled the air. Her eyes came to rest on my body and she whispered: How about you hop into the shower and I'll grab you a fresh set of clothes?

I knew that my body had been screaming for a shower since the day before, so I simply nodded and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. I looked in the mirror to see that my reflection resembled nothing of the woman I typically saw looking back at me. Reduced to a blotchy face that scrunched up with the arrival of tears and a body stiff from sleeping on the floor, I looked miserable. My muscles pulled to attention when I stretched around the shower curtain to run the water. Yesterday's clothing fell to the ground with a thud

and I slowly tiptoed into the shower. The aching muscles in my body began to relax, softly releasing the tension from my shoulders and back. I leant against the wall and sunk lower and lower until I was sitting on fibreglass floor.

Eventually, the water started to cool so I turned the tap off and pulled my body up and out of the shower. With a towel wrapped around me, I stood in front of the mirror again. Short brown hair hung in clumps around my face. My green eyes looked like murky puddles of swamp water, and my usually warm skin tone looked ghostly pale. At twenty-eight years of age, the glowing skin I had flaunted as a teenager now sagged with fatigue as dark circles formed underneath my eyes. Had I stopped using a few years ago, I might have looked remarkably different. Yet there I was, splotchy, pale skin, eyebrows that hadn't been touched in months, nails chipped and lips cracked from neglect—I looked haggard. Bored by this self-criticism, I pulled a brush through my hair and attempted a smile. The pathetic reflection that smiled back had me rolling my eyes as I turned to exit the bathroom.

Rose was nowhere in sight, so I walked into my bedroom to take my phone off the charger. There were two text messages and a missed call:

7:02 a.m.

Rose: Had to run. Crisis at work. Rest up and I'll pop in on my way home.

Relief flooded through me knowing that I could at least have some peace and quiet. I needed today to sort my life out, especially since I was due back at work the

next day. Waitressing wasn't the most important job, but it was all I had. If I lost my job there, then Rose would have no other choice but to evict me. I was already three months behind and no friendship was going to save me.

The second text left me gutted.

7:05 a.m.

Jack: Marle, I've booked you in at the Women's Clinic on George Parade. The appointment is at 9:00 a.m. Don't be late.

A sharp pain laced through my chest as I swallowed his words. It was crushing to have a man you used to love push you into making a decision you are not comfortable with. A man who had once contemplated leaving his family for me was now pushing me to end something that I didn't even have the chance to start. Whilst he did have a point regarding my finances, I didn't want him making decisions on my behalf. It felt forced.

I looked to see who the missed call was from and noted that it was from my sister, Grace. Not wanting to deal with her drama, I let out a huff and dropped the phone on the bed. There was no chance that I was going to return that call just yet. It was already bad enough dealing with the rejection from Jack, so listening to Grace's opinion on top of everything was not an option.

I let the towel drop to the ground and surveyed my closet. If I had to go to the clinic this morning, then I was at least going to wear something comfortable. I threw on some loose-fitting clothes and headed into the living room to start cleaning. After spending time most of the morning in the bathroom, I forgot just how bad

the sofa was. There, in all its glory, my second-hand, black leather couch was reduced to a puddle of suspicious-looking vomit. The longer I stood there staring at the mess, the quicker my eyes were beginning to water at the smell and the faster I felt the nausea returning. Dashing across the kitchen, I swiped the disinfectant spray from under the sink and a roll of paper towels from the counter, getting stuck into the task. Half an hour and a bin full of paper towels later, my living room was back in shape, looking and smelling like it did before —sort of. My stomach groaned in protest and I realised that I hadn't eaten or kept down, for that matter, a single meal since Saturday. Seeing that it was now Monday, I considered making myself something to eat, but the thought of food made my stomach roll. Upon opening the fridge, I also realised that I still hadn't been grocery shopping. Frustrated by my inadequacy as a grown adult left me settling in for another cup of ginger tea instead. I thought about the baby growing inside me and what I wanted. I never really thought about having kids. It was something that I just never considered until now. What I really wanted was some time to think it over but, after Jack's message, I felt like I had no choice. If he wasn't going to support the child, then who was going to help me? I had no one and that had never been more obvious than now. I looked at the clock above my stove and cursed. Taking one last gulp of my tea, I jumped from the stool, grabbing my wallet and keys before heading into the bedroom. It was 8:45 a.m., which meant that I had exactly fifteen minutes to make it across the city. I pulled my phone from the charger and noticed another missed call from Grace. Confused as to why she would call me twice in

one morning, after we hadn't spoken in years, I merely stuffed the phone into my back pocket and noted that I would just call her later.

I arrived at the clinic and was surprised to see that it was designed more like a home than a hospital. Walking through a garden, I followed a path to the front doors and went to buzz the intercom but was saved from the task when the door swung open to reveal a tall brunette with sharp facial features. A pack of cigarettes hung loosely in her fingers as she held the door open with her other hand. My mouth twitched in longing. She noticed. Pocketing the cigarettes, she stepped over the threshold to usher me inside.

It may be the first day of summer, but you'll catch a cold standing out in that wind, she laughed, closing the door behind me.

Once inside, I could see that this place did, indeed, used to be a home before renovations clearly transformed the space into a clinic. The reception area and foyer retained a lot of the historical features of the home, whilst further down the hall, there was an opening that led into a medical facility that contained what I assumed to be operating theatres and treatment rooms.

I'm Emily, by the way, she said, leaning forward to shake my hand. You must be Marlene, our nine o'clock appointment?

Feeling a bit trapped, I answered the question with a slight nod. Emily took the hint because she only inhaled another breath before continuing.

Right, well, you are a little late but if you take a seat on the side, I'll see if we can still fit you in. She guided me over to the waiting room and, after ushering me over to a seat, she asked, Can I get you something to drink whilst you wait?

Seated next to an old fireplace, I looked up at her and smiled. No thanks.

With Emily out of the room, I took the time to look around. Blinding white walls were muted by worn-in linen sofas, each mixed with an assortment of cushions, ranging in colour and texture from pink velvet to emerald green leather. I looked down at the pamphlets and posters scattered across the coffee table and became painfully aware of what I was about to go through with. Growing up, it was not something I ever paid attention to. I knew in high school that girls in my year had gone through with abortions but I assumed that I was the exception. I assumed, in ignorance, that accidents like this never happened to people like me. I assumed that I was exempt from making hard decisions because, like for most children growing up, they were made for me by others. I hated myself for not googling what the experience was like. I suddenly wanted to know how many women went through with abortions. Was it painful? Did you cry? What was it like? Did you regret it? I pulled my phone out of my back pocket to do just that when the screen lit up with Grace's name. My thumb hovered over the answer button, frozen in place, as I wondered what could possibly be so important that she kept calling. I answered before I could ponder the question further.

Hey!

The voice on the other side radiated urgency.

Marle— was all Grace could manage to say before her voice cracked and painful sobs vibrated through the phone. I sat to attention, leant forward and lowered my voice.

Grace, what's wrong?

A muffled sob was briefly broken by her answer, Marle it's mum, before she sniffled and took two large gulps of air.

Noticing that my tone attracted the attention of Emily, who was bent over her computer at the reception, I wanted to move out of sight but, before I could stand up, Grace blurted: She's dead.

With one hand holding the phone and one on the armrest, I froze. I sat as still as a portrait whilst blood drained from my face. Grace continued talking, mentioning something about a heart attack, but all I could think was, Anne, my mum. The woman I ran away from and hadn't spoken to in ten years. The woman whom I ignored out of pure selfishness because I blamed her for dad leaving. The woman whose calls I sent to voicemail because I didn't care for the conversations she wanted to have.

Marle, are you there? Grace asked.

I stumbled out of my thoughts and was about to reply but Emily interrupted: Alright Marle, if you'll follow me, Doctor Jones will see you now.

With my phone still pressed against my ear, I said, Grace I'm gonna have to call you back. I ended the call before I could hear her response and stood up to follow

Emily. As we passed a wall of information sheets, my eye caught sight of a picture on a form that showed a mother and her child smiling for the camera. It hit me suddenly that I spent my whole childhood blaming my mum for dad never being around and there I was now—a woman pregnant with a child who would probably never know their father. The realisation stopped me from walking behind Emily.

Frustrated by my delay, she turned back and said: Marle, please, we do not have all day. Whilst her heel tapped impatiently on the vinyl floor, I turned from the wall to look up at her slender face. Tears pooled in my eyes.

Sorry, but I can't do this.

I turned and ran out through the front door.

Back in the apartment, I quickly rummaged through my closet, looking for my old suitcase. I dragged it out and placed it on my bed whilst making a mental reminder to buy a new one the next chance I got. With the zipper busted and the handle broken, I opened the bag and got to work packing up my life back into the bag that had helped me leave the life I had before. On the way home, I thought back to how I had treated my mum over the years. Regardless of whether it had been teenage angst or just plain cold rudeness, I knew I had to be there to say goodbye. As fun as my time in the big city had been, the warmth and familiarity of my hometown beckoned me to return.

I checked the time on my phone and saw that Grace had tried to call me again. Since it was 11:00 a.m. and the bus ride I booked was scheduled to leave at 1:00

p.m., I decided that I would return the call later. My last pair of shoes were tossed into the bag and taped shut just as Rose stepped into the apartment. I had called her on my way back from the clinic to fill her in. Considering that she was my landlord, I owed it to her to tell her I was leaving in person instead of leaving a note. She was shaken by the news but supported my decision. Standing by the doorway to my bedroom, shock and pure sympathy played across her face.

I am so sorry Marle, you poor thing, she said as she stepped forward to wrap me in her arms. A wave of sadness pushed down on my chest as I pulled out of her embrace.

You can sell the furniture to pay for the rent that I still owe you, I said. I picked up my purse and fished around its contents until my hands landed on a set of keys. These are also yours, I smiled, placing the apartment keys into her hands.

Tears formed in Rose's eyes, telling me that the goodbye I was trying to avoid was finally here.

You give my best to that sister of yours, Rose said in an uneven tone.

I will, I laughed, thinking back to the time my sister had hunted me down in the city and tried to convince me to come back home. Rose loved Grace, not just because she was my sister but because Rose saw a lot of herself in Grace—strong willed, loyal to a fault, and overly forgiving.

At least let me give you a lift to the bus station, Rose offered.

I knew I wasn't getting out of that apartment until I said yes, so I merely smiled and nodded my thanks as I followed her outside, hearing the faint click of the door closing behind me.

Chapter 3

One back-aching bus ride later, I made it. Baymoore was just under seventeen hours north of the city; merely one state over but, to me, a whole world away. Subdued under my own clouded vision, I covered my mouth to stifle a yawn as I stepped down from the bus. As I looked out across the main street in town, it became obvious to me that nothing had changed. Excluding the arrival of a few new coffee shops and a new crossing down the road, everything was just as I had left it. At six o'clock in the morning, the air was brisk. I took a deep breath and scanned the parked cars, looking for her. Arms crossed, one leg resting on the car behind her, there was Grace. Five foot seven just like me, eyes green just like mine, that same knowing frown...my twin sister. She looked like me in the most obvious features. Her hair, now wildly dark, was the only physical indication that we weren't the same person. But when it came to personalities, we were worlds apart. She was the calm and level-headed one, unlike my impulsive and emotionally unstable state. Where she excelled, I didn't. Maths, science, athletics, swimming—you name it. When you're the same age, you can't help but compete with your sibling. When we started school and I was told to be more like my sister, I developed a resistance whereby I went out of my way to be the exact opposite of her. At first, it was fun being the rebellious one; however, eventually, people started to look at you differently, like

you were a lost cause. Like they pitied you. In a small town like Baymoore, this made the small-town bubble even smaller.

Wrapped in fluffy coat, Grace's fingers dug into the sleeves of her pockets whilst her teeth clattered in the shade. The sun had only risen moments prior but was still hidden behind the hill. A large pair of sunglasses covered her eyes nevertheless and her feet tapped away impatiently. On the bus yesterday, I managed to call Grace back and let her know that I would be arriving this morning. She didn't say much in the way of response, but I knew that she would be there like clockwork. We locked eyes briefly as I started to cross the road but, before I had the chance to gather my things, Grace had already turned and slid into her car. Rolling my eyes, I followed suit, throwing my bags into the back of the car, and sat down in the passenger seat. She pulled out of the parking spot just as I spun towards her.

Thanks for picking me up, Grace. I really appreciate it.

You're welcome, she replied, her words clipped.

I glanced across the car to look at her and saw her eyes exposed behind the frames. Still opaque from crying, I tried to think of something to say to ease the tension but figured that silence was better than forced conversation. Sunken into the seat, I sat there next to a sister whom I hadn't seen or spoken to in years, just watching the shops pass by as we drove back to our childhood home. To mum's home.

As we pulled up at the house, the feeling of nostalgia hit me hard. Five minutes from the town centre, the quaint little weatherboard home sat isolated at the end

of the street, surrounded by palms and mango trees. Looking at the house, the paint peeling from the timber after years of relentless sun. The grass overgrown and the plants under-watered. It felt like a prison when I was younger with the palm frond shielding me like bars to a cell. Now, it just looked sad.

As the car came to a stop in the driveway, I jumped out to grab my bags from the back. Coming around the side of the car, I made a beeline for the mailbox, collecting letters out of habit. With Grace already through the front door, I followed her through and paused. The scent of coconut air freshener filled my senses as I stepped over the threshold. A collective arrangement of old rattan furniture mixed in with one-off pieces purchased over time. Whilst the kitchen stools had been replaced due to age, other items, such as the mosaic coffee table that we had crafted as kids, stood in defiance, cracks mended and corners repaired with patience. It was oddly comforting to have walked back into a room that harboured so many memories. The living room opened out towards the kitchen and I followed the creaking floorboards to where I found Grace leaning against the kitchen bench.

Thanks again, I said.

Walking past me, Grace ignored the comment and opened the curtains to the veranda, which spilled out onto the garden. With her back towards me she spoke.

There's milk and bread in the fridge, a set of keys for you on the bench.

I looked at where she pointed with her head and located the set of keys, mum's keys. I swallowed hard

against the rising guilt before it bloomed across my cheeks in shades of pink. With my arms still looped through my bags, one hand still holding the letters, I opened my mouth to speak.

Don't, Grace cut off my attempt as she walked towards me to pick up her own car keys. The only reason I called you yesterday was because, despite what you've done, mum would want you to be there at her funeral. She brushed past me and I was about to reply but she quickly spun on her heels and beat me to it, her voice raised. And don't think, not for one second, that I forgive you!

Stunned at her anger, my feet remained planted as I watched her slam the front door behind her. Muscles frozen in place, I waited until I heard her car start and retreat from the driveway before I dropped the letters onto the bench and set my bags down on the floor beside me. Without thinking, I walked around to the living room and approached the shelf that was against the wall, peppered with photographs of Grace and I as children. One photo, in particular, drew my attention. A photo of myself and Grace, around six or seven years old, sitting next to mum around the mosaic coffee table. There was a large birthday cake sitting at the centre of the table and I was leaning forward to blow out the candles before anyone else had the chance. Mum was smiling down candidly, a paper crown perched at an angle atop her head. I smiled fondly at this memory of mum's birthday before I stalled when I read the number on the cake—thirty. Caught up in my own drama as a child, I failed to realise that mum had herself just been a child when she had us two girls. She was a single mum of

twin girls at thirty, whilst I was now twenty-eight with nothing to my name but a few dollars in my bank account.

Wiping away a tear that escaped my left eye, I turned to the veranda that led out into the garden. After few attempts, I eventually opened the glass sliding door and was greeted by a chorus of birds, all singing at varied pitches. There, hidden under a small palm that fought against the rising grass, still sat the bird bath we had made as kids, overflowing with water. You could still make out our stubby handprints moulded into the basin. Just as I took a step down to the garden, my phone started to ring in the kitchen. Reaching the phone, I was about to answer when the screen blacked out, its battery dead from the lengthy bus ride. I decided then to pick up my bags and head into my old room. Down the hallway, last door on the left. A standard single bed sat against the far wall of the room, with my childhood toy propped against the pillows. Lionel the lion. The toy that I had treasured as a child had later been stuffed into the back of my closet when I turned fifteen. Sneaking a boy into my room at that age meant that I needed to look mature, so Lionel had to go. I walked towards my bed and dumped the bags on top, smiling at the thought that mum must have found him after I left and placed him there.

Without scanning the room, I knew that not a thing was out of place. Aside from Lionel, everything—from my record player to the dream catcher—was exactly where I had left it. Not a speck of dust in sight. After eventually finding the phone charger, I plugged my phone in and turned to unpack my clothes when several

notifications came through at once. Three missed calls and one text message. Two missed calls from Jack and one from Rose. The former was ignored and I decided to call Rose. It wasn't long before she answered.

Hey, Rose! Sorry I missed your call!

Her muffled voice came through in greeting as she replied: Nonsense love! I was only checking in to see if you made it safely. The noise of a chip packet being opened, followed by Rose's munching, had me smiling. The idea that she was already eating chips before 7:00 a.m. had me saying: Yes, I'm here in one piece, but the real question is what are you eating?

The phone line crackled before she replied. It's those turmeric chips everyone has been raving about at work.

They're obviously a hit if you're having them for breakfast, I said.

Oh no, love, I've been up since 4:00 a.m. worried about you, so this is actually my lunch, she laughed.

My smile faltered and I couldn't help but think of all those nights that my mum must have stayed up late worrying about where I was or, more importantly, who I was with. With that thought in mind, my frown returned and so did the nausea. Swallowing with a dry mouth, I hurried to end the conversation.

Hey, Rose, thanks for checking in, but I've got to go.

My sudden change in tone, accompanied by a hiccup at the end, told Rose just as much.

Anything for you dear. Be sure you buy yourself some ginger tea! It will do wonders for your stomach.

I thanked her again and hung-up. Before I stood up, I checked for the text message that came through and saw that it was from Jack.

6:16 a.m.

Jack: Call me.

Two words was all I got. Knowing that he had obviously found out that I didn't go through with my appointment, I simply ignored the message and returned the phone to the nightstand. A wave of exhaustion came over me, but I knew that I needed to take a shower before I fell asleep. After an overnight bus ride, I did not need any more unnecessary scents triggering my nausea.

In the shower, as the warm water untangled the tension in my shoulders, I looked over at the glass shower screen and smiled. From top to bottom, there was a crack in the glass screen that would easily split it in two with any added pressure. Back when Grace and I were five years old, mum had placed us both in the shower to wash our hair. She had stepped out to grab the shampoo when Grace and I began arguing over time spent under the water. It was then that I became so frustrated that I pushed her into the shower screen. With water under her feet, she slipped and fell with more force than I intended. She landed against the screen with a loud crack that had mum spinning around to face the shower. Grace's scream promptly followed the crack of the glass, which resulted in me being pulled out and given the hiding of my life. Mum's hand had been like a branding iron on my backside. Then, I was pushed aside as mum whisked Grace away into the kitchen and towards the first aid kit. At the time, I had fumed at the

injustice of my treatment because the real crime had been Grace hogging the water. Now, as I stood there running a finger over the crack, I realised that I had, indeed, been in the wrong. That, on top of everything, I owed my sister an apology for this incident as well.

Waking up in the afternoon and checking the time to see that I got a few hours of sleep after that restless bus ride, I rolled off the bed and quickly got dressed. Once in the kitchen, I noted that milk and bread were in the fridge just as Grace had said. With the alarming thought that I only had two hundred dollars left in my bank account, I also noted that I needed to find a job as soon as possible.

Mum's car keys in hand, I hesitated. I contemplated walking to the shops before my stomach cramped, forcing me to palm the keys and head towards the garage. Amongst the bikes and the lawn mower, sat mum's little 1987 Volkswagen Golf. Never wanting to throw something away if it still worked, mum loved this car. The polished black paint a distant memory as the salty breeze left the car looking more grey than anything else. Since the shops were only around the corner, it didn't surprise me that the car was still managed the trip. Opening the door and cautiously sliding in, I could smell a faint trace of her perfume, smoked rose. A scent I grew to loathe as a teenager. Now, it was just a memory that I relished before the moment was gone.

As I drove past an old swing set, memories of mum making us ride our bikes to the shops had me smiling. An area notorious for mosquito bites, every time Grace and I were sent to the shops, we would always opt for the long route, detouring by the water's edge, just so we

wouldn't get bitten. Our ice creams usually melted by then, but it was worth it when you went to sleep the following night without the irritating itch.

Jumping out from the car, I made my way inside the grocery store and grabbed a basket, heading towards the fruit and vegetable section. Lost in my own thoughts, my attention snapped back when I heard: Marle Ellis? The moment I had dreaded ever since I stepped on that bus yesterday. I begrudgingly turned around towards the origin of the voice and found myself face-to-face with Sophia Frances. Easily one of the most annoying human beings I had come across in my life. Standing just a shoulder above me, Sophia exuded an air of elitist superiority. With grandparents in the business of owning and renting land, it was no surprise that she landed the best property of all, a two-storey beach house with acres of land on either side, rendering the beach in front of her house virtually inaccessible to everyone else. The only reason why I knew all that was because I was barely eighteen when she was gifted that bombshell property as a graduation present. She stood in front of me now and I could see that small-town life suited her. Having a ridiculous amount of money and social influence meant that she had little to no competition for the attention that she craved. Her long blonde hair was effortlessly swept back over her shoulders. Piercing blue eyes were set above razor sharp cheekbones. Swollen lips sparked a memory of my own when I was younger, paler and non-existent. Her body was wrapped in skin-tight Lycra, so I just knew that she was one of those people that woke up at dawn for an F45 session.

I stared at her like a blank canvas, which prompted her to say: It's me, Sophia! Oh, wow it sure has been a while!

Wanting to cut the chit chat short, I replied: Yeah, well, my mum died yesterday, so I've come home.

Her smile wavered and her face then tried to frown before the Botox in her forehead decided otherwise. Alas, she recovered quickly.

I heard, you poor thing! Grace was telling me all about it last night.

I thought, what the?— Since when did Grace hang out with makeover Barbie?

Well, it was nice seeing you, I quipped before slowly taking a step backwards. I was about to turn around when she said: You should come to our ten-year reunion!

Shit! I saw a letter mentioning it this morning when I went to the mailbox. I thought that if I kept walking and ignored her remark, she would go away—but she continued.

I know you haven't RSVP-ed but I'm hosting the event, so I know we can squeeze you in!

Wincing at the proposal, I turned around and smiled.

Sounds good!

Suddenly I found my shopping list to be the most interesting thing since sliced bread and continued my retreat. She took the hint because, shortly after, Sophia swivelled around on her squeaky-clean joggers and returned to the checkout counter.

I let out a deep breath and went back to shopping but choosing between pink lady or granny smith apples

rapidly became the hardest decision to make of them all. Standing there, contemplating which one would have more flavour, I was catapulted back to the memory of mum slicing up pieces of apple so that I could place them in makeshift ice block holders as a summer treat. I shook the memory away, threw both apples into the basket and kept walking.

I need a drink, I muttered.

Chapter 4

Wine bottle open and now half empty, I stood motionless in the kitchen. The timeless clunk of the hands fixed to the clock above the fridge told me that I hadn't moved for several minutes. My eyes were glued to a small chip on the island bench as my mind spun a series of memories in which mum cooked and cleaned in that very spot. I could almost smell her smoked rose perfume wafting through the room as if she had only passed by just moments prior. The thought was interrupted when the chime of the doorbell rang throughout the house. Upon opening the door, I found Elizabeth Porter standing there with a bouquet of hydrangeas in her hands. Two years below me at school, I knew Liz because I had briefly dated her brother back when I was sixteen. Short and pale, with a smattering of freckles across her cheeks, she was nothing like her older brother who, at the time, had been tall, dark and handsome. Stunned into silence at her arrival, Liz spoke first.

Hi there, I have a delivery for the Ellis family.

She stepped forward hesitantly with the bouquet, so I reached out to take the flowers, saying thank you in the process. She wore an apron with 'Porter Floristry' printed on it, so it seemed obvious that someone had placed an order with her shop. As I moved to close the door, Liz quickly said: I'm sorry to hear about your mum. Those blue eyes of hers filled with genuine sympathy

and she shuffled awkwardly from one foot to another. I smiled and replied: Thanks Liz, I appreciate it.

Shocked by the fact that I remembered her name, she returned the smile before I inclined my head and closed the door. With the hydrangeas placed on the dining table opposite the kitchen, I pulled a card from the flowers and read:

Grace and Marlene,

Our sincere condolences at the loss of your loving mother Anne.

Warmest regards,

Frances Family

Not surprised by the workings of a small town, I assumed that something as quick as a flower delivery would occur within hours and it did. Before I had the chance to place the card down, the faint rattling of keys in the front door caught my attention.

Grace walked into the kitchen, still wearing the same black trousers and coat from this morning. However, this time she wasn't wearing her sunglasses, leaving me to absorb the dullness that swam through her eyes. Eyes that were usually a mesmerising green were now red-rimmed and hidden behind noticeable bags. A result from a night of no sleep. She threw her keys down on the bench as she walked past me, grabbing the home phone from the counter and propping herself onto the sofa in the living room.

Who are the flowers from? she asked.

Knowing who they were from and remembering my conversation with Sophia this morning, I asked: Since

when are you and Sophia friends?

Glancing over her shoulder towards where I stood, Grace shrugged.

Since she helped me find a place of my own.

The card from Sophia's family was now back on the table and I was walking over to the living room, wine glass in hand, when she continued: I take it they're from her? Her head tilted towards the flowers.

Yep, was all I dared to reply.

I sat down across from Grace and saw a ghost of who she used to be. Confident, incredibly intelligent and fiercely dedicated, she was now reduced to a vacant body as her mind wondered elsewhere.

Nodding towards my glass of wine, I asked, did you want something to drink?

Grace snapped out of her trance. Her hollow eyes locked in on my face as her mind replayed the question.

Do I want a fucking drink? she spat. Like a snake pulling back before it sprung, the venom in her next words hit home. How dare you sit here like this is your home? She veered towards the edge of her seat as she continued: How dare you act like nothing happened? Like you didn't just pack up and leave mum and I alone? I opened my mouth to speak but Grace interrupted. You weren't there! Her voice cracked at the end, letting out a painful sob. Tears streamed down her face and I let her continue to speak. In case you didn't realise Marle, it was her birthday yesterday. Placing her head into her hands, Grace wept and her shoulders shook in uncontrollable shudders.

All life drained from my face as I became aware that I missed mum's birthday.

I am so sorry, I whispered, acutely aware of the huge mistake I had made by forgetting. A mistake I would, regrettably, have to live with. Grace looked up from her hands and shook her head.

No, you don't get to apologise, she said, taking another deep breath. You will never understand what it was like to see her fall down. To be the one who had to do compressions on her own mother's dying body as everyone around me screamed. Tears rolled down her eyes. She made no effort to wipe them away as her hands gripped the sofa's edge helplessly. You weren't the one who rushed to the hospital after the ambulance, only to find the paramedics waiting at the entrance. Waiting to tell you that they lost her. You weren't the one who had to remove the jewellery from her fingers, her neck. Grace eventually wiped her eyes. I did! she yelled. I was the one who sat there, in the hospital, all day yesterday. Crying next to her dead body. That was me, she said. Gulping for air, only me.

I could feel the tears slide down my face. I stood sombrely and walked over to her. Like the first sip of tea, I cautiously sat down beside her before I wrapped my arms around her and cried. Cried for our mum who had passed. Cried for the guilt I felt over my absence. Cried because, despite running away, I loved my family deeply and I felt the hurt that Grace was expressing just as deeply in my own chest.

Whilst we sat there curled up and crying together, I realised that my absence had been selfish. I was young

and self-centred, not thinking to care about how my actions would impact others. I knew that I would never be able to take away the pain that I caused my mum. But leaning against my sister, I realised that I could try to do so with her. I knew that she may never forgive me for leaving and ignoring our mum. However, I knew that I had to start with, at least, the smaller things first and see where it might lead.

Her head rested against my shoulder.

I'm sorry for pushing you into the glass shower screen, I said.

Her quick and shallow breaths came to a halt and she slowly raised her head to look at me. She sat there in silence, staring at me for two seconds before she laughed with exhaustion.

Yeah, I forgive you, she replied and a smile slowly appeared in the corners of her mouth. She sat up higher and wiped the leftover tears from her eyes.

Just like that? I asked.

Well, she replied, if my memory serves me correctly, mum gave you a massive hiding and banned you from watching TV for a week. So yeah, we're even.

Falling back into the sofa, I laughed at the memory once again until Grace started dialling on the home phone.

What are you doing? I asked.

The phone balanced between her shoulder and cheek, Grace replied: I spoke to Father George this morning after I dropped you home. We set an appointment for tomorrow to discuss the funeral. She paused before she

looked over at me and added, I would appreciate it if you came with me.

Nodding my agreement, I watched her in awe and marvelled at how Grace was still able to pick herself up and keep going even in face of so much grief and anguish. My thoughts were interrupted as Grace spoke through the phone.

Hi David? Yes, thank you, I appreciate it. Well, today would suit us better. Yes, perfect ,we'll see you shortly. You, too. Thank you.

I waited for Grace to end the call before I asked: David? As in David Longmire?

The one and only, she replied.

Confused, I questioned her further.

Since when does he run the funeral home?

Grace rolled her eyes at my ignorance because, had I returned home or called every once in a while, I would have known the answer.

Since his uncle Matt passed away and left the business to him, Grace supplied.

My brows pulled down as I tried to remember David's uncle Matt, but my attempt was stopped short when Grace slapped me on the knee and said: It doesn't matter because we're heading there now. Grace fished through her pockets and pulled out her car keys. I was walking behind her when my stomach rumbled in protest. Grace stopped to look at me and asked: Have you eaten anything today?

Um, no, because you stormed inside before I had the chance, I answered hesitantly.

Unimpressed, Grace turned back around and kept walking to the car.

Right, well, we can grab something on the way home.

Chapter 5

I nside the funeral home, I was immediately taken back by the overpowering scent of flowers. Curious to know if it was this town or my nausea that was making me so sensitive to each smell, I found my answer when I came to stop beside a large arrangement of flowers that were excessive to say the least. Definitely this town. Further in, we reached the reception area whose walls were covered in shades of soft grey. Footsteps that could be heard down the hall from us had us turning to face David himself. My memories were of a chubby teenager who was torturously bullied by none other than Sophia Frances, but this teenager had now grown into a man, albeit with the horrid limp in his left leg still there—but also with the same genuine smile, arms open wide in greeting.

Grace and Marle, I am so sorry for your loss, David said. I was only speaking to Anne last week about the reunion coming up. Such a shame to see her go.

We both inclined our heads in gratitude and stood in painful silence. David turned to me.

And Marle! he exclaimed. It's a shame to see you under such circumstances but a pleasure nonetheless.

Fondness over the memories we shared in high school bubbled to the surface. I recalled David and I sneaking out of our houses at fifteen with our parents' whiskey, trying to drink it at the beach. Throats stinging from

alcohol, David had choked: What is this? I had cried with laughter, rolling back into the sand and joking: This is definitely not the soft drink I thought it would be.

Now, I couldn't help but smile as I looked at David. Those warm brown eyes used to swim with tears when we were younger, in high school, after Sophia Frances had teased him about his weight whilst he sat and ate a sandwich his mother had made him. It was from then on, at thirteen years of age, that I took it upon myself to intervene every time I saw Sophia bully him. This simple act turned into a feud between Sophia and myself—but I gained a friend because of it. A friend I had failed to stay in touch with and who was now a stranger at arm's length.

David's facial expression told me that he was revisiting some of the same memories whilst we both stood there, in the funeral home, staring at one another in silence.

How's Tim? Grace questioned.

David turned to face her. He is doing well! Still a little under the weather but on the mend, which is good.

Like an outsider to the conversation, I tilted my head. Who's Tim?

He's my fiancé, and soon to be husband, David said enthusiastically.

Wait, you're gay? I asked, stunned that I hadn't realised. I was aware that, during high school, David never hit on me but thought it was because I treated him like a brother.

Rolling her eyes again, Grace was about to berate me for my rudeness, but David beat her to punch line.

Ever since I walked into the school with a Justin Bieber T-shirt. David wiped away an imaginary tear from his eye before he looked down at me and laughed. Oh, come on Marle, some part of you always knew.

I looked him up and down and resigned myself to the fact that the signs were there, I just didn't realise. I should've known, I admitted with a shrug of my shoulder. After all, you were a little too good at applying my eyeshadow in tenth grade.

Flashback to my first date. At sixteen, I was asked out to the movies by a senior, Michael Porter. Mum was working and God forbid I let Grace apply my makeup. So, there I was, screaming in the bathroom after my fourth failed attempt to replicate the same eyeliner thickness across my right eye, when Dave walked in. Claiming to have a steady hand from painting, Dave sat me down and went to work. In no more than ten minutes, my eyes were glistening and symmetrical.

A couple of YouTube tutorials and Bob's your uncle, he had professed with a clap of his hands. I remember being so excited going on that date that I ignored mum when she asked if I could remember to take a photo so she could see what I looked like when she came home from work. Not only did I not take a photo, but I spent the night fooling around with Michael so that, when I returned home at 3:00 a.m., mum was asleep on the sofa. Still in her work clothes, she lay curled around her mobile phone, having been calling me all night.

The memories produced a profound sense of guilt for the complete disregard I had shown to my mum during those years. At the time, I was so caught up in my own

life that I failed to see how my actions were hurting her. I hated the fact that she wasn't there to see me off on my first date, so I punished her by staying out late and not answering her calls. What I should have understood was that she wasn't there because she was too busy trying to support two teenagers on minimum wage. Thinking of all the times I took her for granted, I was abruptly brought back to the present by the sound of Grace's voice.

What do you think of this one?

I realised that our conversation had moved on from Dave's sexual orientation to coffins and I quickly strove to catch up. We had walked down to the end of the hallway and were now standing in front of several caskets. With Grace's eyebrow raised in question, I turned to look at where she was pointing. Simple in design, the dark oak of the coffin provided the most detail with each grain in the timber shining through the varnish.

Yep, sounds good, was all I could reply because the thought of placing mum into that box and lowering her into the ground consumed me. Before I started to cry, Dave was next to me with a box of tissues. This process is never easy, he said with a reassuring hand on my shoulder. The same anguish was written across Grace's face and we both decided that that particular coffin would do, just so we could get out of there. With the flower arrangements, paperwork and payment quickly taken care of, we nodded our thanks to Dave and promptly left.

Afterwards, Grace kept her promise and pulled into Cathy's Corner, one of the two new cafes in town.

Painted in a charcoal wash, the front façade had milk crates placed around a mixture of benches and boxes with people spilling out onto the path. Once we grabbed a table inside, I sat down with a menu and began to read when Grace spoke up.

This place does an amazing brown rice congee.

A what? I asked. Confusion spread across my features.

It's a type of rice pudding, Grace added.

Sounds healthy, I said shaking my head. I'll pass.

Don't knock it until you try it, Grace pushed.

She was always the healthier one, so it never surprised me when she suggested oddly named dishes. Folding the menu shut, I said: Fine. But if I vomit it back up and it lands on you, don't blame me. Grace only rolled her eyes before she turned to the approaching waiter. If only she knew.

I watched her order two bowls of who-knows-what and sat there uncomfortably because nausea didn't discriminate. I could have been eating a block of chocolate and would still have felt the need to vomit. The thought that this would be the best time to tell her that I was pregnant made me take a gulp of water before I leant forward to speak. I opened my mouth but was interrupted when Sophia Frances walked by.

Marle, so nice to see you again! Sophia chimed. She leant over to hug me, still wearing the same Lycra outfit as before, only now I was engulfed by the stench of dried sweat.

When did you guys last see each other? Grace questioned with her head tilted to the side.

Sophia plastered an all-knowing smile across her face before she replied: Oh, we ran into each other this morning at the grocery store, didn't we Marle? I encouraged your sister to attend our ten-year reunion but she must be too busy.

My mouth was parted in boredom as I wondered why she was speaking about me as if I wasn't in the room. The only reply I could offer was: Ah, I may be busy, but at least I've had a shower today.

Realisation dawned on Sophia's face and she hesitantly took a step back whilst Grace just sat there and stared at me, imploring me to behave. I tried.

Wanting to change the subject quickly, Sophia turned to Grace. How are things working out with Jordan? she asked.

Grace's posture straightened. Yeah, we're working it out, she replied.

Now I sat there in confusion, trying to figure who Jordan was.

We should catch up some time this week, Sophia offered Grace.

Still pained at the mention of Jordan, Grace nodded her head. I would love to, she mumbled.

Great, Sophia said, clearly happy with her response. Well, I'll leave you ladies to it. She took a step closer in order to hug Grace before she paused, remembering my earlier comment, then turned and waved goodbye.

What was that about? Grace asked.

Looking back to see Grace staring at me, I smiled. Just like old times, I said.

Grace simply shook her head and rolled her eyes, like always.

Who's Jordan? I asked.

Halfway to placing her glass back on the table, Grace hesitated. Her eyes mirrored my own as she proceeded to place her glass back on the table.

He's my husband, she said.

My jaw went slack. Just like the day I was told I was pregnant, I sat there, stunned. I didn't know what to say, so I just waited for Grace to continue.

She swallowed and said: It doesn't matter anymore because we're in the process of getting divorced.

Wait, I said, trying to wrap my head around this. Walk me through what happened.

Grace sat lower in her chair and took a deep breath.

We met shortly after you left. He was a doctor at the medical centre and I was a student on placement. We started dating once I graduated and shortly after that he proposed. She paused briefly as our meals were placed on the table, then continued. Now, after almost a year of marriage, we are getting divorced.

You could see she was visibly uncomfortable having to talk about it.

She said: I sent you an invitation and even tried calling a million times.

Grace took a spoonful of her meal in an attempt to stop talking. I followed suit and, with just one mouthful, I felt my body recoil. The taste of health hit me and my nausea returned.

I couldn't remember if I received an invitation or a phone call, but I also couldn't remember a lot of my time in the city either. Knowing that she wouldn't appreciate a throw-away apology, I asked: What happened?

Grace lowered her spoon and answered reluctantly: Life happened, I guess. He's almost twelve years older than me.

I took another mouthful and almost spat it out, due to a wave of nausea pushing further up my throat, before my hand clamped over my mouth. Grace looked at me with guilt and nodded in supposed agreement.

I know, I know, dating someone that old was bound to end in disaster. But what can I say? Maybe I've got daddy issues.

The nausea eased briefly, which allowed me to drop my hand and laugh.

You have no idea!

Chapter 6

Walking into the church the next day, I couldn't help but remember the last time I was there. I was probably around fourteen years old when mum had dragged Grace and I along to the Christmas Eve mass. Although it was in the evening, the sun was still up and shining through the stained-glass windows. Pushing twenty-eight degrees, the small chapel-like church had been packed to the brim with both locals and tourists alike. As we sat in the sweltering heat, all I did was stare at the fan above my head and wished that it were strong enough to actually be useful.

The voice of Father Brown broke my thoughts.

Grace and Marlene! Thank you for stopping by. My sincere condolences for your loss.

He walked quickly for a man his age. When he shook my hand, I could feel his frail bones within my grasp. No taller than my shoulder, he had wisps of white hair cut back into a short modest style and his soft brown eyes were hidden behind rimless frames.

It hasn't changed, Grace said, looking towards the altar.

The moment was lost when I uttered: I'm just glad that I wasn't struck down walking into this joint.

Grace elbowed me in the ribs, quickly taking charge by guiding Father Brown away to discuss the funeral. We

decided earlier, over breakfast, that mum would have wanted a full ceremony, so we agreed that Grace would be the one to discuss the details. Even though neither of us had attended church since we were kids, Grace was the one who actually paid attention to the readings when we were younger. Whilst I was off daydreaming about the fan above my head, she was listening to the priest like the perfect child she was. An hour later, Grace and Father Brown eventually emerged from the church. Grace's disapproving eyes zeroed in on the cigarette between my lips which I quickly tried to stamp out with my shoe. As a speech pathologist, she probably didn't approve of the smoking, and I could hazard a guess that she would be furious if she found out I was pregnant as well. Oh well.

Father Brown's voice cut through the silence as he said: My thoughts and prayers are with you both, before he shook both our hands, inclined his head and left.

With booklets of chosen readings and hymns in my hands, we piled back into Grace's car. Suddenly, she turned to me and whispered: I don't think I can do this. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and her lower lip began to quiver. I leant over the seat and wrapped my arms around her. What started off as a whimper became a shaking sob. Uneven breaths, accompanied by the wind caressing the window, eventually settled into a calm silence. Not wanting to break the momentary lapse, I continued to rub my hand in circular motions across Grace's back. Dealing with the death of our mum and the breakdown of her marriage was a heavy burden to carry. What hurt me the most was the realisation that not only was I not there for her but that she had no one else

except Sophia fucking Frances to confide in. The fact that Sophia knew of my sister's pending divorce before I did was the worst. And as much as it hurt, I knew that there was no one to blame for the situation except for me, myself and I.

Arriving back home, I felt completely drained of energy. Grabbing the wine bottle from yesterday and claiming that the sofa was calling my name, I left Grace in the kitchen as she rummaged through the fridge in search of something to eat.

We ate less than an hour ago, I mumbled. As if you're still hungry.

You know I like to graze, she admitted.

At the faint ruffle of plastic after the door to the fridge shut silently, I lifted my head over the back of the sofa to see what she was doing. With her back turned towards me, Grace stood huddled over the sink, like a goblin who had just stolen something precious.

What are you eating? I asked suspiciously.

Grace raised her head to look over her shoulder towards me, the smudge of chocolate evident around the lines of her lips. The mischievous sparkle in her eyes told me that she had just found my stash of milk chocolate. Ever since I was a child, I would always hide my chocolate in the cheese drawer for safe keeping. We had an unspoken rule in our house that if you left chocolate lying around, it was anyone's.

That's not fair! I only bought that this morning! I said helplessly, watching my chocolate disappear.

Grace only laughed as she polished off the rest. Licking her fingers for good measure, she confessed: Well, you should really find a new hiding place.

Falling back into the sofa with a huff, I couldn't help but smile. Without thinking, I had placed the chocolate in my old hiding place, not realising that Grace was the one who told me where to hide it back when we were seven years old. I had come home from a party that day and was so desperate to preserve my chocolate that I had auctioned off a Lindt chocolate ball to Grace so that she would help me hide it from mum. Anne always made sure that we never ate too many sweet treats as kids, so when I came home with a lolly bag, my only hope to keep them all was to hide them somewhere.

Satisfied with her find, Grace walked around to the sofa opposite me and collapsed onto the cushions. We both lay there in silence, absorbed in the noise of the birds outside. I was slipping into sleep when Grace whispered: I think I might sleep here tonight.

I propped myself up onto my elbows and looked over at her. I was about to ask if everything was okay but stopped before I said a word. I knew that everything was not okay. I knew that she was carrying the weight of mum's death and her own impending divorce on her shoulders and I knew that I hadn't been there for any of it. Instead, I asked: Is there anything I can do?

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes.

Well, for starters, you can buy more chocolate because you're out. Grace's lips pulled back into a smile as she rolled to face me. But I do need to move my things back home, so some help would be nice.

The anguish and defeat in her eyes at the mention of moving back home motivated me to sit up and look her squarely in the eyes.

I saw some empty boxes in the garage this morning. We can use them if you want?

Following me, Grace also sat up, then hunched forward to tie her hair into a bun atop her head.

Okay, well, we may as well go now, whilst Jordan is still at work. I'd rather avoid him at this stage, she admitted.

Nodding in agreement, I rose to collect my phone and saw that I had three missed calls from Jack. Not wanting to address that particular issue, I placed the phone in my back pocket and followed Grace into the garage.

We settled into a steady rhythm of rummaging through the junk in the garage, trying to reach the empty boxes in the back. Leaning over the bikes, I managed to pull the boxes down into my arms only to realise that they weren't empty. Walking over to Grace with tears forming in my eyes, she took one look at me and then down at what I held my hands. Written on the box I was holding were two words: 'Family Albums'. With pure disbelief at what we had just found, Grace grabbed the box out of my hands and ran back into the house. Following close behind her, we stood at the kitchen bench and stared at the box that lay dormant on the table. A box that had idly been sitting in the garage, unbeknownst to either of us, until now. Walking over to the drawers, I pulled out a knife and approached the box.

This could be nothing, I pointed out, pausing with my knife against the tape.

Still in shock over the discovery, Grace stood frozen at the bench, eyes glued to the cursive writing mum had scribbled on the side. All those years spent wondering where and who our dad was. Hoping that one day he would show up and apologise. Apologise for leaving us for another family. For not being there for us but, more importantly, for letting mum take the blame for his absence.

Frustrated by the delay, Grace choked out: Hurry up and open it already.

I looked over at her and could see that she had grown impatient. I ran the knife along the tape, splitting the seal. Stale air drifted through the opening, hinting that this box was packed up a long time ago. Grace anxiously stood next to me as we both peeled back the folds of the box to reveal several albums with two photographs and an envelope laying on top.

Set within a glass frame with whitewash borders, I picked up the first photograph. Standing there, with the beach to his back, was our dad. Looking to be average height, his short-cropped hair had an auburn tint where the sun hit the top of his head. Dark brown eyes resembled pools of ink as he smirked at the photographer. Knowing that Grace and I bore a striking resemblance to our mother, I wasn't surprised to find that we looked nothing like our dad. Switching photographs with Grace, I looked down at the other photo within the same whitewash frame. Behind the glass sat the same man, sprawled across the same beach as before. Only this time, his arms were wrapped around mum. Both sat in the sand with the sun on their faces, eyes squinting at the light, smiles as wide as the ocean

behind them. Mum wore a simple white dress, whilst the man next to her wore a plain white T-shirt and a pair of navy-blue shorts. Staring at the photo I couldn't help but wonder what went wrong. You could clearly see the love they both had for each other. From their warm embrace to the knowing look in their eyes, anyone would be a fool to say otherwise.

With the photograph pulled close to her face, Grace frowned.

What beach is that? she asked.

Not knowing the answer, I shrugged and placed the frame in my hands back into the box.

Looking down at the envelope inside the box, a sense of anticipation washed over me. With shaking hands, I picked up the envelope. Opening the top, I pulled out a series of folded letters. Looking over at Grace for reassurance, she nodded her encouragement to proceed. Without wanting to delay any further, I swallowed my unease and unfolded the letters.

To my dearest Grace and Marlene,

Words cannot describe how excited I am to finally meet you. Being forty weeks pregnant, I expect to see you both very soon. I am writing this letter because, over the past nine months, I have learnt a lot about myself and the person I want to be. As you will learn in the future, I lost both my parents in a car accident shortly after my twenty-first birthday. The pain was and still is unbearable, but I grow stronger every day knowing that you two are my greatest blessings of all. A year after my parents passing, I met a man called Mark. I was in such a dark

place after their death that Mark's company provided peaceful solace. At first, he was patient, kind and caring. It wasn't until I broke the news to him that I was pregnant that he became someone else entirely. I could cover up the bruising but I couldn't hide from the pain that I could be causing you both. I decided that the best shot of escaping him was to pack a bag and move north. I picked this town because mum, dad and I used to holiday here when I was younger. Without a job or home and now heavily pregnant, this town is helping me rebuild myself. I thought a lot about how I would tell you girls about your father. Some weeks, I would build up the courage and think that you deserve to know. Then, another part of me resented the fact that I let this man into our lives and that he could easily come back to ruin what I have fought so hard to protect. I was tempted to spin a story of a loving man who passed away, but I couldn't bring myself to lie. Instead, I am writing you this letter. Whether or not you girls will ever read this is another question, but I felt the need to tell the truth at least once. Your father is just a man. No one special and certainly not someone worth your time. I have decided that you are both better off not knowing who your father was. I would rather you blame me for not knowing than spend your whole lives looking for someone who doesn't deserve you. You girls are my whole world. If there is anything I can give you, then that is each other.

Your loving mother,

Anne Ellis xx

The letter glided to the table. I just stood there. Like a deer in headlights, I remained still, waiting for some sort of reaction to bubble to the surface. Instead, Grace and I absorbed the silence, relishing in the comfort of our own thoughts. I was completely stunned. I spent my whole life blaming my mum, just as she predicted. I spent countless nights screaming at her, demanding to know where my father was—and all the while she had simply tried to protect me, to protect us. Trying to preserve a degree of innocence in my childhood. Something that I will no doubt try to replicate for my own child. The weight of withholding that knowledge from Grace and I must have been tremendous. To let your children imagine a man full of love and kindness whilst you sat there and endured the truth, knowing that he was a danger to this family, was a sacrifice she had made for our own naïve happiness. A sacrifice I took for granted. Looking over at Grace and the tears streaming down her cheeks told me that she felt the same guilt. Felt the same pain over losing a mother who had only wanted to shield us from the trauma she experienced. The overwhelming need to cry sent tears cascading down my own cheeks. Crying over the pain I caused my mum but also because, after finally discovering who my father was, I realised that I do not care. I do not care because, in the end, he is just a guy I do not know and who does not want to know me. I spent my whole life trying to chase after an imaginary dad, one who did not actually exist in reality, when I already had all I really needed—my mum and sister. Like a cloud moving away from sun, I realised that the greatest gift of all was the family I had from the start. I knew that it may be too late to apologise, but at least I was here now. In the end, if all I could offer Grace

was a pair of helping hands to move to a new house, then I would be the best helper there was. I placed a hand on Grace's shoulder and waited until she finished wiping her eyes before I said: If you want to move before Jordan finishes work, then I suggest we get a move on.

She nodded her head in agreement, so we picked up the few empty boxes we found and headed out the door.

Chapter 7

We pulled up to the house that Grace had been sharing with Jordan and I immediately noticed the garden. Set just a street away from the beach, the colonial-style house was surrounded by layers of greenery. Leaving me in the car to marvel at the exterior, Grace was quick to jump out and get to work. Picking up the boxes from the back of the car, I followed her inside. Once we were through the front door, I was gobsmacked. Sky-high ceilings throughout the single storey home allowed for an abundance of light and fresh air to stream in and across the dark timber flooring. Indoor palms framed the entrance as I walked into the open-plan living area. Linen sofas were strategically placed around a tribal patterned coffee table to offset the soft rug underfoot. The place oozed cool, calm and sophisticated. Following the sound of Grace's voice, I stumbled down the hallway on the left, walking into the master bedroom. With the dark timber flooring and the white walls continuing through to this room, my eyes were drawn to the four-poster bed sitting front and centre. Layers of fabrics and cushions lay atop, all in varying shades of white. Anchored beside the bed sat two bedside tables, each with photographs on top. I walked to the side I presumed to be Grace's and bent down to pick up a photo. In it, radiating with joy, Grace stood, wearing a figure-hugging silk white gown. She looked every bit the glowing bride. Standing next to her was

Jordan, clad in a black tux, his eyes shining with affection for Grace. Leaning in to whisper in her ear, his eyes crinkled at the corners, laughing at something he just said. Apart from salt and pepper hair, he looked remarkably young considering that Grace said he was almost twenty years older than her.

Not knowing where Grace was, I called out to her again. She eventually replied: I'm back here! Around the wall behind the bed, there was a walk-in wardrobe. With enough shelving on either side to start a small storage business, I wasn't surprised to see that Grace had already used up most of the boxes for clothes only. Past the wardrobe, an arched doorway led into another room, the ensuite bathroom. I gasped at the marble stone that covered both the floor and walls and couldn't help but walk over to the basin, running my hands over the brass tapware. Drooling at the opulence, I turned to walk back when I saw Grace frozen in front of a box. I leant over to see what she was staring at and saw a small blue jewellery box resting in her hands.

Grace had placed her engagement ring back into this box. Not knowing what to say, I bent down next to her and draped my arm around her shoulders. We sat there in silence until Grace took a breath and looked up to say: I didn't like the ring anyway. Placed in a single solitaire setting, the large cushion-cut diamond would melt most hearts. But I knew Grace—if there was anything that she hated more than raisins, it was expensive jewellery. I remembered the time that Grace had begged mum to wear her grandmother's pearl earrings. They were expensive pearls, yes, but it was the sentimental value that rendered those earrings priceless. I had no interest

in jewellery, so it was not long before mum gave in and allowed Grace to wear them. Not wanting the earrings to sit around and collect dust, mum was happy to finally see them being worn. Fast forward to our year six school camp, we spent the day in the water, only to arrive back at our cabin and find that Grace was missing an earring. Mortified at the loss of something so treasured, Grace returned home, apologised profusely and swore she would never wear something so expensive again. That promise clearly stuck because, even now, she won't wear any jewellery, bare fingers and all. Standing up, Grace walked around to Jordan's side of the king-sized bed and, leaning down, placed the Tiffany box on the bedside table. Stuck in a trance, I watched as Grace mindlessly rubbed her ring finger as if she secretly missed the weight of the ring on her hand.

Back in the wardrobe, I got to work packing up her clothes in an effort to give her some privacy. Without a word, Grace returned and started folding the clothes beside me. We spent the next few hours in a comfortable silence, switching from pulling items down off coat hangers to folding and organising. I took a moment to stand up and stretch my legs after sitting down for so long when a flicker of light caught my eye. Looking over to an area in which Grace's remaining shoes sat, I saw the light again. I bent down to get a closer view and saw it. There, wedged behind a pair of knee-high leather boots, sat a photo album. The silver embellishments on the cover caught the sun from the skylight above, bouncing it back into the room. I picked up the album and Grace froze. Turning from the album cover, which read 'Our Wedding Day', to the look on Grace's face, I knew that

she was about to break. Just as I predicted, her jaw quickly clamped down, trying to suppress her emotions but her eyes betrayed them. What started out as just one tear trailing down her cheek, turned into a waterfall. Her mouth scrunched up just before she let her face fall into her hands and cried. Soft whimpers turned into shuddering wails. Even breaths turned into sharp intakes of air. Her normally calm and level-headed persona turned into that of a broken woman. Dropping the album on the floor, I rushed over to where she sat sprawled amongst the sandals.

We'll get through this, I offered, pulling her into a tight embrace. What doesn't hurt you makes you stronger.

Grace paused briefly and looked at me. What? she questioned.

The confused look in her eyes had me explaining. You know, the popular saying—what doesn't hurt you makes you stronger?

Her reply was blunt. You're supposed to say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

We looked at each other as the realisation dawned on my face. Grace was the first one to break, beginning to laugh.

God, you're an idiot sometimes.

Happy to see that my lapse in intelligence provided her with some much-needed relief, I just shrugged and said: At least I didn't accidentally call Mrs Wiltmore mum in senior year!

Looking pointedly at Grace, she paused to look at me, shocked that I still remembered, and then proceeded to laugh, rolling down on the floor. Tears that streamed down her face now were tears of joy as opposed to sorrow. Flashing back to our English class in year twelve, every student was working on their Shakespeare essay when Grace called out to the teacher for help. The only problem was that instead of saying 'Mrs Wiltmore', Grace had said 'Mum'. A class full of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds busted out into hysterical laughter at the verbal slip that Grace had made, me included. It took a good two months before people forgot about it. Grace had cried in the bathroom at lunch one day, upset over the fact that people, like Sophia Frances, were still teasing her about it. That afternoon, as school finished, I 'accidentally' slipped and fell into Sophia who, in turn, slipped and fell down a couple of stairs. At the time, I was frustrated that she only ended up with a couple of bruises but, looking back on it now, I'm just thankful that she wasn't seriously hurt. Sometimes I forget how aggressive I had been as a teenager and a sense of regret washes over me. But then I remember the smile on Grace's face when the whole year forgot about what she had said and Sophia stopped teasing her, so I know deep down that it was all worth it.

Grace now lay there wiping the tears from her eyes and I wondered what I did to deserve her. We've had each other's back since the day we were born and yet I had left her as soon as I graduated. I had spent my time at school looking out for her but, as soon as we finished, I just packed my bags and walked out. Fuelled by the desire to escape the small-town bubble, I deserted my

sister and mother. I was so selfish in making that decision that I failed to see how it would hurt them. How, after all those years of sticking by her, I left her when she needed me the most. I left her here, assuming that nothing would ever change and oblivious to that fact that everything did change. That, despite living in the same small town, everyone grew up and everyone moved on.

Picking up one of the boxes that was already full of clothing, I stepped around Grace and started to make my way outside.

I'll start loading these into the car, you can finish sorting out the rest, I muttered over my shoulder.

Grace smiled her thanks before returning to the clothes.

After several back and forth trips to the car, we both now stood in the kitchen. Taking a seat, I watched Grace write a letter to Jordan and couldn't help but imagine how beautiful their wedding must have been. If the photo in the bedroom was anything to go by, I just knew that Grace had glowed. To know that she had truly been happy on that day and that I had missed it will haunt me forever. From the proposal to the ceremony, I wasn't there for any of it—and that hurt. Placing the pen back into the kitchen drawer, Grace looked over at me. Those same helpless eyes that had beseeched me in the high school bathroom shone right back at me. I walked over to where she stood and pulled her into a tight embrace, whispering into her ear: What doesn't hurt you makes you stronger.

She pushed me away and shook her head, smiling.

Alright, you idiot, let's get out of here. I need a drink.

Chuckling as I lead the way out of the house, I turned to check whether Grace was following me. She stood there with her hand on the door handle, pausing to take one last look at the place she had called her home for the past year. As if trying to commit it to memory, she looked around, then slowly stepped over the threshold and softly closed the door.

Chapter 8

The drive back home was a solemn one. Not wanting to make her cry again, I suggested that she go inside and take a nice warm bath whilst I unpack the car. Half an hour later, with a severely bruised ego regarding my level of fitness, I had all the boxes inside and placed by the wardrobe of Grace's old room. With a rewarding pat on my shoulder, I walked into the kitchen and turned the kettle on. I felt the nausea return just moments after I unpacked the car and knew that another cup of ginger tea was needed. Opting to lay down on the couch to appease the uneasy feeling in my stomach, I figured that I would just stay on the couch until I heard the kettle finish.

The smell of garlic and paprika filled the air, encouraging me to open my eyes. I looked around and saw that the soft pink tones that had highlighted the afternoon sky were now replaced by a blanket of black ink. In almost complete darkness and a faint hue of light cast behind me, I sat up to take in my surroundings. Behind me, in the kitchen, Grace floated between the chopping board on the bench and the stove. Wearing a Winnie-the-Pooh pyjama top that barely stretched past her stomach and frilly pink shorts covered in roses, I couldn't help but laugh at her. Startled at the unexpected noise, Grace spun around to face me.

What the hell are you wearing? I chuckled.

Well not naming any names but someone decided to tape up my boxes with four rounds of duct tape, Grace replied, smiling as she returned her gaze to the stove.

Still laughing at how ridiculous she looked, I just shrugged. Better safe than sad.

With her body frozen in place, Grace slowly turned her head to look at me. Better safe than sorry? she corrected.

Yeah, same, same, I said waving my hand at the remark.

With her back to me, Grace's shoulders shuddered in amusement as she shook her head. No, no, it's not.

Standing up from the couch to stretch my body, I looked over at Grace again. How long have I been asleep for? I asked.

Back at the chopping board to roughly slice the coriander, she shrugged. I'd say maybe an hour—two at most.

Since I had almost no sleep on the bus ride up here from the city, I was glad to have finally had a decent rest. Grace placed a bowl in front of me as I took a seat at the kitchen bench.

The source of the garlic and paprika smell that roused me from my nap was mum's notorious vegetarian stir-fry, my mouth immediately started to water. Loaded with the likes of eggplant and capsicum, I looked up to see Grace already digging in.

When did you learn to make this?

Grace swallowed her mouthful before she replied: Mum showed me how to make it last year. Watching as my eyes rolled back into my head after the first taste, Grace added: The secret is to glaze the halloumi in honey before you add it to the dish.

I only shook my head as I continued to devour the meal. Like most kids, I wasn't a huge vegetable eater when I was younger. Mum used to try and hide the mushrooms and carrots in my spaghetti by finely dicing them, but I wasn't a fool. I knew there was evil lurking in my dinner and I wasn't going down without a fight. That was until the night mum decided to try a different tactic. Her idea was that if she grilled, baked or fried a vegetable in just enough seasoning, then I wouldn't care what I ate. As a result of this tactic, my vegetable intake hit an all-time high and she decided to combine them all in one dish, creating a flavour-bomb stir-fry.

With my fork hitting the now empty bowl, I could safely say that Grace had nailed the dish. I leant over the bench to see whether there was any more left.

Relax, there's plenty left for lunch tomorrow, Grace said.

I saw satisfaction dance in her eyes and knew that she was thinking the same thing. Sitting there, across from Grace, made me miss the moments we had shared over dinner as teenagers. At the dining table, we used to have this rule that whoever was the first person to get up from their chair after dinner, had to clean the kitchen. Consequently, we usually spent hours at the table, just talking and laughing with mum until either of us grew tired and finally rose from our chairs. Most of the time,

we would all help out with cleaning anyway simply because we knew that two people would clean up faster than one. Now, as we stood side-by-side again, one washing the dishes and the other drying them with a tea towel, all I could think about was how lucky I was to have someone like Grace in my life. Tears swelled in my eyes and Grace rubbed my shoulder.

You alright?

Wiping my eyes with the tea towel she offered, I said: Yeah, I'm good. I was just thinking about how shitty me life would be if I were an only child.

Grace laughed because she knew it was true. She continued to dry the dishes.

Well, for starters, you definitely wouldn't be cleaning this quickly without me.

We laughed as we placed the last dish away and I thanked Grace for dinner, admitting that I was still exhausted from the bus trip. Agreeing that she was also exhausted, we both wished each other a good night and slipped into our old bedrooms.

Chapter 9

The next morning, I turned to look at the time on my phone and groaned. It was 5:30 a.m. and the sun was already peeking through my windows. I pulled another pillow over my head to drown out the light and was close to falling back asleep when the birds outside erupted into a chorus. Throwing back the covers, I sat up in bed and was about to leave my bed when my phone chimed, signalling an incoming text message. The message read:

5:32 a.m.

Grace: Run on the beach?

I smiled at the memory her question evoked and replied with a thumbs up, jumping out of bed in the meantime. Every morning since we were about fifteen, mum, Grace and I would wake up just as the sun was rising and go for a walk along the beach. I was usually hungover or still coming down from a night out, but mum never punished me. Grace no doubt rated me out for slipping through the window most nights but mum was just happy that I was there. Some of my most treasured memories have stemmed from time spent with mum and Grace on the beach. From walking in the morning to midday lunches, we spent much of our childhood along the shoreline.

Grace was already fumbling with her keys down the hallway, so I quickly changed into a pair of running shorts and a plain white T-shirt. Deciding to leave my

phone at home, I twisted my hair up into a bun and followed Grace out to the car.

As we pulled up to the beach, the salty breeze drifted in through the open windows of the car. I breathed in the fresh air and stepped out onto the gravel, wincing at the pain of the tiny pebbles pressing into the base of my bare cold feet. The car now locked behind us, Grace nodded with anticipation and we set off jogging down the sand dunes and onto the harder sand by the water. We eased into the motion of running and I allowed my stiff joints to slowly work their way into fluid movement. The initial shock of running barefoot through the cool water sent shards of ice up my legs, but they later simmered down after my muscles warmed up. A few kilometres in, I came to relish the cool water lapping at my feet. With sweat pooling down my back, I pulled my shoulders back and tried to focus on evening out my breaths. The sun felt glorious on my skin. Given my recent lack of sleep and persistent nausea, I felt that the sun was finally returning some of the energy that I had lost in the last few days.

Eventually, we slowed down to a walk when we reached the end of the loop. With the car hidden just beyond the sand dunes behind us, Grace sat to stretch out her legs whilst I just sat in a deflated lump. Waiting for my heart rate to slow down, I leant back onto my elbows and looked out over the water. The saturated tones of orange that radiated from the glow of the rising sun contrasted sharply against the dark blue hues of the ocean. The swell was absent this morning and smaller waves lapped at the water's edge. Feeling the sand

beneath me, I dug my toes in to savour this moment of peaceful clarity.

Overcome with the urge to confess to Grace and thinking that there was no time like the present, I blurted out: I'm pregnant. Grace whipped her head around to face me, her mouth dropping open like a goldfish's. She stared at me as if I had just sprouted two heads, so I decided to keep talking to ease the numbing silence. Breathing in the salty air, I said: I was having an affair with a forty-seven-year-old man. I know what you're thinking and yes we both have daddy issues. I accidentally became pregnant, which was when he told me to get rid of it and left. Grace just sat there like someone slapped the life out of her, so I continued: I hung up on you when you called to say that mum had passed because I was sitting in an abortion clinic. Swallowing the nausea that started to rise up, I added: Obviously, I left because here I am. I waved my hand towards the ocean in front of me and then back to my stomach, sitting there like a bloated fish, sweaty and pregnant.

Too afraid to see the reaction on her face, my eyes remained fixated on a broken shell by my left foot. Focusing on the scratches etched into the back of the shell, I almost didn't hear her ask: How far along are you? I looked across to see sympathy carved on her face and, turning back to the shell, I answered: About six weeks. The broken shell disappeared into the sand under the weight of my left foot. Grace asked: Have you seen a doctor? Squinting into the sun as it rose further into the sky, I looked over at her and replied: Yes. I'm contemplating my options, I added, but I'm still undecided.

Undecided about what? Grace questioned, puzzled.

Taking a deep breath, I admitted that I didn't know whether I wanted to keep the baby or not.

You can't be serious, Grace said as if I had just delivered a punch to her face.

Knowing exactly where this conversation was going, I chose to keep my mouth shut whilst she spoke.

Mum was pregnant at a younger age than you are now and she kept you! With Grace raising her voice, I could tell that I had just hit a sore spot.

You wouldn't be here today if she chose to abort her pregnancy, Grace continued. Think about the life growing inside you at this very moment!

I grew tired of her need to judge my choices so quickly, so I snapped back.

The last time I checked, that wasn't your choice to make!

Grace recoiled at the tone of my raised voice and looked visibly wounded by it.

I'm sorry, she said. I shouldn't have said that.

Calming down at the apology, we both sat there in an awkward silence until Grace broke it.

Jordan and I were trying for a baby up until about three months ago, she said, swallowing back the tears that were forming in the corners of her eyes. That was, until I found out that I was infertile.

Silent tears escaped from her eyes as if she had already spent months crying over this news. Leaning

over to her, I pulled her in and let her head rest on my shoulder. She took a deep breath and said: At forty, Jordan is desperate to start a family and I couldn't give that to him. I let her cry into my shoulder and just sat there rubbing her back as she continued speaking: I wasn't going to stand in his way of that dream, so I asked him for a divorce and blamed it on our age difference.

The sound of pure defeat in Grace's voice pulled at my heart strings. We sat there on the sand, watching the sun rise further into the sky, and I couldn't help but cry with her. Unbeknownst to me, Grace was enduring such grief for months. The thought that she didn't feel the need to burden me with her problems gave me pause. From day one, it had been as if we were attached at the hip. From having sleepovers in each other's bedrooms to playing on the same sport teams, we couldn't get enough of each other. It wasn't until we hit high school that we started to fall apart. When Grace started to excel in school, she was bumped up a class, leaving me behind. I thought nothing of it until we suddenly found ourselves in different circles of friends. It went from sitting in different groups at school to attending different parties on the weekends. With each passing school year, we slowly drifted apart. What pained me the most was the knowledge that I sat back and let it happen. I sat back and let my best friend and sister lead the life she wanted without even thinking that I needed to put in an effort to maintain our relationship. Given her ambition to become a therapist from an early age, I figured that when I left for the city, she would be too busy to notice I was gone. Not only was I wrong but I was also ashamed about my complete disregard for her feelings. Looking

over at her now as the morning light beamed over her features, I knew that I had made a mistake in leaving. Not because I missed the town but because I left her behind. I left my other half behind when I should have encouraged her to come with me. Rising up to my feet, I smiled down at Grace and asked: Still up for a swim?

I pulled off my running shorts and top to reveal my daggy cotton underwear and one-size-too-small sports bra, I stood there wiggling my eyebrows in an attempt to entice her. Grace looked from me to the calm shoreline and nodded. She wiped away the tears and followed suit by dressing down to her underwear and running after me towards the ocean. Reaching the water's edge, I winced as the icy water stung my skin. I wanted to get the initial shock of the water temperature over with so I chose to maintain my jog through the water until I reached hip height. With my muscles contracting at the sheer drop in temperature, I eventually paused to catch my breath. I was waiting for the next small wave to come along so I could dive under and was in the middle of pulling my boobs back into my sports bra when the weight of a bus pushed me from behind, forcing the rest of my body into the water. The instant wash of cold water against my face throbbed like a slap. With the weight still on top of me, I let the small wave from earlier roll over me before I dug my heels in and pushed towards the surface. I was gasping for air when I swung around to see a laughing Grace who only said: You're just lucky I didn't swim up behind you and grab your foot.

Knowing that I would rather be crash-tackled into the water than have someone grab my foot under the water

when I least expected it, I just laughed and shook my head.

Chapter 10

Having arrived back home, I followed Grace into the kitchen and dropped the mail from the letter box onto the bench. Once I was seated on a stool by the kitchen bench, I watched as Grace brought the kettle to a boil and made tea for the both of us.

Are you going to look for Mark? she asked.

Perplexed at the sudden question about our dad, I sat back on the stool and pulled my eyebrows down in confusion. Grace looked over her shoulder towards me and saw my frown, so she elaborated: I figured, since you spent all your teenage years looking for answers about our father, that after what we found out in the garage yesterday, you would finally have a real opportunity to find him.

Handing me my cup of ginger tea, Grace sat down beside me, mindlessly sorting through the mail as she waited for a reply. It was a genuine question. One I never thought I would get to answer. It was true that I did spend a lot of my time pestering mum with questions about our dad's whereabouts. However, after reading the letter that she had written for Grace and I, my desire for closure simmered down. Yes, a part of me would always wonder about him, but I guess that just makes me human. After everything we've been through, if Grace could grow comfortable with never knowing her father, then so could I. Turning to face Grace, I smiled.

If I had read that letter when I was younger, I probably would have gone looking for him. But now I am old enough to know that finding an absent father will not bring me any closer to anything.

Grace's smile radiated a warmth across my skin and I knew that the answer I had given was the one she was hoping for.

My only regret is that I wish I had come to that conclusion a lot sooner in my life, instead of blaming mum.

Acknowledging that I behaved like a brat towards my mum hit a tender spot in my heart. Looking back at all the times that I fought with her or purposely stayed out late without telling her where I was, I felt truly ashamed. Denying unconditional love under the presumption that I deserved more was a decision that I will regret for the rest of my life. A mother who single-handily devoted her entire life to raising Grace and I deserved more than what I gave her. She deserved my love and affection; instead, she received my ignorance and misdirected hatred. Feeling Grace's gaze on me, I lifted my chin to meet her eyes. With an escape tourism booklet from the mail in her right hand, Grace said: We should call Luke to see if he can make us booklets for the funeral.

Realising again that Grace has always been the organised one, I nodded and rose from my seat, collecting our empty mugs. With the mugs in the sink, I turned back to Grace.

How much do you think it will all cost?

I knew that I had only eighty-seven dollars left in my wallet after the grocery shop yesterday, so I sheepishly

looked down at my bare feet, which were still sprinkled with sand.

I'll cover the cost of everything, Grace said.

I looked up to meet Grace's eyes and was met with sincerity. The power of her sympathy had me wiping away a new tear sliding down my cheek. Feeling my unease at the situation, Grace quickly added: Once the death certificate is mailed to us, I will have the insurance company reimburse me anyway. Grateful for the financial assistance, I nodded and turned back to the sink to wash the cups.

Are you going back to the city after the funeral? Grace asked.

I placed the cups to the side so that they could dry and looked over to Grace. Sitting still on the kitchen stool, she braced her arms on the bench, waiting.

No, I answered, letting out a deep breath I didn't realise I was holding. I have spent enough time trying to avoid this place when I should have stayed here all along. Tears cascaded down my face as I laughed. Now I just have to find a job.

Grace smiled and agreed, looking secretly relieved as her shoulders sagged from the tension. We will find you something, I promise.

With that said, I left Grace in the kitchen to call about the booklets whilst I quickly jumped into the shower to rinse off the sand and salt water.

Body washed and hair blow dried, I let my towel drop to the floor and quickly jumped into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. It didn't take long to remember how quickly

the day heated up in Baymoore once the sun had risen. The ocean temperature was still icy coming away from winter but that would be a distant memory in a matter of weeks. The hills surrounding Baymoore acted like a valley that either funnelled the cooler wind off the water during winter or trapped the summer heat in the centre of town. The result of which, would leave you sweating profusely by 10 a.m.

I had just stepped out of my bedroom when my mobile started to ring. Turning back into my bedroom, I headed over to my phone and saw that it was Rose.

Hey Rose!

Her reply was short and sweet.

Hello love! How are you? Is everything alright back home?

The warmth of her voice always reminded me of mum. I smiled into the phone.

I'm doing well. Grace and I are working things through.

Rose's voice breezed in over the phone.

That's good to hear love. I always had a soft spot for that sister of yours.

Knowing that Grace was always the favourite, regardless of whom she met, I merely smiled and changed the subject.

And how are you Rose?

As if the question jolted her back into remembering why she had called in the first place, she replied: Oh, I've been great! But listen, love, there's something you should know.

Waiting for her to continue I pushed: What's that?

It's Jack, Rose said. He stopped by the apartment late last night. I came downstairs to tell off whoever was banging on the door when I ran into him.

Taking in a deep breath, I paused.

I don't know what you want me to say.

Encouraged to keep talking, Rose huffed.

You don't have to say anything to me Marle, but at least answer his calls and tell him to take a hike!

Feeling put on the spot all of the sudden, I just stammered: Ah, okay.

Rose noted the change in my tone, so she added: I don't mean to sound harsh, love, but you should at least let him know that you're alive. The poor guy thinks you've run away.

I did run away, I admitted.

Muttering through the speaker, Rose said: Oh, you know what I mean. Just give him a call so that he stops causing a ruckus in my building, at least, waking up everyone downstairs.

I apologised for the trouble and promised Rose that I would call him to let him know I was okay. She seemed satisfied with my admission because she hung up shortly afterwards.

Already feeling deflated at the thought that I would have to talk to Jack at some point in the future, I fell back onto my bed and sighed.

Grace was shouting down the hallway.

Are you ready?

She then rattled the keys as if she were trying to entice a cat to come closer to its owner.

Yep! Coming! I answered quickly, then hurriedly grabbed a pair of slip-on leather shoes and slipped out of my room, following Grace towards the car once again. Was it too early for a drink?

Chapter 11

Arriving in town, Grace and I pulled up outside a little photography studio that was wedged between a bakery and a homewares store. Bricks painted over with white paint gave way to a large store-front window with a sheer white curtain that masked the interior. The only sign that we were in the right place, was a small wooden plaque nailed to the door that read, McCleod Photography. I followed Grace towards the glossy black door and waited as she knocked. When the front door opened, my breath was taken away. Standing at the door and welcoming us inside was Luke McCleod. The guy who I secretly stalked throughout high school.

Three years above Grace and me at school, Luke wasn't a typical high achiever. He was someone that flew under the radar with ease and that was something I admired. Rarely on-stage accepting awards but also never in detention. I knew that for a fact because I was always at both. Either watching Grace accept something shiny for being academic or looking out the window because I was stuck in detention. Again. I wanted to be like Luke and it didn't hurt that he was easy on the eye. Yes, he was tall but his eyes were the real show stopper. Icy-blue pools of colour roamed over my face under eyebrows that rose in curiosity. His lips pulled up into an amused smirk which was when I realised that he said something to me as I just stood there staring.

Swallowing my pride, I looked between Luke and Grace and stammered: I'm sorry what?

Aware that I had been staring at him, Luke smiled and repeated: It's good to see you again.

The initial shock at running into him turned into confusion. How did he know who I was? Yes, I had a crush on him throughout high school, but I had assumed that he had no idea who I was. After all, I was only a fifteen-year-old teenager who barely showed up to school as it was. I opened my mouth to ask how he remembered me but was soon cut off by Grace.

Sorry for the late notice, Luke. I appreciate you agreeing to do this in such a short time frame.

Luke frowned as if he suddenly remembered why we were there in the first place.

It's the least I could do for Anne, he said.

I was ushered inside by Grace as Luke led us to sit around a large worktable that sat in the centre of the studio. Solid oak timber floorboards grounded the white walls and ceiling. The large white work bench was centred in the middle, which only left room for two smaller desks towards the back, each of which held a sizable computer screen. With all the white, it was easy to draw your eyes towards the large image placed on the wall opposite me. The rolling hills leading down to the water's edge framed a tiny club house nestled in next to the beach. The afternoon sun painted the photograph in hues of deep greens and vibrant oranges. A feeling of nostalgia washed over me as I remembered this photo being taken. I remembered because our mum was the

one who had taken it. That very same photo resided within a frame in our living room. I turned to Luke.

How did you get that photo?

Looking behind him to see what held my attention, he turned back around to reply but Grace beat him to it.

Mum gave it to him as a thank you gift for helping at my wedding.

Nodding in agreement, Luke stood up again to grab a laptop from one of his bags that rested behind his desk. Whilst Grace and Luke spoke about the layout of the booklet and what images of mum to include, I sat back and let my mind wonder. The image of mum, camera in hand, was firmly rooted in my memory and I couldn't help but think back to the day that photo was taken. We were never wealthy growing up considering that mum often worked two jobs just to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. The idea that people got multiple presents on their birthday was outrageous. We were lucky enough if there was enough money to buy ingredients for cake let alone the candles. A few months before this photo was taken, Grace and I would babysit the kids down the road most afternoons and weekends. The kids were rude and the parents never paid us enough. But eventually we saved up enough money to buy mum her first digital camera for her birthday.

Having often seen mum admiring that particular camera in a shop window, Grace and I knew it would make the perfect present. The morning of her birthday, mum had unwrapped the present and by that afternoon the memory card was full. A peaceful day at the beach had us trudging back up the hill, covered in sand. I

remember mum pausing behind us to take in the sunset. Pulling the camera up to her eye, she captured the very image that now hung on the wall opposite me, encased in a timber frame for someone else to admire. Someone like Luke.

I looked over to him now and couldn't help but think back to what he said last—'It's the least I could do for Anne'. Since when were my mum and my old high school crush friends? I mean, I knew that this was a small town and that everyone knows everything about everyone but to say that it was 'the least he could do'? What was that supposed to mean?

Feeling a set of eyes burning into the side of his head, Luke turned to face me.

Unless there's something else you might want to add Marle?

My name on his lips left me feeling oddly vulnerable. Like sitting for lunch in high school and your friend running up to you to say that someone wanted to ask you out. Heat rose to my cheeks as Grace cleared her throat and offered an answer instead: Marle only just arrived home yesterday, so she's still used to city rudeness I guess.

Luke smiled at her subtle stab at my manners before he closed his laptop.

That's all for now, then. I should have the booklets printed by Friday, which gives you enough time to pick them up before the funeral.

His voice softened towards the end of the sentence and Grace and I exchanged glances. Under the

commotion of planning a funeral, I think both of us forgot that it was only five days away. Five days and then we had to say goodbye to our mum forever.

Standing up abruptly, I excused myself to go get some air. Leaving Grace to finalise the payment details, I rushed outside and hurled my guts up all over the sidewalk. Bent over in a sweaty mess, I fumbled for the lighter and cigarette in my pocket and relaxed as soon as I inhaled. The sound of the door opening and closing behind my back had me straining my neck to look over my shoulder.

Grace stood there with one eyebrow raised as she took one look from the sidewalk to the cigarette resting between my fingers. Shaking her head in disgust, Grace walked past and shoved a tissue into my hand.

Clean yourself up, there's still vomit on your face.

Then as if she only just remembered that I was still pregnant, she muttered over her shoulder: And put that cigarette out before I—

Before you what Grace? What are you going to do?

Grace could see the challenge in my eyes and knew that it would be like talking to a brick wall. Instead of replying, she rolled her eyes and swung her car door open, jumping into driver's seat without another glance back at me. The engine rumbled to life and I could see Grace impatiently tapping at the steering wheel as she waited. I pulled the cigarette up to my lips and took one long inhale. I waited until she looked at me before I slowly released the smoke from my lungs, flicking the cigarette butt towards her car. She saw it.

It didn't take a genius to have guessed what happened next. Burnt rubber and the echo of screeching tires remained as Grace took off down the street and I was left to walk home.

Chapter 12

Eventually I made it home, dropping the leather sandals I was wearing by the front door. I made it just outside of town before I ended up sliding them off and walking bare foot. Sweltering in the heat, it didn't take long before blisters formed against the leather strap of my shoes forcing me to limp most of the way home. Standing at the front door, I looked across and saw Grace's car sitting defiantly in the driveway, as if taunting me that it got home ages ago. I muttered a 'fuck you' to the car and trudged through the house.

The dining table was covered in more flowers, all with cards from strangers who offered their condolences. Presuming that the whole town would know by now, I wasn't surprised by the number of deliveries and notes that we received. All were addressed to Grace and myself and I was taken aback by how quickly the news of my return had spread. Well aware that I wasn't the most law-abiding citizen, I figured that I would just fly under the radar and that no one would care to bring me up in conversation.

I had picked up one of the flower arrangements just as Grace walked into the room and paused. She took one look at me and shrugged: You hungry?

I nodded quickly before I had a chance to say something I would regret. The heat from the sun reaching midday left the living room unbearable so we

took last night's leftover stir-fry and sat out on the deck. The grass was too long so, bowl in hand, I tentatively lowered myself on the steps next to Grace. Feet planted on the splintering wood, I devoured the lunch as quickly as I did the dinner the night before. The empty bowl now sat on the step next to me and I leant back, resting my elbows on the steps behind me as I looked out across the lawn. Memories flooded back as I sat there transfixed by the overgrown garden. Memories of Grace and I setting up a makeshift tent in the backyard and camping outside for the night. Memories of mum and I feeding bread to the birds on these very steps whilst the sun filtered through the swaying palms overhead. Those moments of undoctored joy and unrefined happiness supplied my childhood with innocent clarity of what it felt like to be loved. What it felt like to have people in your life who truly valued your unique composition. All your flaws, values and beliefs. They loved you regardless. The bittersweet realisation was that I only understood this now, after all this time spent away from home. After all this time that I spent denying those same people the love that they so willingly and unconditionally gave me.

Looking over towards Grace, I couldn't help but feel a sense of guilt wash over me. There sat the woman who had always had my back, since the beginning. The woman who consistently went out of her way, even as a child, to make me feel included or happy—from always inviting me out to the beach for a swim when she could see that I was restless or bored, to making me dinner when mum was working late. You could not fault either her love or her loyalty. Completely oblivious to these acts and displays of selflessness, I chose to abandon her

at eighteen by moving away and cutting off all forms of communication. It wasn't until Grace showed up on my doorstep in the city that I started to realise the lengths to which she would go for me.

After spending a year finding my feet in the city and working at a restaurant as a waitress, the last thing I expected was to see my sister. When I wasn't working, I was partying, so I was shocked, to say the least, when I stumbled home from a bar one night to find Grace sitting on the front steps of the apartment building. She stayed for the weekend, trying to convince me to come home. I was too self-absorbed with my own delusional agenda for youthful gratification that I failed to actually listen to what she had to say. I was so wrapped up in my own quest for freedom that I trapped my own family into an endless cycle of grief. A mistake that weighed heavily on my conscience. A mistake that I knew I would never be able to resolve with my mother, but I could at least try to do so with my sister.

She truly was a carbon copy of mum. Although we are physically similar to one another, it was her mannerisms that made her resemblance to mum uncanny. Sitting on the steps, her head tossed back, her face angled towards the sun, its light shining down on her features—it was as if mum's own hands were caressing her face. Wanting to feel the same warmth upon my own face, I turned my head towards the sun. Flashes of light shone deeply through my eyelids as a warmth spread over my skin.

Have you put much thought into what you might want to do for work? Grace asked.

I twisted to face Grace again and opened my eyes to find her own staring back at me in question.

Not really, I answered. Avoiding her gaze, I turned my eyes down to my feet.

Grace took the silence as an invitation to continue because she pressed forward.

I think Cathy's Corner is still looking for an extra waitress. I can put in a word, if you want?

Remembering the name of the place we had breakfast at, I asked: Is that the place we went to yesterday morning?

The one and only, she replied.

Looking back up at Grace, I could see that her offer was genuine. Without the usual guilt of feeling like the unsuccessful child of the family, I smiled and said: I would really appreciate it Grace. Thank you.

Smiling in return, Grace leant over and collected both bowls before standing up.

I still have to make a few calls to organise my divorce papers, she added, but once I finish that I will call Cathy to set up an introduction.

I followed Grace into the kitchen and sat at the bar stool, watching her as she washed and dried the two bowls.

Are you sure that this divorce is what you want? I asked.

Grace paused with her hands on the bench top and took a deep breath before whispering: Not now.

Pressing further, I continued: I just think that—

Please, Marle, Grace interjected.

Knowing that I probably pushed too far and that, with mum passing away, her divorce would be the last thing she would want to discuss, I left it alone.

Instead, I sat there and watched as she slowly wiped away a single tear that slid down her cheek. I stood up from where I was seated and walked around the kitchen bench. Standing there, in her most vulnerable state, I enveloped her in my arms, squeezing until my arms ached from the tension. Her sobs shook me to my core. Fearing that I may lose her to her own agony, made me only squeeze tighter. It's a dark place to be alone when all you want is your mother. A soothing voice, reassuring words and those soft hands to knead away any troubles. The warmth of a blanket in the middle of a cool night. That is how I would describe mum. Simple and raw yet utterly human. It was at that moment that I realised that I would never be able to feel the warmth of that blanket ever again. The comfort of her presence, the security of her embrace—all gone. Silent sobs were muffled by Grace's louder cries of despair whilst we stood in each other's arms. Minutes passed before we broke the embrace, eyes raw and cheeks stained red from the endless flow of tears cascading down our faces. We both stood still as we wiped away the traces of our tears.

I pressed the palms of my hands into my eyes and confessed: God, I miss her.

The guilt was like a bag of sand, weighing heavily on my shoulders. I turned to walk towards my bedroom but

halted as Grace whispered: She still loved you, regardless.

Knowing that she was referring to my absence for the past several years and my lack of communication with both her and mum, I merely nodded and continued walking down the hall to my bedroom. Drained of all energy and emotion, I collapsed onto my bed and, like a child curling up for the night, let sleep claim me.

Chapter 13

A light tug on my shoulder roused me from my sleep. I blinked to focus on my surroundings. Grace sat on the edge of my bed, looking amused by what she saw. I had curled around Lionel, my toy lion, like I used to do when I was seven years old. Smiling back at Grace, I merely said: Just making up for lost time.

She looked down at her phone and checked the time, then back at me.

Speaking of lost time—I spoke with Cathy when you were snoring away back here and she said that she's short on staff, so you start tomorrow.

Looking around the room, the normally white walls had taken on a soft shade of pink from the sunset outside. The warmth of the sun had started to recede and the cooler night air seeped into the room under the guise of an autumn breeze.

Grateful for the help, I said: Thanks for organising that. I really appreciate it.

Grace inclined her head.

You start at 6:00 a.m., so don't be late.

I smiled and nodded yes.

Standing up to walk out of my room Grace was almost through the doorway when I picked up one of my pillows and launched it at her back. Hitting dead centre, Grace swung around, eyes wild.

That's for lying about my snoring, I said.

Mischief dancing in her eyes now, Grace shook her head.

Tell that to my bleeding ears.

I picked up another pillow and threw it, aiming for her head. Expecting it this time, Grace only had to step around the threshold and the pillow collided with my bedroom door instead. Her laughter followed her down the hallway.

You should really work on those weak arms.

Smiling at the joke she made about my arms and the refence it had to when we were eight and I couldn't climb on the monkey bars to save my life. I only smiled harder and shook my head in fondness at the memory.

I paused looking at my phone—another four missed calls from Jack had me rolling my eyes. Leaving the phone on the bedside table, I figured that he could wait another day or two before I answered his calls. The smell of something yummy was drifting from down the hall, so I followed the scent until I reached the kitchen. Grace stood by the stove, stirring what looked to be a red curry so I bent down and breathed in. A mixture of several different spices swirled across my senses and I smiled in anticipation.

This looks divine Grace, I admitted.

Picking up a spoon to sample the dinner, I noticed something different.

Tofu? I questioned in repulsion.

Noting my disgust at the rubbery texture in my mouth, Grace clicked her tongue.

If you wanted chicken, you could've offered to cook yourself.

I held both hands along with the spoon up in surrender and resigned to be the kitchen hand by proceeding to clean up the pots and pans whilst she finished cooking. We sat in silence as we inhaled our dinner and I couldn't help but notice that my nausea had all but disappeared. Reminding myself to thank Rose later for the ginger tea suggestion, I polished off the remainder of my dinner in complete satisfaction.

Grace collected our bowls and began to wash them in the sink. She smiled.

You have a go about tofu and then you lick the bowl clean! she said.

I shrugged in protest, then reclined back into the chair and rubbed my belly, adding a Scottish accent for good measure.

Whit kin Ah say, A'm a hungert lassie!

Grace smiled at my poor excuse for a Scottish accent and returned with a glass of wine in hand. She sat next to me on the couch and grabbed the remote as she reclined into the chair.

Fancy watching mum's favourite? she asked.

Looking back at the screen to see the movie *Sixteen Candles* just starting, I pulled my legs underneath me and nodded in agreement.

I sat there beside Grace as we watched the movie that our mum could've quoted line-for-line which was oddly comforting. Imagining her own voice over those of the characters on the screen only brought her closer. Ice creams in hand, we used to huddle together and watch this film religiously. Grace now held a red wine glass and I begrudgingly held a glass of water—not much had changed other than the fact that, instead of three, there were now only two of us.

Chapter 14

The soft caress of the morning breeze swept over my body and the soothing sounds of rain danced on the house roof. Rolling over to check my phone, I saw it was 5:45 a.m. I groaned, remembering that I had agreed to start work at 6:00 a.m. at Cathy's Corner. Lifting my body out of bed, I felt a deep stabbing pain shoot straight through my abdomen. Kneeling over my legs, I grabbed for the bedside table but my hand slipped and I fell to the ground. I grabbed at my stomach and winced at the pain as I forced myself to stand up. Every inch of me wanted to curl up in bed and die, but I had promised my sister. I was also ashamedly broke so I had no other option really. After spending years away from home, it was up to me to prove myself to Grace. It was up to me to show her that I was willing to work hard to earn her trust again. Slipping on some shorts and an old t-shirt, I quickly made my way to the kitchen to grab some pain killers. With only ten minutes before I had to be there, I rushed into the bathroom, whipped my hair up into a bun, brushed my teeth and raced out the door, grabbing my runners on the way out.

Arriving with one minute to spare, I hopped out of the car and jogged across the road, thankful that the painkillers were starting to kick in. With the majority of the town still asleep, I was able to make out which person was Cathy. Shorter than average, she had short spikey hair that had recently been dyed pink. Her tanned

olive skin kept up well with age and her bright green eyes shone with years of experience. Ears peppered with jewellery of all different sizes and shapes, I couldn't keep but stare whilst she arranged the tables and chairs outside.

Walking over to where she was, I inquired: Cathy?

Looking over her shoulder, her eyes scanned me from head to toe. She stood up straight to wipe the sweat from her brow and smiled as she extended her hand.

You must be Marle! It's great to finally meet you!

Shaking her hand, I returned the smile.

The pleasure is all mine! Thank you for the position. Especially on such short notice.

Cathy looked back into the café and shrugged.

I lost a waitress to the travel bug, so I was desperate for anyone, she said as she turned back to me. Grace told me that you've worked in hospitality before?

Yes, I replied, for the past five years I served at a restaurant in the city. I can give you the number of my previous boss, if you'd like?

Knowing that my old boss back in the city would most likely reject the call, I was confident that he wouldn't be able to tell Cathy the truth. I was often late and hungover and Cathy didn't need to know that.

Cathy shook her head and smiled.

Unfortunately, I don't have time for reference checks.

Looking over at the front entrance, we saw the first few customers starting to walk in for their morning

coffee. Cathy turned to me and said: Follow me and I'll introduce you to everyone.

I walked inside, after Cathy, passing the front counter at which the barista was taking the coffee orders from the customers who had just walked in.

Pointing at the barista and then at me, Cathy said: Alex this is Marle. She's our new waitress.

Alex was exactly how you might imagine a barista would look like. Dark slicked-back hair, a well-maintained moustache that curled up on each corner, all on top of a healthy beard. A couple of tattoos that were scattered across his forearms told me that this man took his coffee seriously. I turned to my side and waved to say 'Hi' but was cut short by an older male customer.

Another backpacker, Cathy? Surely, you'd know by now that they just don't last.

Frowning at the sudden offence, I opened my mouth to reply but the lady behind him beat me to it. Hitting him over the head with her straw hat, the elderly lady clicked her tongue and said: George, that's Anne's daughter, you daft fool! Taken aback by the aggression shown by such a frail woman, I was gobsmacked. The lady then stepped towards me and grabbed my hand, squeezing it before saying: I am so sorry for your loss Marlene. Your mother was a welcome volunteer at the shelter. One of the most selfless and passionate women I knew.

She released my hand to wipe away a tear. Her eyes reflected so much pain and empathy.

Thank you, I replied.

Looking over her shoulder towards the male customer, she shook her head.

And please forgive his grotesque behaviour this morning. He can be a God-awful pain before he's had his morning coffee.

I smiled at her sincerity and simply nodded my head.

I'm sorry, but I don't think I caught your name?

The woman blushed at the lack of introduction and clutched at her chest.

Oh, where are my manners! My name is Susan and this is my husband George!

Pulling him into the conversation, George looked pained by the news of my mum's passing but still didn't apologise for his earlier comment. As if he couldn't care less whether he caused offence, George leant forward to shake my hand and said: Lovely to meet you, dear. My condolences on the passing of your mother. Kind woman she was. Accepting his condolences with another smile and nod, I was pulled away from the conversation when Cathy spoke from the kitchen.

Marle? Over here, love.

She was waving her hand in impatience, so I quickly waved goodbye to Susan and George before arriving to where she stood. Indicating behind her with a head tilt, Cathy continued with the introductions.

In here, we have Joseph and Juliette—our chefs! Guys, this is Marle, she is our new waitress.

Over her shoulder, I could see the man who was Joseph prepping the food by dicing and slicing a

mountain of vegetables. At 6'4", he towered over his co-workers. With his long blonde hair tied back into a bun and deep blue eyes, my money was on him being a surfer. He had the tan to support my assumption and was definitely someone who would only go inside to work or sleep.

Noticing our attention, Joseph paused his meal prepping and walked over. Wiping his hands on the tea towel tied to his waist, he extended his hand.

Marle, nice to meet you.

Shaking his hand in return, I smiled again. You too, Joseph.

As if repulsed by his own name, the chef laughed and replied: Ah, call me Joe, otherwise I'm likely to look around for my dad. And you don't want to meet that sorry bastard.

Joining in his laughter, I replied: Duly noted.

As we stood there, another woman emerged from the door at the back and called over from freezer. Who's the new girl? she said walking over to where we were. The woman—who I guessed was Juliette—stood at average height with long brunette hair that was braided down her back and off her face. Somewhere between thirty and forty, she had a smattering of freckles across her face, which made her look younger. Warm brown eyes offset her sharp tone and she rolled up her sleeves to begin work.

I lifted my hand up in a short wave and smiled for the millionth time before saying: Hi, I'm Marle.

Juliette nodded her hello, then turned around and began unpacking the supplies she had dragged through the door. Looking satisfied with her introductions, Cathy turned to me.

Unlike some of us, Jules isn't a morning person.

Laughing at the subtle stab, Joe added: Speaking of morning people, I need a coffee before the first order comes in.

Stepping past Cathy and I, Joe excused himself before walking over to Alex to place his order.

Cathy looked down at her watch and then back at the front door before turning to me.

Right, well, you and I will be front of house today. Seeing that it's your first day, I'll just get you serving food and coffee, whilst I handle the orders and coffee with Alex.

Cathy walked to the front counter, pulled open a cupboard and picked up an apron. Tossing it my way, she continued to speak.

As you can see, we are a little short-staffed at the moment.

We both looked around the café and spotted more customers spilling in, so Cathy spoke faster.

After today, I'll have you working every morning during the week and every alternate weekend because I'll have a lot more staff working then.

Nodding in understanding, I opened my mouth to respond but was cut off as Cathy continued: Mornings

will be 6:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at fifteen dollars an hour. Is that okay?

I knew that was nothing compared to what I used to earn as a waitress in the city but with less than forty dollars left in my bank account, I didn't have much choice. I nodded my thanks and pulled the apron around my waist. I'd be lying if I said that being paid this amount didn't hurt my ego but, all things considered, I was still grateful to have the job. Grateful that, in light of my current position, complete strangers were willing to give me a chance. Willing to help me get on my feet once again. With that settled, Cathy returned to the front of the café to resume the setting up of tables and chairs. Before I had the chance to follow her, Alex spoke from behind me: Hey, Marle, do you mind taking these coffees out to Susan and George?

I looked over at Alex as he placed two large mugs on the front counter and smiled in response as I walked over to collect the coffees. Despite the initial pain in my stomach this morning, I felt oddly at ease. As if a sense of calm had washed over me. All the stress that had been bottled up inside me these past few days was suddenly gone. As if the act of returning home had settled my mind. I continued serving coffee for most of the morning and smiled at the comfort of the mundane. A comfort that I could afford thanks to the efforts of Grace.

Chapter 15

Walking through the door in complete exhaustion, I kicked off my shoes and collapsed onto the couch. Feeling the soft caress of the breeze against my face, the fan overhead quietly worked away the tension in my legs. I began to slowly nod off but was jolted awake by the front door slamming. I sat up to look over the couch towards the hallway and saw Grace strolling through. She looked up from her trance and did a double take before bending over and clutching her chest.

Jeez Marle you scared the life out of me!

Collapsing back onto the couch, I replied: Considering that you just stopped me from having a decent nap, I'd say you deserved it.

I closed my eyes again in an effort to resume the aforementioned nap but was interrupted again as Grace came around to sit at my feet.

So, how was your first day?

Curious and eager to find out, it was clear that Grace was excited for me and so I replied: It was good! Cathy and the others were all super welcoming. It was like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

Grace laughed. Yeah it's called the weight of unemployment.

She was taking the jab at my lack of career, so I just rolled my eyes and turned to go back to sleep. Not

satisfied at the stagnation in the conversation, Grace pressed for more details.

Did you run into anyone?

Feet aching from standing all day, I replied in a clipped tone: If you're referring to Sophia, then the answer is no. Thank God.

Grace frowned at my continued dislike for the woman and shook her head before saying: No, I was actually referring to the other locals that you actually grew up with and went to school with?

I mimicked her shake of the head and replied: No, but I did run into Susan and George. Do you know them?

Recognition lit Grace's face at the familiarity of the names.

Yes, they ran the youth shelter that mum volunteered at.

What youth shelter? I asked.

The question gave Grace pause and she appeared to remember something before she answered.

It's called Youth United. It provides housing for at risk children. You should check it out sometime.

A pang of guilt, much like the stabbing pain I felt that morning, pushed through my stomach and chest. The knowledge that my mum volunteered at a youth shelter just after I ran away from home was too much to bear. I had caused my mum so much worry and despair that her only way to get closer to me was to help other children without a home. I felt horrible.

Grace noticed because she shuffled closer to rub my arm and said: Don't mull over the past Marle. You have to understand that mum was happy. Tears formed and I looked up at Grace just in time to catch the quiver in her voice as she continued: You have to know that she is looking down at us right now with a big smile on her face.

I wiped away the tears and smiled at the picture she painted, hoping that she was right. I hoped that mum could see me now and know that I was truly sorry. Sorry for the ignorance. Sorry for the abandonment. Sorry for the lack of communication. But most of all, I was sorry that I wasn't there. That I missed out on her final moments and could no longer wrap her in my arms and tell her that I loved her. That I always loved her. It broke my heart. Something that I will regret for the rest of my life. The only thing that softened my regret was the knowledge that she might be looking down at me and know how I really feel.

Shrugging off Grace's embrace, I stood up and walked over to the kitchen sink. Splashing some water on my face was just the wakeup call I needed. I turned on the kettle and called over to Grace ,asking if she wanted some tea.

Without looking more than an inch away from the screen of her phone, she mumbled: Please. Chamomile, if there's any.

When I sat back down, I passed Grace her mug of Earl Grey. She took a sip and winced.

If you think this is chamomile, then you should've gone to SpecSavers.

I laughed at the mix up and just shrugged and admitted: It was the first one I saw.

Smiling at my lack in reasoning, Grace's phone chimed and, upon looking at the screen, her smile turned to a frown. Whilst I pondered if I should ask her what's wrong, Grace quickly discarded the phone and said: If you're up for it, we have to go through mum's wardrobe today and pick out an outfit for her. Swallowing the ball that had formed in her throat, Grace continued: And then, if you want any items to be placed in the coffin, you need to start thinking about it soon.

Nodding in agreement, I stood up from the couch.

Let me have a shower first to wash off the grease from work and then I'll help you with the clothes.

With an appreciative glance in my direction, Grace returned to her tea and continued typing away at her phone.

With the tea abandoned, I quickly steamed myself in the shower before slipping into a pair of loose-fitting sweatpants and a grey jumper. I followed the sound of drawers opening and closing and ended up walking towards the end of the hallway where mum's bedroom was. Realisation dawned on me that the last time I stepped foot in this room was on the morning I left. Memories of me with my bags packed and mum crying, begging me to stay, all came flooding back.

The same pain in my stomach from earlier today returned, as if my subconscious knew of my guilt and subsequently forced my body to produce that pain as punishment.

I clenched my stomach by the door frame and leant over in pain as bright flashes of light forced my head down in an effort not to faint. The sound of my sharp intake of breath notified Grace of my situation, which had her racing over to my side in panic.

Oh my God, are you all right!?

Feeling the onset of what felt like needles running down my arms, I could only stay still as I waited for the pain to subside. Grace helped me shuffle over to the bed, to mum's bed. Upon sitting down, I relished in the fact that the pain was slowly dispersing.

I looked up at Grace's face and seeing her eyes wild in panic, I smiled and brushed away her arms.

I'm fine, I assured her, I'm just dehydrated that's all.

Eyebrows drawn down in worry, she bit her lip and looked me over.

What about your pregnancy? Shouldn't we go to the doctor's just in case?

Knowing that the pain felt more stomach related, I shook my head.

It's fine, I said and attempted to stand but dizziness overwhelmed me. I just need some water, I said.

Taking that as her cue, Grace dashed down the hallway to get me some water. Returning with glass in hand, Grace found me standing by mum's chest of drawers, staring at the photograph of the three of us. Grace and I were no older than six. I was slung across mum's back and Grace was firmly within mum's embrace at her feet. We were all laughing, as if the person who took the photo just told us the most hilarious joke of all

time. Heads thrown back in pure joy, our skin golden brown from months spent by the water's edge during summer. You couldn't capture a happier photo. With tears sliding down my face, I set the photograph back down and accepted the glass of water from Grace. Worry was still etched into her eyes and I wiped away my tears and placed a hand on her shoulder.

I am fine, I told her. Trust me.

I gulped down the glass of water and made a show of feeling relieved so that she would stop fretting over my well-being. Even though I could still feel traces of the pain in my stomach, I wasn't going to give Grace another reason to worry. After all that had happened over the last few days—mum passing and her marriage coming to an end—I didn't want to be yet another task for her to deal with. Another problem she needed to solve. I wanted to be the sister who helped her, not the one who hindered her. I wanted to be the sister she could lean on. The sister who, despite all odds, still came through. I knew that I failed to be that person for her during the past few years but now that I was back, I knew that position was all I wanted. If Grace was willing to forgive me after everything, then I wanted to be the best sister for her. I knew deep down that I had a long way to go before we got to that stage, but I was willing to put in the effort no matter how hard it was going to be.

Following Grace over to mum's wardrobe, the smell of smoked rose brought a smile to my face. The trademark scent of her clothes hung in the air, as if she had only just stepped out of the room. Assortments of white linen against soft denim weathered with age reminded me of a time when mum would wear the same relaxed

style for days, only making small changes in her choice of pants or shirts.

The familiarity in the clothing made me feel closer to mum than I had felt during the past few years. Something as subtle as the scent of her clothing had me feeling at peace. Just like a child curling up against a treasured blanket, I felt the same notion of comfort and security just by standing in her room. Jolting out of my trance, I walked over to where Grace stood, arms holding bundles of different pieces of clothing.

What do you think? She asked.

Looking down at her arms to see that she had pulled out a white linen dress, I wasn't surprised. Even though mum did have a few tops and dresses in outlandish patterns and colours, the majority of her clothing was plain. Neutral colours, like white, black, soft shades of brown and the occasional blue denim, summed up my mum in two words—simple and refined.

It's perfect, I answered.

With a short nod in agreement, Grace walked back to the bed and placed the dress on top of the covers. The design was simple, the dress long enough to scrape the ankles; it was held up by thin straps over the shoulders and scooped only low enough to expose the collar bones. No embellishments and no ties, just a simple dress that served no other purpose than to be comfortable and to keep my mum cool in the sticky heat of summer.

Fond memories of mum walking barefoot in the garden and picking fruit off the trees had both Grace and I agree that we would not pick out any shoes for her.

A pair of pearl earrings and a gold necklace with our initials engraved on it were the only other pieces we decided to include.

With the outfit neatly ironed, folded and placed in the backseat of the car, Grace and I drove to the funeral home once again.

Chapter 16

The weather the next day was miserable and bleak. Ominous clouds loomed overhead, threatening to drop a monsoon of rain upon us in the blink of an eye. Excluding the morning regulars like Susan and George, the cafe was consequently vacant for the majority of the morning. The lack of customers gave me time to run across the road to the pharmacy and grab some painkillers. Even though I hadn't experienced any stomach pains since last night with Grace, I figured it would be best if I had some on standby, just in case another bout of pain assailed me again.

Cathy was out back organising finances, so Alex and I held down the front of house—me taking the orders and Alex making the coffee. It was nice to have a bit of time for just the two of us because I got to learn more about the mysterious barista and the gallery of tattoos displayed across his arms. He initially joked that if he told me he would have to kill me but, after some carefully placed chocolate pastries, courtesy of resident chef Joe, I was able to coax Alex into divulging the story of the woman on his right bicep. It was a woman from Slovenia whom he had met whilst travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway. She was running away from an arranged marriage that was set up by her father. After learning the horror of what she had lived through, he smuggled her through Mongolia all the way to Beijing. They got married there and lived together for three years

before her father found her location. He sent out a hit man and Alex's wife was killed later that week.

The sheer shock and grief at the story Alex told me led to tears escaping my eyes and, before I knew it, I was apologising profusely. However, even with his back to me, facing the coffee machine as he worked, the shudder of his shoulders told me enough—he wasn't crying, he was laughing!

Although I demanded that he turn around, it was only after he finished pouring the coffee that he finally placed the cup on the counter and faced me. Tears were running down his face in pure amusement. My mouth slackened and my eyebrows rose in confusion. Crossing my arms over my chest, my impatience grew with his lack of explanation, but Alex only laughed harder.

Oh, come on Marle, you have to admit that was funny!

Without a flinch I just stood there, gobsmacked, until a hint of a smile ruined my attempt at a cold demeanour.

You asshole, I joked.

Walking closer to him, I grabbed a tea towel and wrapped it around my hand.

He saw what I was doing and repeated: You have to admit that it was funny!

I shook my head again, smiled and replied: Tell that to the tea towel.

He only had a second to ponder my words in confusion before I released one end of the tea towel and whipped it towards his legs. Upon contact, Alex winced in pain, then laughed even harder and added: Wow, someone missed their morning coffee!

He nursed his leg. His skin turning a soft pink hue where he was whipped. I smiled.

So, if she's not your dead wife from Slovenia, then who is she? I pressed for an answer.

Alex released his leg to stand up straight before he shrugged his shoulders and answered, just some woman I met in France when I was nineteen. I was young and drunk. Nothing else to it really.

When he turned back around to the coffee machine to continue working on the orders, I leant over and picked up the coffee he finished earlier.

I liked the mysterious barista vibe you had before, I informed him.

Chuckling again at his own joke, Alex simply resumed making coffee.

My poor Slovenian wife, he chuckled.

Having learnt not to ask Alex about his tattoos, the rest of my shift flew by without a hiccup. Arriving home, I kicked off my shoes at the front door and proceeded to walk through to the kitchen, sorting through the mail as I went. Noting nothing of interest, I placed the mail on the counter and relished in the surprise that Grace had been grocery shopping. With all that had gone on, restocking the fridge slipped my mind. It was little tasks like that that Grace maintained to a fault. Regardless of the storm that she was waging through, she always found a way to juggle it all.

From behind my back a voice said: Wow, do they not feed you at the cafe?

With a mouth full of bagel and my hands holding salmon and cream cheese packaging, I swung around to see Grace standing by the entryway into the kitchen.

Like a deer in the headlights, I mumbled: You know that bagels are my Achilles' heel.

Muttering something along the lines of 'you hungry hippo' under her breath, she proceeded to walk past the kitchen and towards the veranda. She collected her running shoes from outside and turned back around to face me.

Did you want to join me for a run along the beach?

Dangling her shoes up as a way to entice me, I swallowed my last mouthful of salmon bagel and asked: You do know that if we're running on sand, then you won't need your shoes?

She sat down on the couch to start lacing up her runners and said: The sand has been ice cold the past two days. Looking over Grace saw my confusion, waved over her shoulder and said: By all means, you're welcome to go barefoot and risk it, but I would heed my advice if I were you.

Licking the remnants of cream cheese from my fingers, I nodded okay and turned to go change.

Does that mean you're coming with me? she asked.

I turned back around to face Grace and rubbed my stomach for emphasis before saying: Someone ate one too many Nutella-stuffed croissants this morning.

Grace shook her head and said: Go get changed, would you?

I saluted her demand and spun around to wobble down the hallway. Feeling the weight of a million bagels trying to be digested, a part of me wanted to lie down in the sun and wait until my stomach stopped grumbling but I knew that I needed to run. I needed to keep my legs moving, otherwise I was going to turn into a hippo, especially at the rate I was eating now.

I pulled a shirt over my head and slid my feet halfway into my runners as I dashed out of the house, slamming the door behind me. Sitting in silence as Grace pulled out of the driveway, I felt oddly clammy. Like the feeling of overheating before you faint, the temperature in the car started to rise. Whispering 'not today Satan' in my head, I twisted the air conditioning to full blast at the lowest temperature setting and reclined my chair. Grace looked over to where I sat with one leg pulled up as I tried tying my shoelaces and said: We really should book you in to see the doctor.

I closed my eyes in frustration, then switched legs and continued to tie my shoelaces. Aware that I was intentionally ignoring her, Grace nevertheless spoke again.

Hear me out, Marle. Whether you decide to keep the child or not, you still need to see a doctor to assess your own health at least.

Knowing that her reasoning came from a place of love, I simmered down and acknowledged what she was trying to say. With both shoes firmly on, I leant back into the seat and agreed that I would look into it tomorrow. Satisfied that she was finally getting somewhere with me, Grace smiled and her shoulders visibly relaxed.

I'm proud of you Marle, she said. And it's not as if you'll be doing this alone. I promise I'll be with you every step of the way.

We pulled into a car park right by the sand and she killed the ignition, rotating in her seat. Grabbing my hand, which rested on the middle compartment, Grace looked pointedly into my eyes.

You and me, Marle.

I could feel a wave of emotion rising to the surface, threatening to burst a dam of tears from my eyes so I just squeezed Grace's hand in return.

I know.

Chapter 17

Jumping out of the car, I didn't wait for Grace before I started jogging lightly. I could feel my feet strain over the uneven ground of the soft sand so I pushed harder until I landed on the harder sand by the water. Keeping my stride short whilst I waited for Grace to catch up, I took the opportunity to blink a few times and let the tears that welled up finally cascade down my face. The pure vulnerability at feeling alone in this pregnancy had always been at the forefront of my mind. The idea that someone like Grace would want to be a part of my life, without asking for anything in return except for me to show the same love and support that she has shown, felt remarkably comforting.

The sound of approaching footsteps and her evenly spaced breaths indicated that she was on my heels. With the wind from the approaching storm providing assistance with the drying of my tears, I only had to smile as Grace caught up with me and looked over. Her face was peppered with a pink flush.

Race to the end of the beach? she asked.

Knowing that I'd never been fit enough to talk and run at the same time, I only nodded before I took off towards the finish line. Legs pounding underneath me, I heard Grace shout from behind me.

Hey!

Her voice was far enough behind to tell me that I got a good head start. With the finish line still a few kilometres away, I immediately regretted my initial burst of energy. What felt like adrenaline soon turned out to be a short sugar rush from all the food I ate today. A stomach cramp quickly followed, threatening to jeopardise my lead on Grace. Deciding that I needed this win more than anything, I leant into the wind and pushed harder. Strands of hair that escaped my hair tie now lay damp against my neck, slick with sweat. The pain in my stomach was now a dull ache as the fatigue in my legs forced me to slow down. My uneven breaths produced a sound louder than the waves crashing on the shore and I wheezed my way towards the last one hundred meters. Sweat dripping down my face, I stumbled towards the end, eventually collapsing on the sand and waiting for death to claim me.

Just a second behind, Grace also collapsed onto the sand but stayed in a seated position, gulping in the air readily available on the breeze that snapped at our faces.

You cheated, she panted.

Pausing to ease the burning sensation in my chest, I replied: Don't hate the coach, hate the game.

Grace turned to me in confusion before she corrected: You mean, don't hate the player, hate the game?

Waving off her comment with a shake of my hand, I pulled at my legs to drag my body up into a seated position and said dismissively: Same, same.

Grace scoffed at the disregard and assured me: Ah, no. No, it's not. As she sat there staring at me, she added:

I'm beginning to think that you missed one-too-many days of school.

Thinking back to my time at school and how many days I did miss, I smiled and replied: Yeah probably.

After a brief pause in exercise, both Grace and I stood up and stretched out our legs for the run back to the car. Going at a more leisurely pace this time, both Grace and I settled in beside one another, our feet hitting the sand at the same time. The caress of the wind against my face provided a brief interlude from the humid heat. Despite the cold water, summer was still drawing closer. The wind from the impending storm that had initially dried my tears was now gently lapping at my ankles, slowly pushing me back towards the car. Feeling like I had enough energy to pick up my pace, I lengthened my stride and started to even out my breaths when a sudden stabbing pain shot to my lower stomach. Jolting to a stop just meters from the car, I bent over to clutch one hand to my abdomen and place one on my knee to steady myself. Wincing in pain that I could now feel between my legs, a look of confusion crossed my face.

Grace stopped and turned to look at me.

Oh my God! she shouted.

The panic in her voice forced me to lock eyes with her so that I could see where she was looking. Noticing that she was staring at my legs, I followed her line of sight and looked down. That was when I saw the blood. I saw Grace in my peripheral as she rushed towards me, clutching at my stomach was all I could do before darkness enveloped me.

Chapter 18

Waking up to a persistent beeping sound in the distance, I shivered at the cold breeze that swept across my body. I started to roll over to curl into a ball for added warmth but was stopped by a cord that pulled me onto my back again. Cracking both eyes open, I was assaulted by the blinding light streaming in from the windows to my right. I blinked away the brief lapse in vision as I attempted to rub my eyes before I heard a voice speak from the doorway.

You're awake!

I looked over to see Grace rushing in with a coffee in hand and was relieved to see a familiar face. Noticing her lingering stare at my body, I looked down from where I lay and took it all in. A crisp blue hospital gown was gathered in clumps over my body. A thin white blanket was bunched around my exposed feet, suggesting that I had kicked it off moments earlier. On one arm, a hospital tag hugged my wrist tightly, displaying my name, gender and date of birth. On the other arm, the cord that had pulled me back earlier wound its way up and under a bandage that was strapped around my lower bicep. My eyes followed the cord as it traced its way up to a bag that I could only assume was intended to keep me hydrated. I frowned in confusion.

How are you feeling? Grace asked.

She sat in a chair to my right, bracing both her forearms on her knees as she cradled her takeaway coffee in both hands. I couldn't help but notice the worry in her expression, so I mumbled: I'm okay, I guess. Staring into her eyes, I could tell that she was withholding something, so I asked: What's wrong?

With a deep breath through her nose, Grace opened her mouth to talk but nothing came out. She placed her coffee cup on the ground beside her feet and leant forward, grabbing my hand as a tear escaped her eye and slipped down her cheek. She squeezed my hand tighter and I felt my own jaw go slack as I awaited the impending news.

Grace, what is it?

She bowed her head for a moment before lifting her eyes to meet mine. Sorrow and anguish were all I could see before she uttered her next words.

It's the baby.

Her grip on my hand tightened.

You had a miscarriage, she choked out.

Air rushed out of my lungs as I absorbed the news. Tears slid down my face, blurring my vision as I lay motionless on the hospital bed. My hands were limp as Grace's own iron grasp fought for strength in the embrace. Her pleading eyes were lost on me because my own thoughts had drifted off. Something that I had taken for granted had now been torn from me in a cruel twist of fate. The gift that I didn't cherish or nurture, now suddenly became a dark reminder of my own blatant ignorance. I had foolishly ignored the life that

was growing inside me and this was my punishment. My own flesh didn't want me. My own body didn't want me. The ultimate betrayal that made one thing clear to me—I did not deserve that child. Nothing felt as isolating or as depressing as this newfound loneliness that now enveloped me like a wet towel. As tears silently traced their way down my cheeks, pooling at my chest, I took a moment to let out a scream. The only issue was that there was no sound. The deafening silence of the room was only disturbed by the occasional beep of the monitor behind me. Like a holiday house in the winter, I felt utterly empty. My chest contorted and twisted in agony so much so that I struggled to breathe through the pain. Smothered with grief, I failed to notice the doctor who had walked in until Grace stood up. Wiping away her own tears, she approached the doctor with a hesitant step before turning to me.

Marle, this is Jordan.

With her hand outstretched towards the doctor, I could only make one assumption. The man who stood in front of me was her husband—the one Grace was currently in the process of leaving. The man whose house I had rummaged through only days ago.

Standing awkwardly out of reach by the door, Jordan rocked nervously from one foot to another as he shuffled a series of papers against the clipboard resting in his left hand. Although his hair was more grey now than in the wedding photo I had seen at his house, he looked the same. Dressed in a relaxed pair of grey sweatpants and a black jumper, I would've assumed that he was just a visitor were it not for the white coat he

wore. Looking sheepishly between Grace and I, he nodded once before introducing himself.

Hi, Marle. It's a pleasure to finally meet you.

He took in my appearance—hair tangled from the wind at the beach, cheeks stained from the tears I carelessly left to dry on my face—and became acutely aware of the circumstances in which I was admitted into the hospital. Opening his mouth to offer what I could only assume were his condolences, I winced in anticipation. With the news still fresh and at the forefront of my mind, I knew that I was not ready to hear from other people just yet—to feel the pity laced within their words or to see their eyes shining with the sympathy that I knew I did not deserve. A new form of pain, experienced in great depth, had evolved for me only recently—guilt.

Grace saw the anguish written across my face and cut in before Jordan could utter a word,

Jordan is the leading physician in the emergency ward, she said, looking back at me, He was the one who admitted you into the hospital.

Realising that my last memory before waking up here was that of blacking out on the beach with Grace, I frowned in confusion.

Both of them noted my puzzled expression, so Jordan jumped in to clarify.

Grace called me as soon as you fainted. We—I only live around the corner so it wasn't too long before I was able to carry you back to the car. He shuffled from one foot to the other and smiled awkwardly. Normally, you'd call

an ambulance but, in a rural town like this one, they're not always the fastest mode of transport.

Grace nodded in agreement and walked back to where I lay. Sitting at the foot of my bed, she confessed: You scared the life out of me, Marle. She squeezed my hand and added: Especially when I realised that I couldn't carry your chubby ass across the sand dunes.

Wanting to laugh at her jab, I opened my mouth to smile but found that I was incapable of offering that to her right now. With everything that had happened in the last few days, now there was also this. I leant forward and wrapped my arms around her shoulders before I whispered: Thank you, Grace.

Knowing that my thanks was for more than just today, she pulled back and wiped away a single tear that slid down my cheek.

I'm just glad you're okay.

With the pressure of guilt slowly easing, I lay back into the bed and looked over to where Jordan still stood.

When can I leave? I asked.

Jordan looked up from his clipboard and coughed briefly to interrupt the silence before breaking out into a series of medical jargons. It wasn't long before I caught some of his words.

...despite the initial blood loss, you are still in remarkably good health. As long as your sister promises to monitor you closely for the next forty-eight hours or so, I'd say that I can get you discharged within the hour.

After a reassuring nod from Grace, Jordan excused himself to go file the paperwork. Looking back at her, I

could see that Grace felt out of place. Torn between walking after her almost-ex-husband or staying in this room with me. I decided to choose for her. I squeezed her hand for reassurance as I rested my shoulders on the pillows behind me before dismissively shaking my hands towards Grace.

Can you go and ask Jordan if I can start getting changed out of this gown they've got me in?

Thankful for the dismissal, Grace stood up to leave but stopped by the door, turning on her heels to face me once more. Her eyes roamed over me uncomfortably for a moment before she muttered,

Your running shorts are beyond wear at the moment.

Realising again what had happened and wincing at the thought, Grace quickly offered: I can race home and grab some clothes for you!

The hospital was at least an hour's drive from home, so I knew that that would mean being stuck here longer. I shook my head in defiance and let out a breath.

No, that's fine. Is there a blanket that I might be able to wrap around me instead?

With a slight nod and a reassuring smile, Grace left the room in search of a nurse. Once I was on my own, I finally felt the true weight of what had happened. The isolating nature in which I found myself felt crippling beyond repair. The pressure in my chest built with each breath as I fought to suppress the tears fighting to escape. With a shuddering release of air, I felt my lungs collapse and the dam that had held my tears at bay finally burst. Cascading down my cheeks in wave after

wave of grief, I silently let the pain consume me. The bleak and inconsolable present far outweighed the idea of a joyous future. Any hope for what may lay ahead felt oddly fictitious. As if the sorrow I was experiencing now had consumed all facets of my soul. Love, hope, peace—all dismantled within seconds.

Utterly empty and void of life, I was jolted from my trance when a comfortable weight pressed down on my lower legs. The source of the intrusion to my thoughts was a blanket which Grace neatly laid out for me. I looked up at Grace, who stood next to my bed and clasped my hand in a reassuring squeeze. One look at my tear-stained face told her enough. Without a word, she turned and walked back out of the room, leaving me to gather myself before we left.

Taking a deep breath, I sat forward and swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I looked down to my lower abdomen and rested my hand along the fabric that loosely covered my skin. Void of any pain, it was hard to imagine now what it had felt like earlier. Ignorantly dismissive of the experience had now left me in a unique situation. I had ignored what my body was going through and now that gift had cruelly been stripped away from me. I felt like an imposter. As if I was not deserving of that feeling. Deep down, I knew that hopeful mothers like Grace would not have ignored the warning signs. She would have seen a doctor straight away. She would have fixed the problem. She would still have the baby. But I am not Grace. I ignored what my body was trying to tell me. I ignored my own pregnancy and now I no longer had the privilege of being pregnant. The fault was entirely mine.

Chapter 19

Sitting in Grace's car on the way home, I clutched at the plastic bag filled with my bloody running gear. I wore the hospital gown underneath the blanket that Grace had collected from the nurse. The scratchy material offered little comfort from the heat as we waited for the air conditioner in the car to cool my body. Looking behind to the backseat, two of the three seats were folded flat with a towel spread out across them. I could almost see where my limp body had lain just a little while ago as Grace had raced to the hospital. Feeling the pull of my eyesight aimed towards the back of the car, Grace looked over from driver's seat.

How about we order in tonight?

I'm not really hungry but thanks though, I answered meekly.

Knowing that Jordan had been begging just outside my hospital room whilst I was getting changed, asking for Grace to come over for dinner so they could talk things through, I knew that she needed to be elsewhere.

You should see Jordan tonight, I offered.

Grace paused briefly from staring at the road ahead and looked over at me, puzzled.

I heard you both talking outside my room earlier. He needs you, I added.

Aware that I had heard some of their conversation due to a slight crack in the door that was left accidentally by Grace herself, she had no option but to hear me out.

I'll be alright by myself, I promise.

The hesitation in her silence was obvious. She chewed on her lower lip, contemplating her options.

I won't leave you, Marle. Not now.

The crack in her voice as she ended that sentence told me just how fragile she really was. In the face of such grief, her calm and measured facade had begun to crack. Glimmers of her younger and more innocent self still shone through the crevices. Like a babushka doll, another one of her layers was slowly rising to the surface—indecisive, vulnerable, innocent.

Knowing that I was at the root of the issue, I took the opportunity to offer her a get-out-of-jail-free card. I looked over to where she sat and offered: How about you let me pick up a pizza on the way home and, once you drop me off with the said pizza, you go over and save your marriage.

Tension in Grace's shoulders visibly dropped as she contemplated this plan.

I don't need to save my marriage, Marle. I need to end it.

The turmoil of the thoughts pulsing through Grace's head was obvious as she tightened her grip on the steering wheel, making an abrupt turn onto our street and away from the pizza place. The clouds that had been threatening to rain all day now dissipated to reveal cracks of light in the sky. With the sun slipping behind

the far horizon, the warm shades of orange that had painted the houses now turned into cool tones of purple. The palms that lined the fence in our backyard stood proudly over the house, swaying calmly in the afternoon breeze.

Pulling onto the driveway, Grace turned the car off and sat there—hands still wrapped around the steering wheel; eyes still glued to the ground in front. Although her eyes betrayed deep thought, her body sagged underneath the weight of such pressure, signalling a breakdown any minute now.

Without wanting to startle her out of the trance she was in, I remained where I was. Still clutching the same plastic bag with my dirty clothes. Still deflated. Still empty.

At that exact moment, I knew that we were both broken. Drained of all energy and hope.

What we needed was a woman to whom we could automatically turn to in situations like these but she was absent—permanently. A woman who would have listened. A woman who would've known what to say and do. That woman was our mum.

I opened the car door and looked over at Grace as she pulled herself out of the car. With heavy bones, she shuffled slowly to the front door of the house, not caring to look behind her and see whether I followed. The sound of thunder rolling back over the hills spurred me into movement. Closing my own door, I followed Grace inside the house, aching for a bath and a quick dinner.

The silence in the house was deafening. Standing in the kitchen, I looked over to the living room to see if Grace had collapsed on one of the couches, but she wasn't there. Listening to try and hear where she was, I was greeted by further silence. The soft hum of the fridge in the kitchen provided the only noise in what otherwise felt like an empty house. I padded barefoot through each bedroom before I eventually found her. At the end of the hallway, I pushed the door open to mum's room. Curled up in a foetal position, Grace had pulled the bed sheets over her body and was clutching one of the pillows. As I sat down on the edge of the bed, the fresh linen sheets crinkled under my hand, telling me that mum had washed them only recently. The way Grace tried to bury her face in the fabric told me that she realised the same thing. We both remained there in silence, just breathing in the scent of mum's room, trying to imagine the sound of her feet walking over the floorboards as she silently went about her daily chores. Trying to imagine that this was all an elaborate dream and that those very footsteps would walk down the hallway outside any minute now.

My own imagination was broken. Grace whispered: I'm going to sleep here tonight.

I looked over to where she lay and could see that her eyes were fixed on the wall opposite her as her back teeth clamped down to reveal a stony expression with one tear slipping down her cheek and onto the pillow. Knowing how fragile she was, I squeezed her foot in reassurance. After everything she had done for me, the least I could do was give her some space.

I might order some pizza, I said after taking a deep breath, so let me know if you're hungry because I can bring some to the room for you.

Leaving the room, I turned to pull the door closed when Grace spoke.

I'm sorry, Marle.

I looked at where she lay now and she looked back at me.

I'm sorry I can't support you right now, she added.

Mum passing, her own infertility and marriage breakdown—and still she felt the need to apologise for not being able to support me right now. When I had been nothing but absent. That was Grace. Inclining my head, I merely whispered, I understand, to her with affection before softly closing the door.

Chapter 20

The next morning, sheets of rain assailed the windows, slowly rousing me from my sleep. Dark clouds soldiered past as the wind pressed firmly against the glass. Stretching my legs out from underneath the sheets, a shiver ran through my body, enticing me to pull the blanket back over. Last night's bath had soothed my fatigue but the emptiness of my miscarriage still lingered. After leaving Grace in mum's bed yesterday evening, I poured myself a bath and sank into the warm water. Wanting to feel some semblance of normalcy, I took a bottle of wine into the bath with me. I tried to relish in the fact that I could drink as much as I wanted without the judgement but ended up crying. I took one sip and grimaced. Looking at the bottle in my hand, I couldn't help but feel hopeless. I sunk further into the bath and carelessly submerged the bottle of merlot into the water with me. Deep red swirls appeared across my stomach as the water rose further up my neck. With shuddering breaths, I cried, letting each tear cascade down my face until torrents of salty water streamed down it. Slipping further into the bath, I closed my eyes and allowed the water to claim my entire body. The weight of my guilt pressed heavily on my chest and I felt completely dead. Wanting the bath to consume me, I pressed my feet against the edge in an effort to remain underwater after my head was also submerged. My own failures rang true as my body's urge to breathe won

against my own reasoning. Resting my head against the edge of the bathtub, I was gulping for air when someone started banging on the front door. Pizza.

Aware that Grace would either be asleep or be too weak to bother answering the front door, I quickly jumped out of the bath. Swiping a towel from the hook, I made my way to the front door before the person had time to leave. Upon opening the door, I was confronted by a teenage boy. Dressed in black skinny jeans with a stained polo shirt that read 'Pizza Hut', the poor boy looked at me with wide eyes before he stammered: Hi, ah, pizza delivery?

With shaking hands, he passed me the pizza box before turning around and walking hastily back towards his bike, which rested against the garage. I wondered why the boy was so nervous and got the answer as soon as I walked past the sliding glass doors near the kitchen. With the night sky now black, I could clearly see my own reflection. Not only did I have a small white towel wrapped around my body but I was also covered in wine. After being completely submerged in the bathtub that had been invaded by a bottle of merlot, trails of deep red ran from my wet hair, across my forehead and down my arms and legs. The worst part was that the white towel seemed to have absorbed the brunt of it. With its wet patches of red, the poor pizza boy either thought I was being murdered or that this was a messy time of the month for me.

Wanting to wash the remnants of the wine out of my hair, I slowly walked back down the hallway and towards the bathroom. Even though the miscarriage was still painfully vivid, even when I closed my eyes, the pain of

losing mum was greater. Being a day away from the funeral, I knew it was up to me to push through for both of us. It was important for me to pick myself up and soldier on, just as Grace had done her whole life. Wiping away a single tear that found its way down my cheek, I made a promise to myself to just get through these next two days.

Since I had not bothered to dry my hair after rinsing it before bed last night, I decided to roughly pull it up into a bun this morning. Throwing on my work clothes, I set a reminder to pick up the booklets that Luke was printing and hurriedly made my bed. After all that had happened, I knew that today I needed to stay strong and pull through. If that meant organising the last few details of the funeral without Grace, then so be it. With some time still left before I had to drive to Cathy's Corner, I decided to do something nice for Grace.

Opening the door to mum's bedroom, I looked in to see that Grace hadn't moved since last night. Slices of pizza that I left on the bedside table last night remained untouched. She was still clutching the same pillow as yesterday. I leant down and squeezed her shoulder lightly. Squinting through the light that filtered past the shutters behind me, Grace frowned, startled by the intrusion to her sleep.

I smiled down at her and said: You look terrible in the morning.

One hand now blocking the sun that was blinding her vision, she looked at me and then her eyes lowered to what I was holding.

I thought I might make you something yummy before I left for work.

I placed a tray of food over her legs and she pushed herself up into a seated position. She smiled.

You didn't have to do this, Marle.

Looking down at the tray, I knew that she was right. I knew that I didn't have to do this for her. I didn't have to do anything. But she was my sister and if making her breakfast in bed was going to help her get through today, at least, then it was something that I wanted to do.

I pulled the cutlery from my pocket and said: It's likely that I'll never do this again so eat up.

Somehow, she still looked guilty for not being the one to make breakfast.

I was selfish last night. I shouldn't have left you alone after everything that hap—

Stopping herself from bringing up the memory of my miscarriage yesterday, Grace swallowed her last words.

Feeling her unease, I broke the silence.

It's okay. The last few days have been painful for both of us.

I squeezed her shoulder again in reassurance and stood back.

I'm going to head off to work now, but I'll be back at 1:00 p.m.

Grace frowned.

I thought you called in sick yesterday. You know you should be resting.

She was pointing a fork at me and I looked away to avoid the tears that were slowly rising to the surface.

I can manage, I promise.

I knew she wasn't satisfied with my answer, so I took a deep breath and gave her my most sincere smile.

If I can't cope, then I promise I'll come home early.

Relaxing at that confession, Grace reclined back onto the pillows.

I'll be here when you finish, she assured me with a smile, leaning down to smell the food.

The smell of breakfast could put anyone in a good mood. Though the pancakes probably smelled better than they tasted. They weren't cooked through with clumps of flour mixed in because I was too lazy to combine the ingredients properly. Some of the frozen berries I threw in the microwave to defrost were still covered in ice. The maple syrup I found in the pantry was expired, but Grace didn't need to know that. My mouth still watered at the sight and my tummy grumbled in unison.

Picking up the knife and fork, Grace attentively cut into the pancakes before placing the first bite in her mouth. Her shoulders slackened and the tension in her body eased as she attempted to eat what was a very average meal, so I took that as my cue to leave. Today and tomorrow were going to be difficult and I needed Grace to be at her strongest; otherwise, we were both doomed.

Chapter 21

Returning home from work, I felt exhausted. Not only was the weather hot and miserable, but only a handful of customers came into the cafe. Normally, that would be something to celebrate but today was not one of those days.

Wanting to avoid unnecessary human interactions with both the people I worked with and the customers, I decided to get stuck with cleaning. From polishing the glassware to scrubbing the kitchen, I wanted to keep myself busy. Too absorbed in the work to notice the time, I was happy to see that my shift flew by in record time. The only catch was that I felt completely exhausted.

My knees were bruised from polishing the scuff marks off the timber floor and my hands were marked after I had cleaned the grease tray in the kitchen. My clothes were dirty and I knew that I reeked of sweat. My suspicions were confirmed when I walked into the kitchen and Grace took one look at me.

Eyebrows raised over her cup of tea, she took a sip and slowly returned the mug to the kitchen bench. Swallowing the fragrant liquid, she nodded towards me.

Are you okay?

The weight of that question hung in the air as I dumped my phone and keys on the bench and walked over to sofa, collapsing against the cushions and kicking

my shoes off in the process. Grace looked better today. After the turmoil of yesterday, I was thankful to see her in a better mood, no matter how brief it might be.

Grace walked over to the couch opposite me and sat down still sipping from the cup of tea in her hands.

Big day? she asked.

I knew that she would disapprove if I told her that I pushed myself after yesterday, so I answered: No, just tired.

Without enough energy to respond in detail, I just lay there and watched Grace as she fiddled around with a series of booklets stacked on the coffee table between us.

For a minute, I lay in silence and just stared at Grace, who had become preoccupied. The idea that I could be strong for the both of us over these next two days was unattainable. Despite the fact that she was my sister, I had to recognise that I was also broken and that I needed to work on fixing myself before I could go about fixing others.

Wanting to cry at that very moment, I snapped out of my trance when I saw the booklet that Grace was holding. I sat up and turned my head and get a better look, leaning over.

Hey, are those the booklets for mum's funeral?

Nodding in answer to my question, Grace said: Luke delivered them later on this morning. She turned one of the copies over in her hand and smiled fondly before she added: He did a good job.

I was grateful that Luke had delivered them because I just then realised that I had failed to pick them up from him after work. I pushed up from where I lay to take a closer look. A photo of mum sat proudly on the front. Wisps of grey were interspersed through her soft brown hair, which was tossed back over her shoulders. She had her head tilted to the side, as if she were looking at something or someone. Her warm caramel skin tone glowed in the afternoon light. The sun that was setting in the background left shades of pink across the photo contrasting against the white flash of the camera, which left a cheeky sparkle in her eyes. There was life in this photo. There was love.

A feeling that was seldom found among all, yet seamlessly translated into film. She always radiated in photos. This case no exception.

She was a woman who had always had our best interests at heart. She never raised her voice at me, despite how I treated her, and she always forgave me—even when I didn't apologise. She was a saint. She was my saint.

Leaning back into the cushions, I rested my head against the back of the couch and watched as Grace admired the same photo that I had just been looking at.

The urge to open up to her became overwhelming and, before I realised what I was doing, I asked Grace: Did I ever tell you about Jack?

Still looking at the booklet in her hand, she replied: Are you referring to the Jack who was calling you at all hours of the night during the first few days you were here?

Stunned that she knew Jack had called, I frowned in confusion.

Choosing then to look up and register my facial expression, Grace smiled and shrugged.

The walls are thin and I may or may not have checked your phone when you were in the shower the other day.

Grace leaned back into the couch to mimic my own posture and smiled in invitation.

Jack was the man I was having an affair with before I got pregnant.

Swallowing those last words felt like swallowing razors. My throat seized up and my eyes involuntary pooled with tears at the mention of being pregnant. It had been so easy to ignore my body when I was pregnant and yet, now that I had miscarried, I felt as though my body had complete control over my emotions. I felt vulnerable.

Patiently waiting for me to pull my emotions back into check, Grace smiled and waited for me to continue.

He used to come into the place where I worked, most evenings with different women, so I assumed he was single, I said, wiping away a stray tear.

Looking into Grace's eyes, I saw that they shone without judgement. I knew that she wouldn't approve of where this story was going, but the fact that she was trying to conceal that from me was endearing. Knowing how fragile I was about the whole pregnancy, I felt comfortable that Grace let me talk without making me feel any more guilty than I was already feeling about the whole situation.

Continuing on, I said: One night, I was closing the restaurant and he stayed behind to chat. We eventually went back to my place and it progressed from there. It started out as casual but then picked up when he asked if he could see more of me. That was when I found out that he had a wife and kids.

Pausing to see if Grace was disapproving of the story, she merely nodded and smiled in reassurance, urging me to keep talking.

At first, I pulled away but he was adamant that he loved me and that he was in the process of divorcing his wife anyway. I told him that I needed a few months to process it all, which is when I found out I was pregnant.

Feeling water gather at the edge of my jaw, I wiped away the tears that I hadn't realised were slipping down my cheeks. Sniffling as the tears came down harder, I stopped wiping them away and just let them fall.

I didn't plan for any of this. It just happened, I said.

Grace leant forward and placed her cup of tea beside the booklets. Looking at me, she said: Is that why you went to the abortion clinic? The nurturing and sympathetic tone of her voice told me that there was no malice or judgement in her words.

Shaking my head, I replied: At the beginning, I didn't know what I wanted. I was in shock. Jack was the one who told me to get rid of the baby. He booked the appointment for me and told me to go. That's why I ignored your phone calls that day. I was in the waiting room.

Standing up, Grace walked over to me, sat down and hugged me. With her arms wrapped around me, we sat there and she let me cry into her shoulder. She let me cry because, sometimes, that's all one needs. Sometimes, all one needs is to have someone there because their presence is all that's required. Several minutes later, when my breaths evened out, she let me go and we both reclined back on the couch once more.

Pulling my sweaty shirt up to dry my face, I was wiping the last of my tears when Grace said: When I was on the phone with you then, you said you had to go and hung up. She turned her head to look at me and asked: I assume that's when they called for you. So what made you change your mind?

I thought back to when I was at the clinic. The stoic expression of the lady who was trying to usher me to the doctor. The pamphlet on the side that showed a picture of a happy mother with her child. How it reminded me of mum and how young she had been when she decided to bring two girls into the world. I remembered that, for a brief moment, I believed I could do and be exactly the same. I believed that I was as strong as my mum. The truth was that I was not as strong as her. Her resilience, her enduring love and her patience were all qualities that made her not only a stronger person but a stronger mother. I knew that I wasn't half the woman she was but, maybe, one day I could be.

Taking a deep breath, I replied: I was reminded of mum and that was all the motivation I needed to turn around and leave.

Grace smiled in sympathy.

I appreciate you telling me this, Marle. I know you have a tendency to bottle up your emotions, so thank you for opening up to me.

Drained of tears, I offered her a weak smile in return.

Our moment of solitude was broken by the sound of Grace's mobile phone. Reaching over the table to end the alarm, Grace sighed.

Are you up for visiting mum one last time?

Squeezing my knee in support, I nodded. I might have a quick shower before though. I lifted my arm up to smell my sweat and grimaced. I definitely needed it after work this morning.

Standing up to gather her now cold cup of tea, Grace said: Take your time.

I trailed off to the shower and waved my thanks before closing the door to the bathroom, quickly letting the steam envelop me and my depleted body.

Chapter 22

Arriving home with Grace, I slowly switched on the lights in the house. Even though the sun was due to set in a few more hours, the dark clouds that hovered overhead meant that the house was darker than usual this afternoon.

Relieved that everything was organised and ready for tomorrow's funeral, I took the opportunity to charge my phone and check for any missed calls. It crossed my mind earlier this morning to wonder whether I should call Jack and tell him what happened. I knew that he was pushing for me to get an abortion, so I could at least put his mind at ease. Noticing the regular missed call from him, I went to call him back when my phone lit up with Rose's name.

I knew that I hadn't spoken to her in a couple of days and decided to answer her call, putting the Jack issue at bay, at least until the funeral was over.

Answering Rose's call, I was immediately soothed by her familiar voice.

Marle, love, it's Rose!

She failed to understand the concept of modern technology and the fact that phones could tell you the name of the person calling, which made me smile to myself.

Hey Rose, how are you?

Quick to reply, Rose said: Oh love, I'm just fine! The real question is, how are you?

Without wanting to delve into everything over the phone, I kept my reply short.

I'm doing okay, I guess.

Rose scoffed at the limited response and pushed further.

Marle don't lie to me. I know things aren't okay at the moment.

Aware that she would have no idea about my recent miscarriage and could only be referring to the upcoming funeral, I decided to keep it that way. Not wanting to spill all my problems to Rose over the phone, I figured the best thing to do was just leave it.

I'm not lying, Rose, I promise.

Another scoff was followed by a disgruntled, hmmmmm.

I was about to ask how she was going back in the city when she said: Listen, Marle, I know you've got a lot going on, since it's the day before the funeral and all, but would you be able to catch up over some dinner tonight?

Startled by the question, I found myself repeating her words: Dinner tonight?

Understanding my confusion, Rose explained: You didn't think I wouldn't show up to the funeral, did you? Dumbfounded by the whole situation, I let Rose continue: I left Frank in charge of the building and drove myself up the coast. Satisfied with her effort she let out a breath.

Rose, I don't know what to say, I said still shocked by her words.

You don't have to say anything, love, she replied. Just meet me out for dinner.

Smiling at the realisation that Rose made it all the way here just for me, I couldn't help but feel happy...relieved.

I accepted her invitation and said: Let's try the new Italian place near the cinemas at, say, eight o'clock?

Rose accepted the idea and continued to make a series of muffled sounds before ending the call with: Oh and bring that sister of yours!

Smiling at her familiarity, I replied that I would before she had the chance to hang up.

Chapter 23

We arrived at the Italian restaurant just after eight o'clock so Grace and I waited by the front entrance. Assuming we were the first to arrive, we stood by the waiter's desk in an attempt to be seated. It had been a long day. From cleaning tirelessly at the cafe to enduring the funeral home one last time, I felt exhausted. The slouched shoulders on Grace told me that she felt the same. Eyes pooling with tears that would never fall, Grace bit against her lower lip and tried to pull herself together. I knew she was thinking about the last time we were in this restaurant all together. The way she stared at the small polaroid photo of the three of us on the wall of happy customers, she looked absolutely torn. I tried to keep my own emotions in check so I looked down at my feet trying to focus on the timber beneath my shoes. So absorbed was I by this task that I failed to see the little woman who was already seated in the back corner by the window. With a young family bouncing over the chairs just next to her table, it was no wonder that I missed her after my initial scan. Waving us over like an eager grandmother who was desperate to squeeze the cheeks of her grandchildren, Rose bounced up out of her chair to greet us. With Grace walking in front of me, it was inevitably she who copped the cheek pinching. Remarking on how ghostly pale she looked, Rose made a show of looking worried.

Grace offered a weak smile in return and shrugged her shoulders before admitting: This hasn't exactly been the best week for either of us.

Pulling me into the conversation, Rose took the opportunity to look over Grace's shoulder or, at least, she attempted to do so, managing to envelope me into an oddly humorous hug.

I wasn't tall by any means. Standing at 5'6", same as Grace, most people were either at my eye level or just above. With Rose's arms wrapped around my torso, I couldn't help but laugh uneasily. Unsure whether I should try and wrap my arms around her, I panicked and ended up patting her on the head. The awkwardness was not lost on Grace, who raised her eyebrows at the exchange and then later frowned, confused as to why it looked like that this was the first time I have ever hugged her. Considering that I lived alongside the woman for several years, I was surprised myself that we had never hugged. Yes, Rose was like a mother to me during the years I spent away from home, but she was also my landlord. As much as I loved and respected the woman, we were never that affectionate. Until now.

Loosening her iron grip from around me, Rose muttered to herself: Enough of that, as she wiped away the few stray tears that had silently escaped her eyes during the embrace. She clapped her hands together in resolute fashion and announced: Now, I hope you girls are hungry because I already ordered ahead.

It was good to see Rose. Arriving in the city at the ripe age of eighteen, with nothing but a backpack full of clothes and some loose change, I was almost homeless

within a week—and I would have been, had it not been for Rose. An impromptu storm sent me searching for shelter behind some garbage bins on my first night without a place to stay. It was Rose who saw me there when she was leaving a restaurant and it was she who let me sleep on her couch, eventually helping me find a place to stay and a place to work. She was undoubtedly like a mother to me, so it was only fitting that she was here and helped me say goodbye to my first mum. My real mum.

Taking our seats at the table, she looked at Grace as she reached for her glass of water, then at me as I poured myself a glass of wine.

Without even so much as a whimper in reply to her comment, Rose added: And thank God I did because—look at the two of you. Gesturing at the both of us, she made her point by waving her arm about again, saying: If your mother saw how thin you both were, she'd have a heart attack.

Choking on the wine I was sipping, I paused and looked over at Grace, her own shock registering in her open jaw.

Too soon? Rose questioned.

Further silence from both Grace and I meant that she knew the answer already.

Clutching at her chest, Rose said: Oh, girls I'm so sorry! You know my dark humour can get the better of me sometimes.

Completely aware that her dark humour usually always got her into trouble, I decided to ease her

discomfort for her. After spending so much time with her, I knew that her overly chatty state was just a way in which she tried to defuse an awkward silence.

I leant over to grasp her hand and mustered up my most sincere voice before saying: I really appreciate you driving all this way for us. Looking back at Grace, I knew she felt the same, so I added: It means a lot. Really. With an extra squeeze for emphasis, I let Rose's hand go so she could dab away at the tears slipping from her eyes. Before I knew it, I was drying my own eyes, unaware that I was also crying.

Well, Rose replied with a shallow breath, I certainly wasn't going to leave you two to pick up the pieces by yourselves.

She blew into a handkerchief that she pulled from the pocket of her jeans and pointed at the two of us with her opposite hand.

Especially after everything that has happened these last few days.

She looked between Grace and I, then promptly down at her lap, but not before I saw her eyes glance at my stomach.

Did she know? I was aware that she knew of my pregnancy, but did she know about my miscarriage? Excluding that brief look towards my stomach, she hadn't so much as mentioned my pregnancy since I walked into the restaurant. And now that I had thought about it, she didn't mention anything on the phone earlier. Normally, that wasn't an issue but, since she had found out, she had managed to weave the topic into all our conversations. Now, it was as if she was avoiding it.

Whilst our dinner was served, I waited for the waiters to leave before I took a deep breath and told Rose everything. From my new job to the miscarriage, I told her about everything. To her credit, Rose sat there and silently listened to my rant. She smiled empathically and nodded for me to continue whenever I stumbled or paused to wipe away my tears.

Once I finished, I leant back in my chair for support and caught my own reflection in the mirror by the wall to my left. My usual honey skin now looked like I was having a severe allergic reaction. Red patterns had broken out all over my face as I tried to dry the last of my tears. Grace sat there and ate quietly. She let me say what I needed to say to Rose. She knew that I rarely opened up to people, so she never discouraged it when I did.

Rose looked over at me fondly and smiled.

You have the strength of your mother running through your veins and that's what's pulling you through this grief.

Too tired to reply, I let Rose continue to fill the void of silence.

You have so many people behind you. Both of you do.

Looking over at Grace again, she made a point of making her feel included.

Whatever happens, you both know that you have my full support.

After that, she smiled and picked up her wine glass. Raising it to both Grace and I, she announced: I love you

both and I would like nothing more than to keep talking —but our dinner is getting cold, so eat up!

Raising our glasses in unison, we smiled weakly at each other and drank. Sitting there, in silence, chewing on my creamy ravioli, I took a moment to realise how lucky I really was. Despite everything, I realised that this was the first time since mum passed away that I truly felt like we were going to be okay. No matter what happened tomorrow, we were going to be okay.

Chapter 24

A restless sleep later and with a surprising hangover, I rolled over in my bed to check the time. Seeing that it was only 6:00 a.m., I groaned and turned back to the pillow I was spooning, trying to claim back the sleep that I already knew was robbed from me. With the slow patter of rain against the window, I tried to drown out the noise of the thoughts running through my head. Today was the day. Today was the funeral. Images of her chasing after me with a bucket of sand along the beach. Towers of sandcastles creating an impenetrable fortress around our beach towels. I was happy. She was happy. Tossing the blankets off my body and rolling into a seated position, I rubbed at my eyes, surrendering to the fact that I was awake. There was no point trying to avoid the inevitable. Today, I was going to say goodbye to my mum.

Walking into the kitchen, I decided to make myself some coffee, knowing that today was going to be a long day. Already sitting outside on the veranda with a mug in her hand, Grace stared at the birds who were taking a morning swim in the bird bath. With the kettle already boiled, I poured myself a cup of coffee and joined her outside.

Couldn't sleep? I asked.

Looking over her shoulder to see me joining her by the steps, she shrugged.

I've been awake since three. The thought of mum turning to dust today was enough to give me nightmares.

Shivering at the memory, she pulled at her dressing gown in an attempt to warm herself up. Just then, I felt a breeze swim past our bodies so I did the same thing. Although the rain had stopped, I looked up at the clouds to see if the lapse in rain was only temporary. Foolishly hoping for a clear sky and sunshine, I was met with ominous clouds that threatened to release a monsoon of water upon us at any moment.

The first sip of coffee soothed my worries and the warm liquid diffused the grogginess of the hangover from last night. With Rose constantly refilling my wine glass at dinner, I was uncertain about how much I actually drank. The rumble in my stomach soon after told me enough.

I looked back over at Grace and suggested: We should probably start getting ready. Tilting my head back to indicate the booklets stacked on the coffee table inside, I added: There's a lot we need to do to set up and have ready before everyone starts arriving.

Grace nodded her head in agreement before she replied: I will join you in a minute. With a deep breath, she looked over at the bird bath once again and said: I just want to sit here a little bit longer.

I knew that she was thinking about the time we had made that bird bath when we were kids and how mum had helped us engrave our names at the base using only a small twig that we found in the garden. I remembered how Grace and I giggled as mum pressed our small palms into the cement. The gooey texture made us laugh and

mum had no choice but to join in the laughter herself. We made that bird bath during the first few years that we lived here. We would've been only four or five at the time. But the memory was so vivid that it felt like it had been only yesterday.

Squeezing Grace's shoulder in support, I got up to start the day. With all the organising that had gone into making the day as smooth as possible, it was only fitting that I let Grace enjoy those first few moments of the morning in absolute solitude. Although I had been beside her during the last few days, it was ultimately she who orchestrated everything, right down to the smallest of details.

Chapter 25

The first time we arrived at the chapel, we kept our heads down and got to work—organising all the booklets and making sure that the flowers were delivered on time and in good condition. Thanks to the recommendation from my high school friend and current funeral director, David Longmire, the Porter Floristry had done an incredible job. Native flowers, synchronised in hues of soft pinks and deep greens, were entwined around an open space at the front of the chapel, waiting in anticipation for the coffin to arrive. Once we were satisfied that everything was ready, we returned to the house to get ready ourselves.

Wearing a pair of black silk pants and matching top, I had my hair swept back, off my face, which was void of any makeup or sunglasses. It wasn't sunny enough to warrant the use of sunglasses but, even if it had been, I wasn't in the mood to hide my grief. This was mum's funeral and if I wanted to cry and look like an absolute mess, then so be it. I figured this would be the last place anyone would pass judgement on me anyway.

I grabbed my wallet and phone, then walked into the living room to pick up the car keys that I had thrown on the couch earlier when I saw Grace. Dressed in a black linen pantsuit, Grace looked every bit like our mum. Although her hair was slightly darker its length and the style screamed of mum. Soft waves framed her cheekbones, which I used to think only mum had. It

wasn't until I saw her in this light that I realised that she had exactly the same face shape as mum. Stunned by the revelation, I stood there staring at her whilst she sat by the photo frames with her legs crossed underneath her. Upon hearing my footsteps, Grace broke out of her trance and looked up to where I stood by the couch. Wiping away a single tear that had slipped from her polished facade, Grace moved to stand up, placing the photograph that she was holding back on the shelf with the others.

A picture of Grace on our first day of school in a uniform that was two sizes too big and with a smile that was too wide for her chubby little face. She stood by the school's front gates with mum kneeling down beside her. Now that I look at the photo, I can see that the two of them are carbon copies of each other. Despite the chubbiness of Grace's cheeks, you could still tell that she'd grow up to look exactly like mum. The way their eyes crinkle at the corners when they smile into the sun is an example of how accurate that is. I didn't see it then, but I certainly saw it now.

Sniffing at the memory, Grace pulled her own bag around her shoulders and asked: Ready?

I picked up the keys off the couch and smiled hesitantly before following her through the front door and towards our mother's funeral.

Chapter 26

Grace and I were thankful that the rain had stopped. It was as if the weather had created a temporary dam in order to let us have this moment.

Arriving later than we anticipated, we ended up having to park further away due to the number of cars that were lined up along the street. Not wanting to test our luck with the weather too much, we both walked quickly down the street and towards the front doors of the chapel. Rounding the corner, Grace and I were humbled.

The whole town had shown up. Friends of mum's whom I hadn't seen since Grace and I were in preschool. Children and grandchildren of the parents who had often been at our house for sunset dinners a long time ago. A unique amalgamation of people blended through the front doors, all silently finding their seats, all looking towards the front, all looking towards mum.

Wanting to savour the moment, I was instead encouraged to move quickly when a loud crack of thunder landed overhead. I flinched at the sound and hurried along inside, which was when I saw her.

The simple oak coffin lay dormant at the front. Commanding a respectful silence, no one spoke above the sound of a whisper. The lid to the coffin was closed and already a handful of flowers and mementoes were placed on top of it from, I assumed, close friends.

Still in shock over how early someone could be taken from them, most people remained transfixed on the coffin in front of them, but some people turned. They saw Grace and I enter and offered a sympathetic smile here or a silent nod there. Grace moved to the side to speak with the priest about what I could only assume were final arrangements. My feet, however, were rooted to the ground.

The past few days felt somewhat fictitious. My life had been turned upside down. From my mum to the pregnancy. If someone had told me that this is where I'd be a week ago, I would've laughed and said they're crazy. The problem now was that I was here and that these things did happen. Frozen in place, I contemplated where to go when a reassuring hand fell onto my lower back.

Walking up beside me, Grace whispered in my ear: You okay?

Forever the woman who had it all together. Despite the trauma, the pending divorce and the fact that she had me as her shitty sister, she managed to pull through. Harboring her own scars internally, no doubt, but projecting an outward air of control regardless.

I followed her down the aisle and we took our places in the last remaining seats right in front of mum. Grace's soon to be ex-husband was seated next to her. She shuffled in with a sad smile of greeting towards him. Like a lost child, I could see he wanted nothing more than to be there for her. Hesitantly, he moved to squeeze her hand. She didn't move away and to my surprise, looked over at him and smiled in gratitude. Thanking him for

being here, Grace smiled and Jordan held onto her hand even tighter.

You could see that they still loved each other. Regardless of what they may have said, their body language gave it away. Jordan's pleading eyes always seemed to settle when they landed on Grace. Her own tense shoulders relaxed in the familiarity of his presence. They seemed comfortable together.

The priest was now talking on the stage in front. I took a moment to look over towards mum. Flashes of memories assailed me. Spending Christmas Eve making gingerbread in the heat of an Australian summer, then later putting out a glass of milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies for Santa and some carrots for the reindeers. I would eagerly awaken in the morning and race towards the living room. Snowy footprints leading from the old fireplace in the corner all the way to the Christmas tree left me in silent awe. It wasn't until I was older that I found out that mum was creative enough to use her old hiking boots and a dusting of flour to make the footprints. To a five-year-old, it was the real deal. For everything—from the flashing lights on her Christmas tree earrings to her Santa's helper apron—mum always gave one hundred percent. It wasn't what she spent that made Christmas so special, it was the amount of effort she put in. She could've put up a cardboard Christmas tree for all I cared. It was the fact that she would've spent all night making it whilst we were asleep that really mattered.

She would do anything for us and that realisation hit me cold in the chest. Without realising it, a wave of pressure pushed down on my shoulders and I could do

nothing except sag under its weight. Pulling my head down to my lap, I held it as I cried. Body shaking, I let the pure anguish of the loss envelop me. A hand from behind me braced against my shoulder with a firmness that was all too familiar. Without me ever looking back, a dozen tissues were passed over my shoulder and into my hands. The heavy scent of vanilla from the person behind me was the only confirmation I needed to know that it was Rose who sat behind me and gave me those tissues.

Chapter 27

As Grace started to stand up beside me, I looked up at her and then at the priest. Aware that we were supposed to give a speech later on, I was oddly surprised to realise that our time was already up. Wiping away the tears that had started to dry on my face, I silently cursed myself for not bringing any sunglasses.

We both stood up at the front of the chapel and took a moment to really look around. The sheer number of people who turned up was humbling. All the seats were filled with bodies. Those who couldn't get a seat either stood around the sides of the pews or gathered outside to listen to the service through the front doors. I couldn't believe it. It was astonishing to see how many people were either directly or indirectly impacted by mum's passing. Although a storm approached outside, the sweltering heat of an imminent summer among a room full of bodies, meant the humidity in the chapel was sky high. My silk outfit clung to my body for all the wrong reasons. Stupid mistake.

Seeing that Grace was, technically, the first child, it was she who stood on the podium first. We wrote a speech together, dividing it into parts so that both of us had a chance to say something. When Grace started talking, thanking everyone for coming, the sadness in her voice was audible. She took one deep breath and began to speak but quickly crumbled. The crack in her voice at the end of the sentence sent her into a spiral.

The sympathetic silence of the crowd didn't help, it only made her sob harder. Eventually, I stepped towards her, leant forward and held onto her shoulders. Whispering quietly enough so that my voice didn't carry over the microphone, I said: I can take over if you need.

Grace turned away from the audience and pulled back into my embrace. She shook in my arms as her body shuddered from the sobs.

Without having to look, I knew that Jordan had left his seat. Silently walking over to where we stood at the front, he wrapped his arms around Grace and pulled her to the side, away from everyone's eyes. Thankful for his help, I dipped my head in gratitude and slowly spun back to face the crowd.

Some eyes were patiently waiting, others were clouded by their own tears. Knowing that I would have to finish what Grace had written and then continue on with what I had to say, I slipped my hand into the pocket of my silk pants and paused. Without realising, I had accidentally left my half of the speech at home. In my room earlier, when I was trying to find my wallet, I must have left the paper on the bed as I walked out. Internally cursing myself for the stupid mistake, it meant that I was left with no other choice. Stepping up to the microphone, I thought back to some of my fondest memories with mum and, suddenly, I knew what to say. Taking a deep breath, I pushed Grace's own speech aside and began speaking:

Thank you all for being with us today to honour the memory of our mother, Anne Ellis. As you all already know, mum was unexpectedly taken from us

earlier this week. It's always hard to say goodbye, but it's even harder to do so when the end is unexpected. We wish we had more time and, perhaps, that we spent more of the time that we did have together. Admittedly, I am one of those people. Mum was loving, she was honest, she was forgiving. This legacy of hers is now carried on by Grace and me. Well, more so by Grace, but you get the idea. If I could just be half the woman that my mother was, I would be proud. She was a hard-working, passionate figure of strength, who never waned in her support of or love for her family and friends. She soldiered on even when times were tough. Mum, thank you for everything you've given us—and for the warmth and love you shared with us during your precious time on earth. But most importantly, thank you for giving me my sister. She is the greatest gift you could've given me and for that I will forever be grateful.

Pulling back from the microphone, I wiped away the silent tears that streamed down my face. Seeing that Grace and Jordan had returned to their seats, I waited for the priest to start talking again before I joined them. When I sat down again, I didn't know that I was holding onto my breath until I exhaled it. My shoulders finally relaxing as I sagged back into the seat. Leaning over to squeeze my hand, Grace rested her head against mine for a brief moment.

She whispered into my ear said: Short and sweet. Just what mum would have wanted. Then, just as she was about to move to sit back up, she whispered again, only loud enough for my own ears: Thank you Marle.

I felt relieved. Relieved that so many people turned out for mum. Relieved that I was able to say those things in front of everyone and not break down. It wasn't a huge step, but it was enough to start the process of healing. To say goodbye to the woman who had shaped me into the woman I was today even though I had completely been unaware of this until now. That knowledge gave me peace of mind. It gave me strength.

Chapter 28

Walking outside through the doors of the chapel, I looked up at the sky and hoped that the weather would hold. Dark clouds that were heavy with rain loomed overhead and flashes of lightning strobed far off in the distance. The cool breeze did little to help with the heat that formed patches of sweat against my back. I pulled at my silk pants, hoping to get some reprieve from the now sticky fabric. I look longingly at others who had the right idea to wear more appropriate clothing. Those who didn't had either left already or were in the process of leaving.

Endless faces approached us and offered their condolences. Some people I knew from my childhood, others I barely remembered. Smiling in gratitude, I replied with my own thanks for coming out and turned to the next sympathetic face. They moved in a blur, going from one face to another. I managed to remember the faces of Susan and George. Having only met them in the cafe a few days earlier, I was surprised that I had picked them out of the crowd of people. Susan's motherly eyes and George's sombre attitude hadn't changed. After working with mum at the shelter only recently, they had nothing but love and admiration for her. They spoke of how she would always stay late, just in case a child had a fever and needed some medicine. Susan presented a handkerchief from her own pocket and offered it to me. I hadn't realised that tears were

trailing down my cheeks until she pointed it out. Aware that she had probably been blowing her nose into that thing all through the funeral, I smiled and politely declined. Susan frowned and returned the handkerchief to her pocket, confused as to why I was not wiping away my own tears. Truth was, I didn't care. I didn't care if I looked like I had been cutting onions all afternoon. I didn't care that people would whisper behind my back and comment on how tired or how pale I looked. I was at my mother's funeral and if I wanted to cry without wiping the tears from my face, then so be it. Grief isn't beautiful, so why should I try to be?

Slowly, one by one, people passed by and spoke briefly. One by one, I smiled at them and said thank you. I felt like I was at a train station. Stuck on the same platform, watching people gliding past me. A lot of them smiled and waved, a lot of them opened their mouths to talk to me but stopped before any words came out—as if they, too, realised that there was a glass screen between us and thought better of it.

With the first drops of rain scattering across the car park, those who were left talking in small groups quickly retreated to their cars.

Standing out front, I turned to Grace who had been by my side the entire time. Her face, already wet from all the tears, were now hidden behind a large pair of dark brown sunglasses. She looked oddly out of place, given the weather but I still smiled at her and wrapped my arms around her. She shook in my embrace, so I held on tighter until she was able to control her sobs.

Someone cleared their throat behind us, so I pulled away from Grace and turned around. David Longmire stood just beyond the carpark with his hands in his pockets. Dressed in a black suit, he stood patiently next to his car. The car that now had mum's coffin inside. We had decided a few days earlier that we were going to cremate mum and not bury her, so it was now up to David to drive her body to the crematorium.

When we walked over to where he stood, he was about to start speaking but, before he could say anything, I leant forward and gave him a hug. Initially tense in surprise, I felt his shoulders relax. Then he returned my hug and lowered his head into my shoulder. After a few seconds in silent embrace, I let go so that I could see his face.

Looking up at him, I gave him a genuine smile and said: Thank you for today, David. You made this whole process a lot easier. He blushed at the compliment and replied: You know I love you like a sister, Marle, so you know there is nothing I wouldn't do for you and your family.

The authenticity in his voice sent a wave of warmth through me. The amount of love and support that I had received today felt somewhat fictitious because it came from people I barely knew. It wasn't until I heard those words from David that I truly felt it. Growing up with him meant that we had been side-by-side through thick and thin. Hence, hearing something like that from him after the day I had meant the world to me.

Overhearing Grace talk to him about the final arrangements for mum, I looked up and gave him a hug.

Whispering my thanks into his ear, I gave him one last squeeze and stepped back. Both Grace and I stood there and watched as David slipped behind the wheel of the car and slowly drove away. He offered for us to follow him and attend the cremation, but we both decided against it. With everything that we were dealing with, we both agreed to let David handle the rest. We had shed enough tears today.

Thunder boomed overhead and lightning was crawling ever closer. I lowered my head in anticipation of more rain. Feeling the cool wind starting to pick up speed, I decided it was time to leave. The eerie silence of the chapel, which had been full only moments before, told me that everyone would already be at Cathy's Corner for the reception. Aware that I left my phone in Grace's bag before we entered the chapel, I turned to run back inside to collect it when I saw Jordan. Quietly, he stepped down from the chapel steps and walked over to Grace and I, holding Grace's bag like the perfect husband that he was. Grace smiled and said thank you before falling into his embrace. I watched as they silently stood there, savouring the comfort in one another's arms that each of them so desperately desired.

I felt sorry for them. On top of the chaos in their relationship, they also had to deal with the grief of mum's passing. It was clear that Grace's priority was mum. But it was also clear that, even though Jordan's priority was Grace, he was patient enough to wait until she was ready. It was obvious that he loved her. Perhaps now that the funeral was over, Grace could turn her attention to her husband. A man who was obviously still in love with her.

Chapter 29

Arriving at Cathy's Corner, we found it full of people. Filled with faces that we had seen only moments before at the funeral. Everyone was there for mum. With the cafe closed early, I made a mental note to thank Cathy again for letting us host the reception here. The weather would've scared most of her customers away anyway, but it was a nice gesture nevertheless. Following Grace and Jordan into the cafe, I took my time in joining them through the sea of people. I stood at the edge of the crowd and found myself stalling. Dreading the small talk and the shallow curiosity about my own personal life, I made a snap decision to turn around and walk back out. Just as I did so, a voice cut through my own thoughts.

Now, I hope you aren't leaving before I can say hello.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Rose, who had slipped through the crowd to reach me. I couldn't help but look guilty. Shaking her head in bemusement, Rose only walked closer and ushered me to the side. She pulled me into a seat away from the gathering mass and leant back to swipe two glasses of wine from a passing waiter. Once she was seated opposite me, she passed me a glass and took a sip from the other.

Wanting to get this afternoon over and done with, I tipped the glass back and finished the wine before I had a chance to change my mind. With the empty glass back on the table I looked over to see a stunned Rose and

shrugged. I loved Rose, but today I was not in the best mood for talking. As if she could read my mind, Rose patted my knee and whispered in my ear: If you need anything stronger, you let me know. I looked up and saw her wink at me before she stood and followed a waiter into the crowd, clawing for a piece of seared salmon.

Not surprised that Rose, of all people, would be the one offering me drugs at a funeral, I had to smile. She had been my rock during the years I spent away from home, but she was also a raging party animal. Her short spikey hair and colourful outfits were a giveaway. Today was no different. Despite the black outfit for the funeral, her otherwise mundane appearance was offset by the most aggressive set of glasses I've seen outside of the Mardi Gras parade. A vibrant red frame that sharply curved into a cat-eye shape, finished with a line of what I could only assume were fake diamonds across the top. That was Rose. Despite her short height, she was always one of the easiest people to spot in a crowd.

Mum would have liked her. Her relentless nagging that could only be interpreted as love. Her unconditional patience and wisdom that only experience could provide. She was endearing and yet I felt I was robbed of the chance to introduce them to one another. I felt like I should've had that opportunity but I didn't. I felt like they should've had that opportunity but they didn't. I knew that mum's passing was no one's fault but couldn't help but feel angry about it. All this time that lay ahead of me would pass without mum and that made me angry. From now on, I would only be able to think of mum through memories of the past and, no matter what anyone told me, I felt like someone had stolen

something from me. Our future. Mum would never walk me down the aisle. Mum would never support me through my first pregnancy or hold my first child and cry tears of joy. She would never see me fall in love. She would never see me settle down or succeed. She would never be there from this point on because she was taken from me and the hole that was left would never heal. Because no one would ever be able to fill the void her absence created.

Sobering at the thought of her passing, I shook away the thought that had flooded me. Snapping back into reality, I looked at the crowd of people milling about. Knowing that I needed to do my part and offer my thanks to the people that showed up, I waited briefly for another waiter to pass and quickly downed another glasses of red. Walking over to everyone, I panicked for a moment when most eyes turned towards me. I slowed down as I approached and looked around trying to spot Grace but was met by another a familiar face instead. Sophia Frances stood directly in front of me. Her porcelain skin shone in contrast to my own tear-stained face. She smiled before placing her hand on my shoulder.

Oh, Marle, you poor thing. I can't imagine what you and Grace must be going through right now, she said.

Listening to her sigh for some sort of dramatic effect, I decided to swallow my pride, simmer down and act nice for mum's sake.

Thank you for coming out, Sophia, we really appreciate it, I replied quietly.

Stunned by the hospitality, Sophia's jaw slackened at the lack of retort.

Taking the lack of a reply as my chance to escape, I slipped around her and looked further into the crowd, searching for Grace.

Chapter 30

After hours of small talk, I found myself looking for another glass of wine more frequently. The majority of people had come to offer a brief hello, how are you and goodbye. Others didn't want to leave but were forced to after reports came out that some houses were without power due to the storm gathering outside. Grace and Jordan had left just minutes ago, after Grace started coming down with a headache. Offering me a lift home, I brushed them off with the excuse that I wasn't done drinking yet. Grace only smiled in sympathy and turned to the door, Jordan in hand.

Some strangers, under the pretence that they had been close friends with Anne, stood around in smaller groups. Probably reminiscing about the good old days. I decided to grab a bottle of vodka from the counter and go outside. Sitting on one of Cathy's milk crates, I took a swig from the bottle and savoured the warmth of the liquid running down my throat. After a morning of tears, I hadn't realised just how dehydrated or tired I was until the alcohol started to take effect. My reaction skills were dulled and I carelessly placed the bottle on the cemented ground. Placing it down on an angle, I watched foolishly as the bottle briefly swirled before tipping over to the side. In my drunken state, I then proceeded to watch the remnants of the vodka gush out onto the sidewalk, gathering into a puddle at my feet. Aware of the painful hangover that was looming in the near

future, threatening to appear the moment I stopped drinking, I decided that today was an exception and lifted the bottle back up to swallow whatever was left of the drink.

A loud crack of thunder that landed directly over my head had me flinch at the sharp sound. A wall of rain began to fall across the town, flooding everything in its path. My lack of care for the situation left me stranded on the milk crate as the rain eventually also enveloped me in its oddly warm embrace. Without moving, I sat there and stared ahead wishing for it to drown me. Letting the water pour over me, I remained seated and stared in front of me at a small crack in the road, when the wheels of a car glided over it and came to a stop. Looking up at the car windows, I squinted through the rain to see who was driving.

The passenger door opened and the driver yelled: Get in!

Already drenched from head to toe and with no way of getting home other than walking, I decided to take a chance and jump in. I stumbled over to the car and slipped inside, slamming the door shut behind me just as another clap of thunder ripped through the sky.

The voice continued: Jesus, you're soaked to the bone!

I looked over at the driver and was about to slur something sarcastic in reply but paused.

Sitting in the seat beside me was Luke McLeod. Stunned into silence, I watched as he leant back into the seat behind him and grabbed a jumper. Tossing it over to me he said: Here, put this on.

One hand holding the now empty bottle of vodka and the other holding the black jumper, I just sat there and didn't say anything.

His foot still on the break, he also sat there and looked at me. Eyes full of sympathy, just like the rest of them.

I frowned back at him and said: Please don't look at me like that.

He laughed awkwardly in response and asked: Like what?

Frustrated by the stupid question, I answered in a short tone: Like my mum just died.

Biting down, he clenched his teeth and apologised: Sorry, but I'm looking at you like that because you look like a house cat that was left out in a storm.

Trying to lift up my spirits, I looked over at him once again. Dressed in a black suit and clean-shaven, his dark hair was only messy enough to tell me he had been one of the many faces in the crowd at the funeral. I wasn't surprised. It was a small town after all.

Sitting there, soaked, with his black jumper resting in my lap, I looked in his eyes and said: Thank you for coming to mum's funeral today. She would have appreciated it.

Like a robot programmed to repeat the same sentence over and over again, the words felt forced and disingenuous. He knew it, too, but didn't seem to mind given that today was, indeed, my mum's funeral.

Returning back to the steering wheel, Luke eased his foot on the brake and slowly drove through town, pushing through the torrential rain that pulsed against

the windscreen. We sat in silence, Luke's eyes glued to the road because visibility was at an all-time low thanks to the rain. With the windscreen wipers working relentlessly to maintain a clear view, I settled further into the seat, relishing in the comfort of white noise.

For the first time today, I felt relaxed. Whether it was the fact that the funeral was over or that my body was numb from all the wine, champagne and vodka, I didn't seem to care. Like a weight being lifted off my shoulders, I felt that I could relax without guilt. As if I had finally done what was expected of me. I felt relieved.

Knowing that Luke wasn't going to break the silence out of respect for me and everything that had gone on today, I decided to keep quiet and simply enjoy the break in small talk. With everyone offering their condolences and myself repeating the same 'thank you' and 'we really appreciate it' phrases, I decided that I'd had enough and that my drunken self needed some alone time.

Sitting there, in solitude, I was taken by surprise when a cool shiver ripped through my body. Too drunk to realise how cold I was, I looked down at my hands and saw how purple my fingers had turned. I frowned. Wasn't it hot outside?

Tearing his eyes away from the road just quickly enough to look over in concern before returning his gaze back to rain ahead, Luke said: You should put the jumper on before you catch a cold.

The fogginess of my own thoughts sobered up at the mention of a jumper. Looking down to my lap, I picked up the black jumper that he had given me earlier.

Nothing special, aside from a logo of some local band sprawled across the front. I held the jumper up for inspection, smiled and said: Cute.

The hint of a smirk as Luke angled his face as if he wanted to look over at me but thought better of it when an oncoming caravan swerved in the rain. It quickly regained control before gliding past us and sending a wall of water onto our windscreen.

I shivered again as the warmth of the vodka started to recede. Taking advantage of my alcohol fuelled confidence, I decided that there was no time like the present and pulled off my silk top. What had been a light and flowing top ended up clinging to my body like a saturated towel. I dropped the shirt on the ground between my feet. It landed in a wet thud as the material clumped together in a wet mess. Pulling the jumper over my head, I sighed as the wool immediately began to warm my body back to its normal temperature. I savoured the welcome change and looked over at Luke as I said: Thanks.

His grip on the steering wheel relaxed and so did his shoulders. He took a second to look over at me wearing the jumper and smiled. His blue eyes were just as icy as the day I first saw them in high school. His smile was still goofy-looking, but the creases in the corners of his mouth gave a maturity to his face. I still remember how pathetically doe-eyed I had been, looking at him when I was younger. An annoying fifteen-year-old who had attached her own meaning of love to the first guy who smiled at her in the corridor. For me, that had been an eighteen-year-old Luke, who had unknowingly bulldozed me over as he ran through with his friends.

I pulled my knees up to hug my arms around my legs and smiled at the memory. If he ever found out that David Longmire and I were the ones who had pranked him back then, I would be mortified. So young. So embarrassing.

A short time later, we pulled up to the driveway, where Luke eased to a stop and visibly relaxed, having arrived safely through the torrential storm. Grace's car was nowhere to be seen and all the lights were off, which told me that she must have decided to stay at Jordan's. Knowing that she probably needed his company after the day we had, I somehow felt robbed.

Having Grace stay with me over the last few days was incredibly comforting. More so than I cared to realise. Gathering my things and loosely clutching the soggy silk top I had picked up from the floor of the car, I took a breath and looked at Luke.

Thanks for driving me home. I would have been stuck otherwise.

With his mouth partly open in an attempt to reply, I waited awkwardly for a moment before taking that as my cue to leave. I pulled at the door handle and went to push the door open but paused and added: Oh, and thanks for the jumper. I'll make sure to wash and return it tomorrow.

Spurred into movement, Luke quickly regained his voice to reply: You can keep it. I looked over at him in confusion, so he added: It never fit me anyway.

Realising how well it sat over my shoulders and how small it must be on him, I asked: Why did you buy a jumper this small?

He laughed briefly at the memory before he offered: I bought it back when I was in high school and the Fishers were touring. Shrugging at the thought, he continued: I was too drunk to realise that I had bought the wrong size, but I also couldn't bring myself to get rid of it.

I remembered the night that the Fishers had come into town and how David and I had skipped school that day to go spy on the drummer, who had posted a photo from the beach. I smiled at the memory.

Yeah, it was a pretty fun night.

Luke smiled as well. I remember you climbed onto the stage and tried to crowd surf, he smiled as he spoke. I'm pretty sure you got kicked out after that?

Gobsmacked that he remembered, I stammered.

You saw that?

He laughed at my response.

Yeah, I saw you. I also saw you and David Longmire skipping school before class even started.

I couldn't believe he had seen me. This whole time I thought that I had been no one to him, but he had actually known who I was.

Stunned, I admitted: I can't believe you knew who I was.

I was still shocked by the revelation and Luke laughed.

Of course, I knew. You were the one who threw her bag over the school fence trying to get out, only to have to climb back over to help your friend who got caught in the bushes below.

Sitting in awe, I was dumbfounded. If only I had known.

I looked up at Luke and saw his eyes creasing in the corners as he smiled. Feeling the soaked silk top in my hands still dripping from the rain, I returned the smile.

Thanks again, Luke, I really appreciate it.

The robotic voice from before was replaced by something nicer. Something genuine. He knew I meant what I said because he inclined his head and smiled again.

Anytime, Marle.

Hearing him say my name felt remarkably warming. I don't know if it was the fatal attraction I had towards him as a teenager, the weather or the fact that I had copious amounts of liquor earlier, but I felt lonely and I was craving some sort of affection. I leant over the middle compartment and lingered for a moment before lightly placing my lips against his. It started out soft and inquisitive but quickly turned rough. My hands abandoned the wet silk top in search of his pants. He groaned into my lips when my hands found what they were looking for. I was in the middle of unbuttoning his pants when his hands lightly pulled my face away from his.

We can't do this Marle.

Brows pulled down in confusion, I sat back in the passenger car seat. Avoiding eye contact, he sat there with his head bowed down. His rejection burned like the cheapest kind of tequila.

After everything that had happened today, to be turned down when affection was all that I wanted—it hurt. Embarrassed and angered, I grabbed at the door handle and stormed out. Slamming the car door behind me, I walked away from his car, through the storm and then into the dark, cold house. Alone.

Chapter 31

The wind had eased and a cool sea breeze now calmly swept over the ocean towards our faces. The sun had only awoken moments ago, sending shards of pink, red, orange and yellow beaming across the sky. Last week's storm was a distant memory as the sun heralded warmer weather, standing in midst of the clear sky. Noise was reduced to that of the rolling waves that lapped over the shoreline.

Grace stood beside me, shoulder-to-shoulder. She held the urn with mum's ashes in both hands. It was tightly pressed against her body for fear it would fall through her sleepy fingers.

We had decided, unanimously, that mum's ashes would be sprinkled into the ocean. It was where she had spent most of her time and it was where Grace and I spent most of our childhood. It was a place of peace and comfort for all of us.

After the funeral last week, we also decided that we would wait for the perfect day to spread mum's ashes. After everything she had done for us, it was the least we could do. To give her one last perfect day.

Blessed with a lack of swell after the storm passed, Grace and I figured that this morning would be the best day for it. Standing at the water's edge, I looked out to marvel at how calm the water was. The only breaks in it,

were the smaller waves that crept towards my toes on the incoming tide. It was surreal.

We were thankful that no one in town bothered to wake up for the sunrise because that meant that we had the beach all to ourselves. Risking taking a step into the water, I winced briefly at the cold intrusion but soldiered on under the pretence that it would feel warmer eventually.

Grace followed my lead into the water and I looked at her, smiling reassuringly. She had spent the last week at her house with Jordan. After the funeral, they spent the night together, talking things through. I assumed that they were working it all out, considering that I was left alone in mum's house. Normally, that wouldn't have bothered me. Normally, I would have savoured the isolation from my family. Yet, after everything that had unfolded, I felt lonely.

I was haunted by the memories that surrounded me in that house—a place that used to be filled with three loud personalities but suddenly stood in bleak silence. The silence was only disrupted by the noise of my own footsteps and the palms outside, which occasionally tussled in the afternoon breeze. On the cusp of boredom, I had hoped to cure the silence with the company of Rose, at least, but even she had to return home. My ego was too bruised from Luke's rejection to even bother with the idea of male company, so I decided to work instead.

Cathy had given me the week off but, just like before the funeral, I was better off distracted. There was nothing quite like the rush of working in hospitality to

make you forget everything about your personal life. Nothing but coffee and food to help cloud my thoughts—for a few hours at least.

The storm that rolled in on the day of mum's funeral hung around town for a while, so it was a welcome surprise to wake up on this morning and see the sun creeping through my bedroom window. After a quick call to Grace, it only took a few minutes before we were both dressed and standing side-by-side at the water's edge.

Looking at her now, even though she was somewhat sombre at the sight of mum's ashes, I could see that she looked better. With everything going on in her marriage, I resolved to one phone call each day, just to check in on her and see how she was. By drowning myself in work, I hadn't seen her since the funeral. There was a little more colour on her cheeks and a fresh set of clear eyes told me enough. She was obviously happier than she had been last week. The visible weight that had paled her skin and made her eyes sunken had been lifted.

She scrunched her nose as a way of letting me know that she noticed my stare. It only made me smile more and the memory of us building sandcastles on the beach behind us had me reeling in a comfortable familiarity. She used to build the tallest sandcastles and I used to stare in awe at their height. In reality, these castles were probably no taller than my waist now, but I was young and short and had stared at them in wonder. She used to scunch her nose in the exact same manner back then, as if she were recognising the thoughts that ran through my head.

The water felt warmer now, probably due to the numbing sensation that had formed in my toes and then slowly spread to my knees. With the water as flat as it was, Grace and I waded out into the ocean until the hems of our shorts started to dampen at the ends.

Squinting into the sun with a hand shading my eyes, I witnessed as the blush-pink of the morning sky slowly started to fade. The sound of birds in the trees behind us began awakening the sleepy town, so it was only a matter of time before people aroused from their slumber and began their daily routines.

I let my fingers fall down to scrape the surface of the water and savoured its cool touch as its icy sting lingered on my skin when I pulled them away. The rain may be frequent, but we were fast approaching summer. The freezing ocean would only mock us a little longer as the blazing sun fought to control the temperature.

I looked over at Grace and saw the same reassuring smile on her face that mum had given me on our first day of school. A smile that radiated unconditional love and was only clouded by slightly tearful eyes. I knew that I was going to miss mum for the rest of my life. But I also knew that hints of mum still lived on in Grace. Whether it was the way she smiled or the way she braided her hair before she started cooking in the kitchen, I could still see small pieces of mum and they were what I knew I would cherish forever.

Twisting the lid off the urn, Grace tilted it. Looking back at me in hesitation, I offered her a smile and nodded towards her hands. Taking one deep breath, Grace, too, looked down at her hands and watched as the

ashes slowly left the urn and made their way into the water.

It wasn't until the urn was empty that I realised that my vision had blurred. Wiping away the tears that had silently flown down my cheeks and into the ocean, I looked at Grace. She reached out for my hand as we stood there, in silence, hand-in-hand, watching what was left of mum slowly drift away on the current.

We stood there silently for several minutes, bathing in the light that radiated onto our tear-stained faces. With a final squeeze of Grace's hand, we both slowly turned our backs to the ocean, walking away from mum and towards the shoreline.

Chapter 32

Arriving back home, I felt relieved. Knowing that mum would never again be there still caused a sharp pain to the chest, but the stress of organising the funeral was behind us at least. Dealing with everyone's own grief being projected onto us had been overwhelming. With Grace, though, it had been a lot easier to manage.

I followed her into kitchen now and watched as she opened each of the sliding doors in the living room out into the garden. I couldn't help but feel incredibly grateful for having her by my side. Not just for mum's passing but for everything else associated with the mess that was my life. She was grumpy at times, but she was there for me regardless. No questions asked.

Without speaking, we both piled food onto the kitchen bench and got to work. We silently moved around, cracking eggs for the pancake batter, cutting up fruit and squeezing fresh orange juice. We made an abhorrent amount of mess, which we then had to clean up, regrettably. It wasn't until we both sat back in our chairs on the deck outside that I chose to speak.

Should we go through mum's things today?

Grace lifted her face to the sky and closed her eyes. Like a lizard basking in the sun for warmth, Grace mulled over the words. I didn't know whether it was too early to be sorting through mum's clothing and jewellery. I didn't know if there was an acceptable amount of time that we

needed to grieve before we touched anything of hers. The truth was, I didn't know anything. This was the first time I had lost someone close to me and, although it terrified me at times, I also knew that this was Grace's first time, too.

Giving her time to process my words, I mirrored her own posture. Slipping further into the chair, I let my head rest on the back of it and tilted my head towards the sun. I wore a short dress that ended high on my thighs, anticipating another day unrelenting heat. It was a welcomed change from the cold snaps that frequented the city.

Completely soothed by the stillness of the morning, I was so wrapped up in the feeling that I almost missed Grace's response.

I guess we can start.

Lifting my head up, I looked over to where she sat. A single tear slipped down her cheek and she made no move to wipe it away. I was aware that she must have been torn at my words and the idea of clearing away mum's things but knew that there was no right time to do anything when it came to losing someone you loved. I also knew that Grace might be grieving in a completely different way than I was and that I needed to be mindful of that.

I sat forward and reached my hand out to her across the table. I always found the gesture of holding hands on request quite idiotic or rather uncomfortable. However, in situations like these, it felt the exact opposite of that. Leaning over the table to meet me halfway, Grace placed her hand in mine and held on tightly. She was going

through a lot right now. The emotional intelligence required to process the level of loss and anguish that she had been exposed too was astounding. Whilst she had looked well earlier this morning, right now she bore the weight of having to decide whether or not she wanted to hold onto mum's clothes any longer.

Trying to ease her pain, I said: We don't have to do it today, if you're not ready.

I squeezed her hand tighter for support, like she did for me in the hospital, and waited until she made up her mind.

Letting go of my hand she eventually wiped away the tears that had escaped and said: We can start and, if it gets to be too much, we can stop.

I nodded in agreement, so we both stood up to collect the dishes and headed back inside.

Chapter 33

Mum's bedroom was stagnant. It was the same as the last time we were in it—nothing had changed. As if mum had only stepped outside just moments before. Whilst everything was exactly as we had left it, the room felt stale. As if it was dormant. Hints of her smoked rose perfume still clung to the air but were fading.

Not knowing where to start, I walked over to her bedside table and picked up her jewellery box. I sat down on the edge of the bed next to Grace and we both looked to see what was inside. A gold necklace with a single black pearl lay entangled with long-forgotten rings. Emerald stones clasped onto a delicate bracelet, an amethyst ring decorated by smaller diamonds—pieces that had rarely been worn, under the guise of being too expensive for everyday wear. Handed down from Anne's own mother, mum swore that she would never sell them, no matter how tight money got. It was why most of this jewellery had never seen the light of day. They were too valuable. That wasn't what surprised me though. What caught my eye were the pieces of jewellery that Grace and I had made for her in preschool. Pieces of pasta and coloured beads, all strung together on a loose piece of string to form a necklace. Earrings from the same pasta, only this time decorated with coloured feathers. Something I would've thrown out without a second thought. Something mum obviously cherished

immensely. Knowing that she collected these pieces and stored them with her most valuable items, I felt sick.

All the emotion and grief that I thought had passed with the funeral came washing over me in waves of torment. Gulping down each breath, I felt tears cascade down my face. Hearing Grace's uneven breath, I knew that she was crying too. Maybe we weren't ready. Maybe we'll never be ready.

I left Grace with the jewellery box and walked out of the bedroom. I needed some air and the memories stored in that bedroom weren't helping. I should've known that mum would collect things like that. Exactly as my room had been when I first returned home. My toy lion was propped up on my bed and my posters were neatly maintained. She cherished those little things. Items that I would've thrown away the moment I grew tired of them. She kept them and it upset me to only find out now. Now was too late. Now I couldn't call her and tell her that I'm sorry. Sorry for leaving and cutting off all communication. Sorry for not caring enough. Sorry for being a horrible daughter.

The guilt I felt was immeasurable. Walking out into the living room, I took a moment to gather myself before returning to my room to get ready for work. Acutely aware that both Grace and I were not ready to clear away mum's things, it was best that we left her room alone for now. There was too much of her still there. Whilst some people would encourage us to cleanse it and remove old memorabilia, I was inclined to disagree. I felt ignorant thinking that it would work or help. The memories attached to the items that lay abandoned in her room ignited glimpses into long-ago times in which the

simplicity of living as a family had flourished. We were less complicated. Our thoughts yet to be clouded by the noise of those around us. Our bodies nourished without expectation or doubt. We were young.

Chapter 34

I arrived at work later that morning and found the place in chaos. Today was my scheduled day off and I had planned on taking the time to sort through all of mum's things within the house. Reflecting on how emotional it had been just sitting inside her bedroom, Grace and I agreed that we should leave it for another day. The items weren't going anywhere and we weren't in a rush, so it made sense to wait.

With a whole day off and nothing to do, I decided to call into work and see if I could help out. I knew that my boss, Cathy, was still understaffed, even after hiring me, so it wasn't a surprise to arrive at work and see that she needed my help.

The warmer temperature only served to entice people inside for a drink. It was as if a week of being coupé-up inside during the storm was enough and everyone needed some fresh air.

Without wanting to delay getting to work, I roughly tied my apron around my waist. Cathy mouthed her thanks and looked relieved, then moved over to help Alex with the coffee orders.

My job wasn't hard or complicated. At times, it was incredibly mind numbing, but it was usually busy enough to keep me distracted from the noise in my head. It also put money in my bank account, which I desperately needed. After arriving back home with an

embarrassing two hundred dollars, I made it my priority to start saving. Whilst I did buy most of the food for the house, it was ultimately Grace who had been paying for everything else. Even though she relayed countless times that paying didn't bother her, I knew that funerals weren't cheap. With mum's life insurance not yet having reimbursed any of the payments, I knew that Grace had spent a lot in the past two weeks. I knew that what I earned working at the cafe was nothing compared to what Grace had spent, but I needed to try and pay her back regardless. It was the least I could do.

Running around, serving plates of food and clearing empty cups of coffee, I spent most of the day in a daze, going from one customer to the next. Regular visitors came and went together with a crowd of tourists. Eventually, realising that the beginning of the school holidays caused this chaos, I was too busy to register the conveyor belt of people who were constantly lining up to place orders. It wasn't until I started packing up that I took a breath.

The cleaning up was easy. With the front doors closed, it only took thirty minutes to have everything swept, moped and packed away for tomorrow.

Finished for the day, I was opening my car door on the other side of the road when Luke came strolling out of his studio. Looking over my shoulder, I ended up locking eyes with him as he was locking up.

Breaking the unintended and awkward eye contact, I looked down at my phone to check the time. Whilst 4:00 p.m. meant a late day for me, it was probably an early one for him. Considering it was a small town, I figured

that working hours were a little more flexible than those in major cities. I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I failed to notice Luke approaching until he was right behind me.

Subtle and light, he cautiously said: Hey.

Frozen in place, I felt my face redden at the memory of what happened last week. Brazenly trying to kiss him in his car wasn't the issue, it was the fact that he had brushed me off that made me feel awkward. The whole situation felt awkward.

It had been a week since that blunder had occurred. I made it my mission to try and avoid the man out of respect for my own dignity, but I had obviously failed in my endeavour.

I turned around to face him and smiled hesitantly before replying: Hey.

He looked the way he always looked. Dark hair that was slightly tousled, as if his own hands had recently run through it. Eyes electrifyingly blue and a smile that tugged at the corner of his lips in a playful yet genuine way. He was gorgeous and I had humiliated myself in front of him. Not wanting to achieve the same level of embarrassment I did the other week, I kept my mouth shut and waited for him to speak first.

He opened his mouth to talk but stopped, as if he couldn't quite find the words. I took a step back towards my car with my hand resting on the door handle. My thought was that if he mentioned last week, then I only have to open the door and slide into the car. The windows weren't tinted, but I could at least pretend that

there was a barrier between us that afforded me the luxury of shrinking into a ball and dying.

Snapping out of my own imagination, I was prompted by Luke coughing into his hand. Shifting his weight from one foot to another, it dawned on me that he had spoken and I had missed every word. I blinked the confusion away and then stumbled for my next words.

I'm sorry? I asked.

With my hands fumbling around with the car keys that were dangling in anticipation, I looked up again to see his facial expression. He shook his head in humour at having to repeat himself. Placing his hands in his pockets, he stepped closer so that he was only a breath away and repeated.

I said, would you like to grab some dinner tonight?

Stunned by the invitation, I only had to breathe in the scent of his cologne before I smiled and nodded my head.

I noted just a fraction of tension leave his shoulders as Luke took a step back and removed his own set of keys from the pocket of his jeans.

Great. I'll pick you at seven.

With those last words, he took a few steps backwards before he spun around and walked towards his car.

I remained standing there, with my back against the car and my hand loosely holding the keys, processing what had just happened. It was only when a lone cloud passed overhead that the sudden arrival of shade prompted me into movement.

Chapter 35

With Grace now living mostly at her own home, it wasn't hard for me to avoid any unnecessary prying. Getting ready for dinner with Luke was a lot easier when no one was poking their head into my bedroom, questioning my movements. It meant that I was dressed and ready to go with a few minutes to spare. Savouring a moment of peace and quiet, I decided to pour myself a wine. I was in the process of settling down into the couch and kicking my feet up on the coffee table when I noticed a flash of movement between the palms outside. Seated in an upright position, I placed my drink onto the table in front of me and leant forward for a better look.

Nothing.

Muttering about how useless my eyesight was, I grabbed my drink again and was sinking back down into the cushion when—There! I yelled out.

In excitement, I jumped up from the couch and ran over to the sliding glass doors. With one swift pull, I had opened the door and leapt out onto the deck, looking for whatever it was that I just saw zip through the overgrown grass. Scanning each palm, I was almost convinced that I had been hallucinating when I spotted the end of a golden tale hidden behind the entanglement of a well-established passionfruit vine. It was long before the body attached to that tale jumped out of the bushes and ran towards me. The full force of a Golden Labrador landed

with two paws against my chest. Shocked at the surprise intruder, the full weight of what I later found out to be a well-fed dog pushed me to the ground in a matter of seconds. A drop of drool landed on my cheek as I looked up into the eyes of one very happy dog.

Where did you come from? I wondered.

Asking no one in particular, I was about to push the dog off me when I realised that I was still holding my now-empty glass of wine. The remainder of the drink was spread across the deck, to be absorbed by the timber. With only one free hand, I had to hold my breath as I worked to push the dog off me. The dog became momentarily distracted by whatever had caught his attention in the backyard in the first place so I was able to rub my head, which now throbbed in pain.

Contemplating how the hell this dog had cleared the still closed gate around the side of the house, I was about to start searching for his or her owner when a knock on the front door pulled me from my thoughts.

Panicked, I looked hopelessly towards the door and back towards the dog who had jumped back into the bushes, on the hunt for some smaller creature no doubt. Completely out of my depth, I jumped up from where I lay sprawled across the deck and made for the glass door. Sliding it shut and twisting the lock into place, I could see the dog bounce up to the deck and tilt its head at me in question. I pointed at the dog and said: Stay put until I get home. Got it?

As if in confirmation, the dog turned around and started to lick at the wine I had spilt across the timber only moments before. A second knock reminded me that

Luke was waiting and I cursed at the frazzled situation in which I now found myself. Quickly gathering my shoes, phone and wallet, I dumped the empty glass into the sink and made for the front door.

As soon as I swung the door open, I let out a breath and took in the sight. Wearing a relaxed navy-blue linen shirt, my eyes darted down towards his legs when he blurted: Jesus, what happened to you?

I looked up to see his reaction and blinked at his words. The confusion must have been obvious because he pulled his hand out of his jeans and pointed towards my chest, then my face.

I looked down and paused. Two dirty paw prints sat square across my chest. This spun me back to the realisation that not only would I still have that dog's drool on my cheek but my hair would now also be a mess after the fall I had. I laughed in an attempt to brush off the humiliation that I continually seemed to find myself in and shrugged.

It's a long story. I'll tell you all about it over dinner.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Luke only smiled and stepped to the side.

After you.

Chapter 36

The food at the newly opened French restaurant was perfect and the company was even better. Given the past two weeks of emotional chaos, it was nice to have dinner during which I didn't cry once.

I knew deep down that my mind and body still needed some time before I started dating again, but sometimes it was nice to just sit in someone's company and relish in the attention. Luke didn't seem like he was in any rush, so why force it?

Slowly driving home, we were reminiscing about old high school teachers when I saw the Golden Labrador from earlier rummaging around the flowers lined up by the driveway.

Genuinely confused as to how the dog could have escaped the backyard, I said: What the—?

Luke followed my line of sight and also frowned in confusion before he asked: Didn't you say you locked him in the backyard?

I was about to answer Luke's question when I saw him.

Sitting on the front steps, hunched over his phone like someone whose life depended on it, Jack's eyes were glued to the screen.

Dinner quickly rose up towards the back of my throat as I fought to swallow my nerves.

Sensing a shift in my mood, Luke pulled up to the driveway and squeezed my hand.

Is everything alright Marle?

Jack squinted in the direction of our car which now sat idle in the driveway.

Luke still hadn't seen him. With the sun now set, the front steps were covered in darkness, the only reason I had seen him was because of the faint flicker of light bouncing off his phone.

Waiting for my response, Luke prompted: Marle?

Frozen in my seat, I watched in paralysing horror as Jack stood up from the front steps and walked over to the car. Noticing that my eyes were following a moving object, Luke turned to see Jack walking towards us. The two men locked eyes, forcing Jack to stop in his tracks. Surprised by the male company, perhaps, Jack stalled and waved awkwardly from where he stood.

Luke turned back to look at me and squeezed my hand again before he asked: Do you know this guy?

Searching for the right words to explain who Jack was, I stumbled and stammered.

He's...um. He's a work...Yeah, he's a work friend from the city.

Not convinced by my answer, Luke lifted his hand to pull my gaze away from Jack. Looking into his eyes, I felt sorry for him. For the drama he unknowingly became involved in.

Plastering on my most genuine smile, my hands pulled his own from my face.

Thank you for tonight, Luke, I had a really nice time.

Confused by my body language and by what I was saying, Luke took his hand out of the grip of my hands.

You sure you're alright?

Nodding, I quickly kissed him on the cheek, gathered my things and opened the door.

Confusion clouded his eyes and it hurt to lie to him, but it was the only way. No one outside of Jack, Grace, Rose and I knew about the pregnancy. I wasn't about to blurt that entire story to him in the space of two seconds. We just had one dinner and I knew that Luke didn't need to hear about all my past failures just yet.

Watching his car pull away and fade into the shadows at the end of the street, I could only hope that Luke would let me explain it all to him one day.

Had I not seen the dog parading along the driveway earlier, I would have jumped at the sudden slobber that made its way up my leg.

Jack saw it, too.

Charlie! Come here!

Ignoring his owners command, the dog sat down beside me in defiance. So, Charlie is your name, I thought, brushing my hand behind his ears. The dog wagged his tail and nuzzled his head into the hem of my dress. Rushing over to pull the dog away from me, I put my hand out to stop Jack from coming any closer.

Sorry, Marle, he's never listens, he said.

Mustering all my strength, I took a deep breath and levelled my gaze at him.

What are you doing here?

Pulling back at my tone, he was momentarily stunned into silence but quickly recovered.

I came here for you, Marle.

He looked back down at Charlie and patted his thigh, a gesture meant to indicate for the dog to go to his owner. Comfortable with my hand still scratching his ears, Charlie stayed put. Sweet satisfaction at that small act of defiance gave me the strength to finally look up at Jack.

Two-day-old stubble sprouted across his face like a bad rash. His grey suit, which I had previously been in the habit of tearing off his body, was now missing its jacket and hung from his body in tatters. His normally pressed white shirt was now pulled out of place and sported a mysterious orange stain. Both his regular silk tie and leather belt were now missing from his usually well-kept appearance. Just like Charlie, I tilted my head in curiosity.

What happened to you?

Cherishing the turn of events that finally didn't involve me looking like shit, I stood comfortably, waiting for his reply. As if he didn't even realise how he looked, Jack turned his eyes down to his body. Tucking his shirt back into his pants, he looked back towards me.

Marle, can we talk about this inside? he pleaded.

I hated the way he said my name but also knew that if we stayed outside any longer we would soon be bitten all over by bugs. Without another word, I walked past Jack and towards the front door, Charlie at my heels close behind.

Chapter 37

Placing my things on the kitchen bench, I reached over the kettle to flip on the switch. Tonight was going to be a long night. Walking in behind Charlie and I, Jack pulled on the dog's collar as he spat: Get out, you filthy piece of shit!

He had one hand on the door handle and the other firmly grasped the dog. I looked back in horror.

Hey! What do you think you're doing? I yelled.

Charlie's pleading eyes avoided looking at Jack and his head dipped in anticipation of being hit. I jumped into action and pulled the dog away from his owner.

What the fuck, Jack?

Confused by my reaction, Jack simply turned to grab the dog again.

The stupid mutt needs to go outside.

Stepping between Charlie and Jack, I pushed back against Jack's chest.

Lay one hand on that dog and you're out.

Surprised by my new-found aggression, both of us stood in an awkward silence. It wasn't until Jack nodded in defeat that we both relaxed and returned to the kitchen.

Placing two mugs onto the bench, I went about making us some coffee, leaving Jack to settle in on the

couch. Seeing how messy he looked, I was reluctant to let him sit on the cream couch, but if I wanted this over and done with, then I really had no choice. The sooner we had this conversation, the sooner he could leave.

Nice place, Marle, he said. Better than the dump you had back in the city.

Marvelling at how clean and well-kept everything was, I was tempted to agree with him but, instead, asked: How did you find me?

I walked over to where he sat and placed a cup in front of him before walking around the coffee table to sit directly opposite. I may have once loved this man, even toyed with the idea of spending my life with him, but a lot had happened over the last few weeks. The more time I spent away from Jack, the more I realised that I had been completely blind. Blind to the way he treated me, blind to what a healthy relationship should actually look like. But worst of all, blind to the people I was hurting in the process. Not just my own family but also his. He had a wife and three children, whom I had completely disregarded. It made me sick to know how selfish I had been. How ignorant.

Taking the first sip of coffee sobered me up. Despite only having two glasses of wine at dinner, I didn't want alcohol to influence any of my thoughts or actions.

Jack was still marvelling at the room when he said: You used to talk about this place when we first started dating. Looking around again at the little beach shack, he smiled and added: It didn't take much for me to do some digging around to find out where you could have gone.

Given the fact that he was a real-estate agent back in the city, I wasn't surprised that he found the address so quickly. Taking another sip of coffee, I sank deeper into the cushions. Whilst mixing the wine and coffee seemed like a reasonable idea, my body still bloated in protest. Rubbing at my stomach in discomfort, I caught Jack's eyes zone in to where my hand rested. Removing it quickly, I cursed myself for not realising that he still thought I was pregnant.

How...um. How are you doing? he asked.

With one hand, he indicated towards my now-bloated stomach. It had been a week or so since the miscarriage and, whilst my body still felt like it was recovering, I was mentally done with it all.

Sitting back up and crossing my legs over so that he had to divert his eyes away, I placed my coffee on the table and gazed directly at him.

Why are you really here, Jack?

Jack went to pull at his tie but realised it was already missing.

Fine. The truth is—Julia threw me out.

Stunned, I just sat there in silence, waiting for him to continue.

She found the text messages between us and, well, the rest is history.

Disbelief. Guilt. Shame. Everything compounded against the walls of my chest. Was I responsible for breaking up a family? The reality of it all came slamming into me in waves of utter despair. I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I didn't realise that Jack had

moved to sit beside me. I was shocked into such a stillness that I didn't feel Jack grab my hands.

I wanted you all along, Marle. Now that my marriage is out of the way, we have a real shot at being a family.

I wondered what Julia would be feeling right now. How she would tell her children. Did she break down and sob as she told them? Or were they already there, as witnesses, when she had thrown his ass out on the street? Leaning across to kiss my cheek, Jack lifted a hand to pull my face away from its transfixed state of shock and towards his own. His lips were now a breath away from mine.

It's just you, me and the baby, he whispered.

Still thinking about his own children, I was trying to remember how old they were when Mark's lips crashed against mine. I didn't move at first, repulsed by the intrusion to my thoughts. But the rough texture of his hand against my face and the familiar scent of pinewood on his neck had me softening into his embrace. Falling back into the couch at the push of his weight, the kiss deepened. I could feel the bulge between his pants and I instinctively moved my hands towards his zipper. How many wines did I really have at dinner?

Thinking about the wine at dinner forced me to remember the man I was having the dinner with. Luke. I was just having dinner with Luke.

Like I had just been jolted by an electric shock, I pulled my hands away from Jack's body and pushed against his chest. The resistance only turned him on more. Moaning into my mouth, I had a sudden flashback to the last time we were in this position. He was on top

and I was feeling nauseous. It was in that exact moment that I had told him that I was pregnant. He told me to get rid of it and stormed off. This was the same man who now lay on top of me again.

The thought of just kissing him now sickened me. Using all my strength, I pushed him away and scrambled towards the edge of the couch, looking to gain some distance between us.

With the back of his hand he wiped at his mouth and said: You know that I always liked it when you played dirty. He smiled an arrogant and somewhat entitled smile. In the past, that same smile might have turned me on, but now it only made me recoil in disgust.

Not wanting to drag it out any further, I blurted: I'm not pregnant anymore!

Telling him the truth was a relief. Like a weight of cement being lifted from my shoulders. I couldn't help but feel excited that I finally had the strength to do so.

There was a minute of silence during which Jack sat in complete shock. His brows furrowed as he looked down at my bloated stomach.

The venom in my voice was obvious as I spat: I ate a lot at dinner, you dickhead.

I'm not sure whether it was sadness or relief that made his shoulders drop at that point. He pulled his hand through his now-thinning blonde hair. The wrinkles that I had once found endearing, only made me pity his situation even more now.

Why are you really here Jack? I asked.

I asked once again because I knew, from day one, that he didn't want the child that we had accidentally created. I knew that, deep down, I was just his side piece. I knew that I was not what he wanted. That realisation hurt at the beginning but comforted me now. It comforted me because I didn't want him either. I wanted better.

Jack scratched at his stubble before finally answering.

I had nowhere else to go.

That revelation did not surprise me. The dog. The unkempt hair and appearance. My guess was that he had been living out of his car for the past week.

I stood up from the couch and looked down at him.

If I'm being truly honest with you Jack, you and I both know that you can't stay here.

Nodding his agreement, Jack downed the remainder of his coffee before he replied: If I could just use your bathroom, I'll be on my way.

I pointed to where the bathroom was and watched his defeated figure shuffle towards the door. Bewildered at how quickly my day changed from its original plan of relaxation, I sat there in silence and listened to the taps turn on and off.

Muffled by the soft rug that covered most of the living room, I failed to hear Charlie sneak up beside my leg. Placing his head on my knee, his pleading eyes looked yearningly at me.

Jack walked out of the bathroom looking only a fraction better than before and picked up his keys from the kitchen bench before looking back towards me.

I really do wish you all the best, Marle.

Without needing to muster up a genuine smile, I offered it to him freely.

You too, Jack.

On that last word, Jack nodded and then whistled for Charlie to follow. Embarrassed that the dog didn't heed his command, Jack shook his head and stalked over.

That fucking dog never listens, he muttered.

The sudden change in his mood had me reeling. It didn't take me long to step between him and the dog. With Charlie cowering behind my legs, I calmly placed a palm on Jack's chest.

Charlie stays with me.

As if he was glad to be rid of the dog, Jack shook his head and dismissively waved his hand over his shoulder.

The mongrel is all yours.

I could've sworn I heard Charlie breathe in relief when Jack walked out of the house and out of our lives.

Chapter 38

Sitting beside Grace, I watched as the man opposite us fiddled around with some papers. The desk was mostly hidden underneath piles of paper that had yet to be filed.

Excuse the mess ladies, he said.

As he shuffled around bits and pieces, I looked over at Grace who shrugged in reply. The man caught the exchange and offered further explanation.

We're still in the process of moving office, so everything is a little chaotic.

Pulling his tie away from the nape of his neck, you could tell that he was flustered. The man in question was Mike Van Der Helm. He ran Helm's Legal Services, two doors down from Cathy's Corner. Growing up in this small town, it never surprised me how close everything was. How close everything still was.

Like the peacemaker that she was, Grace inclined forward to defuse the awkward silence.

There's no rush, Mike. Take your time.

Supplying her with a killer smile, Mike surrendered to his chair and relaxed his shoulders.

Right, well, thank you both for coming in. I know it's not always easy going through this part of the process, so I appreciate your patience.

This part he was referring to was the will that mum had written. Grace had mentioned last week that Mike had been in contact with her, but I was distracted with work and my new not-so-little dog Charlie. The idea that mum had written a will and stored it here left an uneasy feeling in my stomach. I didn't exactly leave on good terms. A part of me was worried that this is where I would find out how she really felt about me. I might be earning minimum wage at the moment, but I certainly didn't need anything from her. I loved our childhood home, but I knew that if push came to shove, I didn't need it. I guess I was just scared that she had removed my name completely—as the last 'fuck you' sort of goodbye.

Mike slammed a file that was in his hands onto the table for effect and licked a finger before he began leafing through the papers. He pushed the ill-fitted glasses up his nose before he said: Right, well, let's have a look, shall we?

I braced myself for the unknown but was instantly comforted by Grace's hand as she gave my leg a squeeze. She didn't need to say anything because her eyes shone in understanding. She knew exactly what I was thinking. She always did.

Taking off his glasses, Mike leant back in his chair, loosely swinging the frames in his hand.

Apart from Anne's collection of vinyls, which is going to the youth shelter, she has left everything to be split evenly between the two of you.

Relief flooded my body. My shoulders sagged, relieved from the fear that she had written me out of the will.

Grace also felt the tension leave my body because she moved her face towards my ear and whispered: I would've given you half anyway.

Winking back at me for good measure, I sat in disbelief and awe at how lucky I was to be surrounded by such forgiving and loving women. I never gave either of them the patience or respect they deserved, so to now receive it in abundance was incredibly humbling.

The rest of the meeting flew by in a blur. I just sat there in a daze. My thoughts winded back to mum and how she continued to show me unconditional love, regardless of how I had treated her. I guess that was why they called it unconditional love. Without limitations or questions. Just wholehearted love. The thoughts running through my mind radiated a warmth across my skin. She loved me. She really loved me.

I didn't realise that we were finished until Grace stood up and asked: Are you coming, goldfish?

Stumped by the question, I looked up at her with raised eyebrows.

I'm calling you a goldfish because your mouth has been open like that for the past ten minutes. Now, let's go because I'm starving.

Looking back at Mike in embarrassment, I smiled sheepishly and jumped up to follow Grace.

Chapter 39

Cathy's Corner was busy, as usual. Considering that we arrived during the peak time of 10:30 a.m., I knew that we would have to get takeaway. Small-town folk are creatures of habit and creatures of habit loved their brunch. After a quick nod to Cathy and Alex behind the counter, I lined up like everybody else and waited to place my order.

I stood next to Grace, still churning over my thoughts about mum, when she turned to me and said: I know it's a lot to take in and there's still a lot to settle and organise, but I just wanted to put your mind at ease.

How did she always know when I was deep in thought? Remembering how I had just recently looked like a goldfish told me exactly how she knew.

You can stay at mum's house for as long as you need.

Jumping back into the conversation, it took me a moment to absorb what she was saying.

Wait, what about you?

A sweet smile swept across her face.

Jordan and I are still working things out, so I think I'll stay at our house for now.

Knowing full well that she would never be coming back home, I smiled in return.

Thanks, Grace.

I knew that we would eventually go through each and every item that had belonged to mum and divide it all up. For now, I was content to just be able to savour our childhood home a little bit longer.

A voice from behind us broke the moment.

Fancy running into you two ladies!

Sudden dread filled my stomach as I realised who that voice belonged to. I turned around in unison with Grace and plastered on my most genuine smile. Grace was always the diplomat, so it was no surprise that she replied in record time.

Hey Sophia! How are you? How are the little rascals?

Sophia's reply was painfully energetic.

Oh, you know how they are. Always nagging me for food but endlessly entertaining. I just can't stop taking photos of them!

A shiver ran down my spine. Grace looked at me with a frown. Not wanting to stir the pot with several sarcastic remarks that had sprung to my mind, I decided to play along for Grace's sake.

Bit of a breeze this morning, I said. I even rubbed my own arms for a little more convincing.

Sophia didn't respond and turned back to Grace, transfixed by her own need to divulge useless information.

I even created an Instagram account for each of them! Here, I'll show you.

Whipping out her phone, Sophia pulled Grace into her self-inflated bubble and proceeded to scroll through

various photos of what I could only assume were baby pictures. Growing impatient with how inconsiderate Sophia was being towards Grace, I felt the need to intervene. I knew that Sophia was aware of Grace's inability to conceive. So the fact that she was blatantly parading photos of her own kids in front of Grace was really starting to get to me.

Turning to the two of them, I said: Alright, enough of that! Clapping my hands for effect, I could see that Sophia was stunned by my brash tone. Ignoring her, I turned my full attention to my sister and said: Grace, did you pick out what you wanted to order for breakfast?

Grace appeared to be confused about why I was being so blunt towards Sophia, so I picked up the menu to really drive my point home.

Here, have a look.

When I passed her the breakfast menu, Grace had no choice but accept it and smile.

Suddenly finding herself standing there with no other point of conversation, Sophia pursed her lips and waved dismissively over her shoulder.

I'll see you ladies tomorrow night then. Don't be late.

Wanting to ignore her, I tried my best but paused at her last words. Turning around to Grace, who now stood there with her eyes scanning the menu, I asked: Um, what did she mean by 'see you ladies tomorrow night'?

The sarcasm in my voice had Grace shaking her head in disapproval.

It's our high school reunion.

The line for takeaway had finally moved to the point where Grace and I stood at the front. Not giving what she just said another thought, Grace placed her menu down on the counter and smiled.

Hey Cathy, how are you?

The chaos of the cafe never seemed to bother Cathy. It was if she thrived off the commotion of all these people moving through. Today was no different. Wiping her hand on the cloth attached to her apron, Cathy smiled and gave Grace a kiss on the cheek.

I'm well, love. How are you holding up? You look great.

The sound of Alex calling out the names of the people whose coffees were now ready rang throughout the place. Grace took a moment to contemplate her answer.

I'm better, Cathy, thanks for asking.

Truth was, Grace did look well. Really well. It was a week ago that we gave mum's ashes to the sea. She already looked better then, but now she looked great. Her skin glowed from several nights of sound sleep no doubt. It was clear that she was feeling better because others were starting to notice. It only made me think of my own appearance and wonder why no one ever gave me compliments.

Leaving my thoughts aside, I became aware that Grace had already placed her order. I looked at Cathy and noticed that she was waiting for me to rattle off what I wanted.

Uh, can I please just have one of those toasties that Juliette makes?

It wasn't on the menu but, on occasion, Juliette would cave in and make me a Mediterranean-style toastie. She never disclosed the ingredients she used and I didn't really care. I just loved the way they tasted.

Cathy knew this as well, which is why she just smiled, shook her head and said: Anything for you, Marle.

It wasn't long before, food in hand, we made our way outside and towards Grace's car.

Yelling from across the road, Sophia said: Bye ladies! I'll see you both tomorrow night!

Sophia stood with her hand wound around two leashes. Both dogs attached to those leashes were small and yappy, just as I would have guessed.

Smiling her ever polite smile and waving across at her, Grace yelled back: We wouldn't miss it for the world! Can't wait!

I ducked my head into the car before I could bother replying. I was still trying to think of an excuse not to go. I should've remembered that it was coming up soon. Sophia did mention it to me on that first day in the supermarket but, with everything that went on, the reunion was the least of my concerns. Now it was the first.

Grace interrupted my thoughts.

What possesses someone to buy two designer dogs like that?

Turning to see Grace pointing towards Sophia's dogs, I was gobsmacked by her comment. The ever-polite, always-accommodating diplomat.

Where did that come from? I asked.

Grace only rolled her eyes.

You weren't the one who had to stand there and look through each of their Instagram profiles just now.

Reeling back to when Sophia shoved her phone into Grace's face, I took a moment to clarify.

Wait. Are those two dogs the two 'little rascals' you were talking about in the cafe?

Grace nodded.

I know, right? Completely ridiculous if you ask me.

Stunned by the turn in events, I just sat there and laughed.

Confused about my sudden outburst, Grace inquired: What's so funny?

And here I thought that Sophia was showing Grace photos of her kids! I had been so rude to her under the suspicion that she was flaunting them in front of Grace that I failed to realise she was talking about dogs. Pulling out my toasted sandwich, I took a bite.

I had just spent the last twenty minutes thinking they were children, I replied with my mouth full.

Grace took a moment to think back to how I behaved when they were looking at the photos, then she, too, burst out in fits of laughter.

Wow, Marle, that's a new one for you.

I nodded in agreement and continued to stuff my face with the most delicious sandwich.

Chapter 40

Getting ready for the reunion, I couldn't help but feel nervous. All those people I had worked hard to forget as soon as we graduated were now going to be in the same room. Or house. Considering that the reunion was at Sophia's house, I wouldn't have been surprised if the whole thing was sprawled out on her lawn. Since the storm that had raged during the week after the funeral, the weather had been unexpectedly pleasant. With her large amount of land positioned right on the beach, I was actually hoping that the festivities were going to be outside. Once the sun set, that would mean that it would be a lot easier to sneak away whenever I wanted without as many eyes looking on.

Hearing the jangle of keys at the front door, I assumed it was Grace walking in, so I continued to apply my makeup in the bathroom. It wasn't until I heard a scream at the front door that I came bolting out to see what was wrong. Grace stood, pinned against the inside of the front door by Charlie's two front paws, which were placed possessively against her body. Upon hearing my footsteps, Grace looked up at me in horror.

Whose dog is this?

Trying to push the dog away, Grace only succeeded in receiving several licks on the arm. I called for Charlie to get down and he obediently obliged, then bounded to where I stood just meters away.

It's a long story, I replied and shrugged.

Remembering the ordeal I had with Jack the other week and how I had gained a dog as a result, I figured that it was best if I explained it all to Grace another day.

Clearly still shocked to see a dog parading around the house, Grace took a hesitant step towards the kitchen. It didn't take long for Charlie to grow distracted by a bird that flew past the window, which had him leaping towards the glass sliding doors. It took me just one day to learn to keep the curtain shut when Charlie was inside. The glass was so clean that, at first, Charlie had not seen it and had run straight into the door. The loud bang had sent me running into the living room only to see one dazed dog and the slobbery mark of his face on the glass. I was more surprised that the glass hadn't shattered under the force of his weight.

Picking up my bag off the kitchen bench, I pulled a squeaky toy from the laundry and handed it to Charlie. After the initial sniff, Charlie grabbed it and ran to his bed by the TV. Circling once, then twice, he was satisfied with the comfort level and plonked down onto the bed.

I looked over my shoulder and told him: I'll be back before midnight, I promise.

Grace looked at me like I had sprouted two heads, but I just shrugged in return. That story was definitely for another day. Grace was still standing there in confusion, so I asked: Shall we?

She had no response other than to agree and follow me out the door, one eye still wearily looking back at the mysterious dog that had appeared out of nowhere.

Chapter 41

Driving up to Sophia's house, I was gobsmacked. It would be rude to say it was anything less than a mansion. The driveway alone was bigger than the house I lived in. Peppered with trees on either side, it didn't take a genius to figure out who had paid for all this. Her parents.

I had heard stories through the grapevine that she inherited quite a bit of money when she graduated from school. I guess I had forgotten how much money.

It's beautiful, isn't it, Grace marvelled.

Grace looked at the estate in admiration, as if she were familiar with all the details already. It reminded me of all the times that she must have spent here when I was away. How many times she must have confided in Sophia instead of me because, at the time, I had shut her out.

It left a sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. As quickly as it came, however, it left. With Grace sitting next to me, I knew that, despite how I had treated her, she had found it in herself to forgive me. And whilst my feeling of guilt may never go away, I knew—no, I hoped—that I had all the time in the world to make up for it.

Making our way to the back of the property, I was relieved to see that everyone was out on the lawn. The downside to everyone already being there was that all eyes were able to see us when Grace and I made our way

down the stairs and onto the grass. Whilst I couldn't hear the whispers, I knew that they were swirling around each group. Small towns talk and, boy, did I know that.

Grace could feel my hesitation and said: Relax, Marle, they're probably just talking about how great you look. Squeezing my hand inconspicuously behind her flowing dress, Grace looked at me in reassurance. It was then that I was almost certain that she could read minds. Mine specifically.

As the waiters brought around food and drinks, it wasn't long before I found myself with hands full of both champagne and salmon crackers. It didn't take long for Grace to be pulled away by some group into a conversation regarding medical devices. I knew their faces and they knew mine but other than that we had nothing in common. I was the one who skipped school as often as possible, so it didn't come as a shock that I was now standing alone, only interacting with the waiters.

A voice from behind me broke the silence.

Well, well, well.

The voice of David Longmire pulled my attention to the left. He wore black suit pants and a purple velvet jacket, no less, and I smiled in relief.

If it isn't Marlene Ellis in the flesh, he said.

Aware that we had only really spoken in relation to organising mum's funeral since my return, it was good to finally see him outside of the emotional context and turmoil of the last few weeks.

Kissing him on the cheek, I offered him a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

It's good to see you, Dave.

Taking his first sip, David paused to look at me from head to toe.

It's good to see you, too, Marle.

The comfort and familiarity of standing side-by-side with someone who shared so much of your high school years felt relaxing. Like returning to your parents' house after living apart from them for years.

It didn't take David long before he said: I heard from a little bird that you went on a date with Luke McLeod the other night. Arrogantly sipping from his champagne glass, he just stood in amusement and waited for my response. He knew that I had a crush on Luke all throughout high school. David was the one who prank called him with me when I had managed to discover his phone number.

I tried to play it down and made a dismissive gesture by waving my hand.

You know how men in small towns are.

Acutely aware of how gay David was, he choked on the spinach pastry he was eating at my words.

I know, Marle. I know.

He winked at that and then proceed to finish off the pastry. We had always joked that all the good-looking men in small towns eventually settle down with the uglier women that stay around. I used to plan my future and weave a situation into existence, where Luke would eventually fall madly in love with me, braces and all. I had no idea that one day I would be going out to dinner with him. Minus the braces.

The thought of him filled me with dread. I hadn't spoken to him since he dropped me off at my house the other night. We didn't exactly leave on steady terms after Jack was seen standing on my driveway, waiting for me. I had told myself the next morning that I would call him, but I never got around to it. How could I tell him what needed to be said over the phone? It only made me feel worse when I saw him, in passing, a few days ago. I had just finished work and was climbing into my car when Luke stumbled out of his studio. I felt so awkward about the whole situation that I pretended not to see him and quickly drove away. I might have gotten away with it had I not looked in the rear-view mirror and locked eyes with him.

Not knowing if it was the memory of my high school crush or the liquid courage I had gained, but I pulled out my phone and hit the 'call' button before I had a chance to change my mind.

David saw whose name appeared on my screen before I hit 'call' and his eyes bluded as a result. I could tell that he wanted to hang around and listen to the conversation but the call for speeches started and a mass of people slowly started to gather inside. Not wanting to miss out on any small-town drama, David gave me a quick peck on the cheek before snatching another flute of champagne and raced inside.

I was about to hang up on the fifth ring when Luke answered.

Hello?

He had given me his number just after dinner the other night, so it didn't surprise me that he had no idea

who was calling. I swallowed my pride.

Hey, it's me, I managed to say.

Hoping that he would recognise the sound of my voice, I waited while Luke paused for a moment.

I didn't think I was going to hear back from you.

The caution in his voice was palpable.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to take so long to call. I had a lot going on that I needed to sort out.

I was not sure how I was going to explain everything to him, so I decided to see where it went first. Luke paused again before speaking again.

Did any of that have to do with the stranger sitting on your doorstep the other night?

I was not sure whether I was detecting a hint of jealousy in his voice. I figured that an honest explanation was the best that I could offer him.

That's what I wanted to talk to you about.

I could feel the tension on the other side of the phone as Luke waited for me to continue.

Are you free tonight? I asked him awkwardly.

The hesitation in his voice was obvious.

I don't know, Marle.

Please, I quickly added. Let me make it up to you.

I never thought I would be reduced to pleading, but here I was. Standing on the lawn in Sophia's backyard asking my old high school crush to give me a chance to explain myself.

Luke breathed out and into the phone.

Alright. I can pick you up. Are you at home?

Relief flooded my body and my shoulders sagged, releasing the tension resulting from fear of rejection. In my mind, I repeated back what he just said.

I, ah...I'm actually at Sophia France's house, I replied awkwardly.

Sophia's? Luke asked, stunned.

I laughed nervously.

Yeah, I'm kind of at my high school reunion.

Luke's laughter filled my ears and sent my toes curling.

How is it that it's ten years after school and I'm still catching you trying to leave early?

A smile spread across my face.

Bad luck, I guess?

The snicker in his voice only made me want to leave even more.

Fine. I'll be there in twenty. Don't make anyone cry.

I was about to reply something sarcastic, but he hung up on me before I could get a word in. Shaking my head, I pocketed my phone and turned towards the house. Fits of laughter and an occasional heckle floated out from it, carried by the sea breeze. I took one step towards the house doors when I decided to stop.

The sun had just reached the hills and the sky was lit up in shades of orange and pink. Wanting to savour this moment, I discarded my heels and walked down to the

water's edge. Standing still as the icy water lapped at my feet, I took a moment and fondly remembered that we had spread mum's ashes into it just the week before. I took a sip of my champagne, looked out at the water, smiled and said: I'm home, mum.

About The Author

Author, Olivia Simons, graduated with a bachelor's degree in creative writing and went on to develop her debut novel, *Among Other Things*. She spends her time between work as a copywriter and searching through hidden bookshops. If you can't find her, she's probably at home reading. Send food.

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