

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J.C. CERVANTES

ALWAYS

isn't

FOREVER

Can true love
conquer death?



OceanofPDF.com

ALWAYS
isn't
FOREVER

J. C. CERVANTES



OceanofPDF.com



An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Razorbill,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by J.C. Cervantes

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Razorbill & colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Cervantes, Jennifer, author.

Title: Always isn't forever / J.C. Cervantes.

Other titles: Always is not forever

Description: New York : Razorbill, 2023. | Audience: Ages 12 years and up.

Summary: Reeling from the death of her best friend and soulmate, Hart, Ruby struggles to move on until she meets Jameson, who unbeknownst to her is actually Hart's soul in the body of the local bad boy.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022051254 (print) | LCCN 2022051255 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593404485 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593404492 (epub)

Subjects: CYAC: Grief—Fiction. | Soul—Fiction. | Interpersonal relations—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.C3198 A1 2023 (print) |

LCC PZ7.C3198 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022051254>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022051255>

ISBN 9780593404485 (hardcover)

ISBN 9780593619575 (international edition)

ISBN 9780593404492 (ebook)

Cover art © 2023 by Karmen Loh

Cover design by Kristie Radwilowicz

Design by Rebecca Aidlin, adapted for ebook by Michelle Quintero

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

pid_prh_6.0_143736954_c0_r0

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Part One](#)

[One: Hart](#)

[Two: Ruby](#)

[Three: Hart](#)

[Four: Ruby](#)

[Five: Hart](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Six: Ruby](#)

[Seven: Hart](#)

[Eight: Ruby](#)

[Nine: Hart/Jameson](#)

[Ten: Hart/Jameson](#)

[Eleven: Hart/Jameson](#)

[Twelve: Ruby](#)

[Thirteen: Hart/Jameson](#)

[Fourteen: Hart/Jameson](#)

[Fifteen: Ruby](#)

[Sixteen: Hart/Jameson](#)

[Seventeen: Ruby](#)

[Eighteen: Lourdes](#)

Nineteen: Hart/Jameson
Twenty: Ruby
Twenty-One: Hart/Jameson
Twenty-Two: Ruby
Twenty-Three: Hart/Jameson
Twenty-Four: Hart/Jameson
Twenty-Five: Ruby
Twenty-Six: Hart/Jameson
Twenty-Seven: Ruby
Twenty-Eight: Hart/Jameson
Twenty-Nine: Ruby
Thirty: Lourdes
Thirty-One: Hart/Jameson
Thirty-Two: Ruby
Thirty-Three: Hart/Jameson
Thirty-Four: Ruby
Thirty-Five: Hart/Jameson
Thirty-Six: Ruby
Thirty-Seven: Hart/Jameson
Thirty-Eight: Ruby
Thirty-Nine: Hart/Jameson

Part Three

Forty: Ruby
Forty-One: Hart/Jameson
Forty-Two: Ruby
Forty-Three: Hart/Jameson
Forty-Four: Ruby
Forty-Five: Hart/Jameson
Forty-Six: Ruby
Forty-Seven: Ruby
Forty-Eight: Ruby
Forty-Nine: Hart/Jameson

[Fifty: Ruby](#)
[Fifty-One: Hart/Jameson](#)
[Fifty-Two: Ruby](#)
[Fifty-Three: Hart/Jameson](#)
[Fifty-Four: Ruby](#)
[Fifty-Five: Hart/Jameson](#)
[Fifty-Six: Ruby](#)
[Fifty-Seven: Lourdes](#)
[Fifty-Eight: Hart/Jameson](#)
[Fifty-Nine: Ruby](#)
[Sixty: Lourdes](#)
[Sixty-One: Jameson](#)
[Sixty-Two: Ruby](#)
[Sixty-Three: Jameson](#)
[Sixty-Four: Hart](#)
[Sixty-Five: Ruby](#)
[Sixty-Six: Lourdes](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

For the hearts that refuse to live in an “orderly house of reasons and proofs.”

OceanofPDF.com

Part One

The Celestial Record of an Angel

I am in the business of the afterlife.

My position dictates that I document all human encounters. I've had hundreds of such encounters. And in every single one I have yet to meet a human who does not believe in some iteration of romantic love. It is certainly not my place to disabuse anyone of this notion, but believe me when I say that very few humans possess a love strong enough, pure enough, to carry into their next incarnation.

And let's be honest, humans too often *think* they are in love, but thinking has no place in matters of the heart. And the word *love*? Well, humans fling it around like loose change, but rarely have they tasted its true essence.

Alas, very few souls will ever experience forever love. Personally, I've never seen it.

But this account isn't about me. This account is about Hart and Ruby, it's about first love and the power of memories, it's about how deep a heart can break before it shatters. But mostly? This tale is about a life that was taken too soon and the journey that single event set all of us on.

One
HART

~ Twenty-five hours before the end ~

*I*t's always been Ruby.

That's the first line of this "assigned" love letter, and it's all it takes to get the juices flowing and put me in the zone.

From the first time I saw her eleven years ago at the local garden center, freeing some ladybugs from their netted prison. There she was, six years old, a mere fifteen feet from me, ripping open the small nets.

She had this fierce expression on her face, lips pressed together, dark eyes blazing with determination. And just like that, I was sucked into her orbit. Even at the ripe old age of seven, I knew she was uncommon.

I still remember how my heart lurched, screaming at me to go over and help her, to be her partner in crime: Take a risk! But I'm not built that way, never have been. Risks lead to injury and injury leads to pain and pain leads to misery. See the problem? Besides, I was seven and the thought of landing in Dick's Garden jail sounded like the worst kind of misery.

So I hung back with my eyes glued to her, like she was some story and I needed to see how it ended.

Some of the ladybugs were smart enough to take flight; others crawled over the netting, and the rest? They landed on Ruby's arms and hands. She just stood there, smiling, observing them with this kind of awe that I wished everyone in their life could experience even once.

Most people would have fled the scene of the crime, but not Ruby. See, Ruby's a study in daredevilry. She didn't care if she got caught. All that mattered to her was setting those damn ladybugs free.

A wedge of sunlight spilled onto Ruby's golden-brown tangled hair. She looked up. Her eyes met mine. My face burned with the heat of someone doing something wrong. "Are you a good liar?" she asked.

I quickly spun away, knocking a tiny pot of mint off the shelf. I shrugged, feeling lost in my own skin. "Uh, not really."

She marched over with so much purpose, I thought maybe I should run, but she was already standing right in front of me. The ladybugs still clinging to her.

"Well, you have to be," she insisted as she picked up the mint pot and put it back in its place. "If anyone asks, I wasn't here. You don't know me."

"But . . . I don't know you."

Just then her mom called to her. "I gotta go," Ruby said with a smile that showed off a missing front tooth. "Don't forget." She mimed something with her hands that I took to mean, You never saw me.

And then she was gone. And I was left standing next to some wilting basil, wondering what had just happened. As I walked back to meet my dad near the Mexican palms, I felt a tickle on the back of my hand. I looked down. One of Ruby's ladybugs skittered across my skin. Bright red with four black dots, its wings opening and closing, closing and opening. And then it took flight.

Yeah, so like I said, it's always been Ruby.

Now I look down at the legal pad on my bed, worried as hell that the words won't be good enough. There's tons more slashing I've got to do, but at least it's a start for our time capsule that Ruby insists we make for memory's sake.

The sound of a car engine and an electrical drill fill the space. Me and my dad live above his auto shop, Jorge's. His specialty is the restoration of classic cars. I used to hate it, the noise, the grease, the late nights. But now? I see it as his art form; it's calming to head down there and watch him work on an old Firebird or Porsche.

I glance at the clock. Shit! We're supposed to be at Martin's party in fifteen, and I haven't changed into my swim trunks or . . .

My bedroom door swings open. It's Ruby.

Quickly, I shove the essay under a pillow, nearly knocking my guitar off the bed, and decide it's best to head her off at the pass: "Give me ten and I'll be ready."

"You're going to be late to your own funeral," Ruby says, still standing in the doorway like she isn't sure if she's going to come in. She's got her dark sun-streaked hair tied back and her Ray-Bans are perched on top of her head, getting stretched out because her head is way big. She's wearing a pair of jean shorts, and a T-shirt that hangs off one shoulder, revealing a red bikini top.

"I was working on the letter for our time capsule thing. I guess I lost track of time."

"You're a songwriter. This should be easy for you." She takes a few steps into my minimalistic room, glancing around like she half hopes to find a discarded sock. What kind of a monster doesn't use the hamper?

Knowing Ruby, her letter will be five words long. She can't even write a proper birthday message in a card, so I don't know why she would torture herself like this. Even *if* this was her idea.

She falls back onto my bed, simultaneously smacking my chest. Her sunglasses fly off her head and onto the floor.

"Hey, you okay?" I lie on my side, resting on my elbow, looking down at her, wondering how after all this time she has this unraveling effect on me.

Whenever she's this close, I just want to feel her skin against mine, to breathe her in, while I think I've gotta be the luckiest guy alive because she chose me.

She hesitates. There's a long silence and I'm not sure if she's formulating a joke or a killer comeback. She's capable of both, but she does neither. "I guess I can't believe five months is the only thing between us and senior year and everything is happening too fast and . . ."

I wrap her hand in mine. "Hey, I'm the worrier, remember? And you're totally encroaching on my territory."

She doesn't lean into the levity.

"I just feel like . . . I don't know." She squeezes my hand, looking out the window to the sunny skies beyond.

Here's the thing about Ruby: she never worries about anything. Ever. Sneak off campus? *Rules are meant to be broken.* Leap from a sea cliff? *Keep your eyes open.* Flat tire on a back road? *Let's get lost in the woods.*

"And this is why we are supposed to be making killer memories, like tonight."

"The party?" she teases, knowing full well I meant the surprise I have for her later that I've been planning for months and when she sees it, she's going to flip.

"Or we could do it another night," I tease back with a shrug.

"Don't even think about it." She gives me a kiss, meant to be a peck, but I'm greedy, and in a nanosecond the kiss is deeper, our bodies pressed so close I think we could melt into this mattress. Sometimes I wish we had never agreed to wait to have sex until college, because right now she's seriously ruining me.

In an instant she pushes off of me, sucks in a lungful of air like she's having the exact same thought. Or not. She dives past me, reaches beneath the pillow, and jerks free the essay. Like she knew it was there all along. Am I really that predictable?

I lunge, falling on top of her. She squeals, shoves the paper under her back, and stares up at me defiantly. We're so close that our foreheads are pressed together. "What happened to being late for the party?" I ask.

She makes a sad pout. She's perfected the expression over the years, a look I can't say no to. "Just give me one line," she says, "kind of like a prompt."

I laugh. "If I give you one line, will you give me back the paper?"

Her lashes look longer from this close, and the golden specks in her dark eyes look brighter. She blinks, her lashes tickling my cheek. "I promise."

I pull back, so I can see her face in full view when I say the words. She does a half-hearted drumroll. Voices carry from the shop below. A car engine rumbles.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" I say, still smiling.

"It can't be *that* good."

"Oh, it is."

She rolls her eyes. "Lay it on me."

I hesitate, let her squirm another second before I say, "It's always been Ruby."

Her face shifts from wonder to surprise to frustration in the span of half a second. Then she bunches my T-shirt in her fists and says, "I really hate you, Hart Augusto."

I kiss the tip of her nose. "I really hate you, too, Ruby Armenta."

"How much?"

"So much. I will hate you for so long; I plan to get sick of you."

"Deal!" She's up and hovering over me with a hand on her hip. "So are we going to do this party slash surprise, or what?"

I change super quick, and as we head out, I sling my arm over her shoulder and kiss the side of her head, thinking my first line is perfect.

Yeah.

It's always been Ruby.

Two

RUBY

~ *Twenty-four hours before the end* ~

We're in Hart's 1982 yellow Mustang, a car his dad gave him last year for his sixteenth birthday when it had no tires and only half an engine. It took six months of work in the shop to get Monster in gear—barely running on four wheels. I tried to help but ended up fumbling with the tools, so Hart put me on DJ duty instead. Monster's an old stick shift. Third gear locks up a lot, and she doesn't do hills, can only get up to fifty-seven miles per hour, and has enough scars to say she's been through some stuff. And her floors are always, and I do mean always, coated with a thin layer of sand that no vacuum can get rid of. Hart's tried. Believe me.

Monster's engine churns as we loop down the hillside toward the ocean. We've got the windows down (she's got no A/C), and the warm night air spills into the car.

Pretty soon we're belting out the words to U2's "Beautiful Day." Hart's an old soul, and his music choices only add to that vibe. My already loose rubber band pops free and my hair whips around my face and all I can think is *I hope we never change*.

"Hey, let's skip the party," I say.

Hart turns down the music. "What's going on?"

I didn't want to tell him earlier, but there's this tension in the center of my solar plexus telling me something is wrong or about to be wrong. It's a strange feeling, like thorny branches are growing inside of me. Mom says my

great-grandmother had that kind of intuition, too—a gift, she called it. I call it a pain in the ass that only serves as a red flag, never giving any details that would actually affect the outcome.

But I refuse to allow this intuition to make me a worrywart. Hart's already got that covered.

When we were kids, he wouldn't climb the monkey bars or anything more than four feet off the ground, he started a petition for seat belts on the school bus, and he insisted on helmets whenever we rode bikes.

I tell Hart, "We could go down to the shore and . . ."

He squeezes my hand. "I promised you the party and you promised to let me surprise you. And tonight, we are both keeping those promises."

Why does he have to be such a stickler for the rules? "Fine," I say, turning the music back up, but the moment's passed, and I worry that everything is about to change.

Three

HART

*I*ncoming!” Martin shouts as he flies through the night air, cherry bombing into the dimly lit pool.

His splash is like a tidal wave. No big surprise there, since he’s the top dog tight end for Seaside High’s football team. Plus, he’s six and a half feet tall and weighs in at over two hundred and thirty pounds. But the thing I like most about Martin (other than the fact that we’ve been friends since our band days in middle school) is that he’s chill; he’s this really cool guy who, yeah, can smash in your ribs on the field, but then play the sax like some kind of reincarnated jazz icon.

Going to his Friday night bash was strangely my idea, to get Ruby out of her funk. This party isn’t too wild, just a few friends and their friends and their cousin’s friends, hanging at Martin’s pad, which happens to be without parental controls.

“Get in here, Augusto!” Martin hollers from the deep end of the pool. A beach ball flies through the air. A couple of people are playing chicken, squealing and laughing and splashing. The rest of the crowd is hanging in tight little huddles.

“Nah, I’m good,” I say, even though I’m in my trunks.

The problem isn’t the swim, it’s that from where I’m standing, I can see the germs practically floating on top of the pool, mad-dogging me.

My buddy George hauls himself out of the pool, dripping water all over my feet. “Water’s perfect, man. You’re missing out.”

We've been friends since the third grade when he moved to town with his mom, two older brothers, and one abuelo. His house is chaos and noise and fighting and total devotion. I love it.

"Pretty sure I'm not missing anything," I tell George just as his dog, Josie, trots over and rubs her big chocolate body against my legs.

"Hey, girl." I kneel down and rub her neck the way she likes it. Josie tilts her head back to make sure I get all the good spots while her tongue hangs out the side of her mouth in clear appreciation.

"She likes you better than me," George grumbles. "Come on, Josie. I'm way better looking, girl."

I laugh while Josie laps up the love and totally ignores George.

I was with him when he picked her out at the shelter five years ago. She and George are inseparable; he even got her certified as a therapy dog so she could hang with us anywhere. She looks like a hellhound, but deep down she's a big softy. Unless you're a stranger she doesn't like.

"Hey," he says out of the corner of his mouth. "Did you see Marina? She looks . . ." He closes his eyes and inhales. "You think I have a shot?"

"Yeah, bro. But that would mean you'd have to actually talk to her."

Josie runs off toward the spicy smell of chicken on the grill while George runs a hand over his dark wet hair, nearly cringing. "I can't just walk up and talk to her, man. Shit don't work like that anymore. This ain't the olden days. Maybe Ruby could get her number for me and I could text her and . . ." He shakes his head. "Nah, it'll just end up bad. Like, she'll probably break my heart. Or what if I find out she's a weirdo and then I have to end things, or what if she gets all clingy and falls in love with me and . . ."

The thing about George? He always talks himself out of most things he really wants but is too afraid to do. Yeah, we've got that in common. Two suckers.

"All that *could* happen," I say. "Or not."

"Yeah, well, you've got Ruby, so you don't have to worry about the stuff the rest of us mortals do." George shakes his head like he's already made up his mind.

"Marina's looking over here," I say.

“Crap, what do I do? Should I look too? Nah, that’s so pathetic . . . Bruh, help!” He’s fidgeting.

I laugh. “Chickenshit.”

“Look who’s talking.” George grunts and somersaults into the pool, splashing me on his way in.

Just then Ruby slides up to me, sighing through a smile. She raises herself onto her bare toes and whispers in my ear, “The chlorine kills all the germs before they can kill you.”

I throw her a long side glance. “What about bacteria, viruses, and parasites? And all those dead skin cells just bopping around?”

“Those too.”

“So you’re a pool expert now,” I say.

“Nope, I googled it when I saw you standing on the edge of the pool looking like you might jump in, but then I saw that second-guess look sweep across your face and I thought I’d come save you from making a big mistake,” she says, throwing her attention to the city lights twinkling beyond the oasis that is Martin’s backyard.

Finally. She’s speaking my language. “By mistake, you mean jumping in?”

She looks up at me, a shy grin playing on her mouth, a dare playing in her eyes. “I mean holding back.”

I guess I’m as bad as George.

And then she shoves me in. Fortunately, it’s the deep end, because I’d hate to die by head injury in a germ- and likely pee-infested body of water six weeks before summer break.

I thrust myself up for air, ready to drag Ruby in with me, but she’s gone.

She’s standing over near the gazebo, fresh towel in hand, talking to her best friend, Serena, who wears too much of everything and has a personality to match. Serena’s also on the road to being the valedictorian and plans to double major in Chinese and art history when she goes to college.

Bright purple-flowered vines drop through the moonlit rafters.

Coltrane’s bluesy sax now pipes through the air. Martin is making a show of his not-so-great dance moves. Hell, I admire the guy for not giving a shit

what anyone thinks of him.

“Dance with me,” he sings to a girl standing nearby. But she looks mortified, covers her face, and slides away.

Sadly, there are no takers. But that doesn’t deter Martin. “Geesh, man. You guys are B-O-R—”

Just as he gets to the *I*, I see Ruby. She’s heading toward Martin with that smile of hers, her head ducked a few inches to the right, really playing it up. “I can show you some better moves,” she says, and I melt.

A lot of guys would be jealous. I mean, here my girlfriend is dancing face-to-face with the king of soulful sax, Martin Tomlinson, but I’m not jealous at all. First, Ruby’s heart belongs to me. Second, Martin’s heart belongs to everyone. Last week it was Shaylee, the week before that, John, the week before that? Well, you get the picture. That’s how he earned his nickname, *Fifty-two*. It’s not his jersey number, it’s the number of weeks, aka flings, he has in a single year. The guy’s reached a *legend-of-cool* status mere mortals like me will never reach.

Not that I’d ever want that, but maybe . . . it wouldn’t be all that bad to be the guy who says and does all the right things without overthinking every detail. In terms of social order, I’m not popular, but I’m not *unpopular*. I’m floating in the middle of the hierarchical ladder, mostly considered benign, which basically means I pose no threat to the social order of Seaside High.

Ruby, on the other hand, is at least ten rungs above me. She can just as easily blend into the background as she can dance in the spotlight with Martin—or anyone, for that matter. She’s captain of the swim team, a bully slayer, and refuses to wear anything that’s “fast fashion.” “Look at these landfills of clothes,” she always says. And she makes everything look effortless, including dancing.

Just as the song ends, a trio of guys walks out of a set of double doors into the backyard. At the center? Jameson Romanelli, quarterback bad boy who loves to start trouble. The guy’s a privileged asshole and everyone knows it, but he gets away with it because he can throw for two hundred yards a game and is predicted to go pro.

His eyes fall on Ruby and Martin.

Shit.

“Hey, man,” Martin says, sharing a bro shake with Jameson. “Thought you guys weren’t going to make it.”

That’s the risk of parties at Martin’s. You never know if it’s going to be his music crew (me and some of the other band geeks from our junior high days) or his football crew.

I only brought Ruby here to break her out of her weird funk, and it seemed to be working. Now she just looks miserable. She can’t stand Jameson Romanelli. He moved back here after his parents’ divorce in sixth grade, toilet papered her house in seventh grade, cheated off of one of her math tests in eighth grade, then in ninth grade spread a rumor that the two of them hooked up on a camping field trip. But mostly I think it’s because he stiffed my dad out of some cash when he brought a Porsche into the shop for some bodywork. It was a shitty thing to do, but it wasn’t even that much money, so I wasn’t going to lose sleep over it, but Ruby? She was so pissed at the “injustice” of it all that I thought she was going to have a stroke. “He’s the most arrogant, selfish, obnoxious, two-faced son of a bitch,” she barked. “God, how can you be so calm, Hart?”

I smothered her (and all her anger) with a hug and said, “He just doesn’t matter enough to me to get all worked up.”

“Hey,” Jameson says to Ruby, who glares at him as I make my way over to run interference. A new song pipes through the speakers, but I’m not paying attention. All I care about is creating distance between Jameson and Ruby.

I’m shocked when Ruby begins to exit the scene as she thanks Martin for the dance.

All smiles, Martin says, “Want to go again?”

“Yeah,” Jameson says, elevator-eyeing Ruby. “Go again.”

Ruby glances around like she’s looking for a drink to throw in his face, but all she finds is me rushing to her side. “Ready?” I say. My heart’s starting to crawl up my throat, because I seriously hate these kinds of “confrontations.”

Martin shoots his teammate a glare. “Chill, dude.”

George appears at my side not saying a word, but he doesn't have to. No one ever messes with him, and not because he's big or tough, but because he's got two big, tough brothers who are amazing cage fighters and they won't hesitate to knock you south and dump you in a trash bin. But they've never let George into that world. He says it's because he's the baby. I say it's because their abuelo wants at least one non-fighter in the familia and would curse all of them if they tried.

Josie wanders over and stands at George's side, glaring at Jameson like she knows what a jerk he's being

Throwing his hands up, Jameson steps back. Feigning innocence. At the same time, he looks over at me and pushes a strand of hair away from his face. "Hey, Tin Man." It's an ongoing joke because of my name. It used to be insulting; now it's just stupid.

And then I smell it. The beer all over Jameson.

"You're wasted."

"Not yet," he says, "but I'm working on it."

Josie lets out a low growl. Yeah, she's definitely in hellhound mode now.

"What's with you?" Jameson says to Josie. "Why have you always hated me?"

"She's a great judge of character," George says with a sarcastic grin.

Jameson offers a smirk as he sways on his feet.

Just then I see a familiar face come through the side gate. Gabi.

Ruby's little sister's a sophomore, and she's with some junior I sort of remember from school. But I can't remember her name. Dylan? Darcy? Damien?

George sees Gabi too and is on it, heading over to block her from Ruby's view, because the last time the girl was at a party, she accidentally got tangled in the middle of some thrashing and ended up with a black eye. After that, Ruby brought down the gavel on parties, and if she sees her little sis, she's going to cause a scene and I'd rather not, because then she'll be in a bad mood and it'll ruin my surprise. Personally, I think she's way too overprotective. Gabi's a great kid. But Ruby never listens to me on this issue.

Ever. And a part of me thinks this is Ruby making up for their not having a dad, as if she needs to play both parent and sister.

I tense. “Hey, Rubes,” I say, steering her away, “we better go.”

Jameson nods, giving me an atta boy wink. “Good idea.”

Waving me off, Ruby faces off with Mr. QB again. “You know what your problem is?”

He’s smiling. “Tell me.”

I glance over at Gabi, who’s trying to get around George when her eyes meet mine and she gets that *Oh, shit* look. *If Ruby finds you here, she’s going to lock you in the church tower where you’ll spend the rest of your days living on bread and water and so little oxygen your lungs will shrivel to the size of prunes.*

I swing my attention back on Ruby, who’s telling Jameson, “Your problem is you.”

I wipe my forehead and glance in Gabi’s direction, urging her with bugged-out eyes and a clenched jaw to duck or hide or drop-roll.

It’s very important when lying to Ruby that my pulse be steady and my movements slow, otherwise she’ll smell blood. “I just remembered. We’re going to be late.”

She throws me a side glance. Then looks at her phone. “We’ve got an hour.”

Shit.

She must see my panic, because she rolls her eyes and says, “Okay. Fine.”

I lead her out through the door Jameson just emerged from, the opposite direction of Gabi.

When we get to the car, Ruby looks up at me with those X-ray vision eyes and says, “This better not be a ploy to get me away from—”

“It’s not. Promise.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You know I’m a terrible liar. Are you going to let me do this thing or not?”

Ruby’s eyes narrow; she bites her bottom lip. She’s thinking. *YesNoYesNo*. And I’m thinking, *Please, please pick yes*.

“Okay,” she finally says, “but is it a big surprise or like, a little surprise?”
“It’s a good surprise.”

OceanofPDF.com

Four

RUBY

~ Twenty-two hours before the end ~

Some of the best things about Hart?

1. He'll give you the shirt off his back, the last gummy worm in the bag, and the first oxygen mask during a plane crash.
2. He never uses a brush or gel and somehow his hair still ends up looking perfectly windblown.
3. His surprises used to be awful, then they got better, and now? They are always worth waiting for.

So I wait as we drive toward the "surprise."

When we get into the center of town, a long palm-lined street dotted with red-tile-roofed shops, restaurants, exercise studios, salons, and galleries, Hart stops at a red light and tells me, "'kay. Close your eyes."

"Are we going to that new Thai place?" I guess, thinking that would be a not-so-bad surprise since Hart doesn't really deviate from meat and potatoes or any and all Mexican food.

"Rubes, it's ten o'clock on a Friday night."

Code for *This town shuts down at nine p.m.*

He's right. El Cielo is a sleepy central California town that leans way left, refuses to allow any corporate chains inside city limits, and is made up of

retirees, trust-fund babies (hence the galleries), doctors, business owners, and the rest of us. It's also a tourist trap, which is why we have such great eateries, cafés, and one of the oldest historic hotels on the West Coast.

"Fine, but let me check my phone real quick," I say. I have three unread texts. The first two are from an hour ago.

Mom: Be home before midnight

Gabi: Can I wear your Love is Love sweater

The last is from Serena just five minutes ago: you left the party already?

I give Mom a thumbs-up. Gabi a thumbs-down. And Serena a sad face followed by sorry, do you need a ride home?

She quickly texts back no before, Jameson is trashed.

"Any earth-shattering news?" Hart asks as he pulls to the side of the road. "Or can you close your eyes now?"

"Okay. Okay." I put my phone away and sit there with my eyes closed, the wind blowing in my face. Hart hums to a soft song I haven't heard before, and even though I can't see him, I know he's grinning.

By the time he's parked, I'm practically bouncing in my seat. With my eyes still closed, he helps me out of the car and leads me by the hand. I hear him punching some electronic buttons on a keypad, followed by a beep. And then he's guiding me across a wooden floor that squeaks beneath our weight. That's when I know exactly where we are. He has to know I realize we're at the docks, right?

I mean, we've been coming here since we were kids, and if the salt and honeysuckle air didn't give it away, the beep and the other familiar sounds of the creaky walkway or the boats gently bumping against the harbor would.

"Can I open my eyes?" I ask, impatient, thinking maybe my earlier suspicion that this was a ploy to get me out of the party is sadly accurate. But I decide to play it out a couple more beats.

We pass Miriam's yacht, all fifty feet of the luxury three-deck cruiser, complete with ostentatious sleeping cabins. I know because I counted the steps and the boat has a certain smell, like new leather and freshly polished wood. It's the same boat Hart and I work on all summer long, bringing drinks

to tourists, pointing out dolphins and other sea life, and making sure the guests have a good time.

A few strides later Hart leads us into an enclosure of some kind. I hear a door close and the sounds of the harbor fade away. The click of a light. Then he leans in close and whispers in my ear, “If you don’t like it, lie.”

I’m in the most familiar place of my life, and yet my stomach is jumping with butterflies. “Deal.”

“But you won’t have to lie, because I think you’re going to love it. Oh, and there are two parts. This is the first.”

And then he removes his hands and I’m standing in front of a little daysailer resting on a trailer. She’s small, maybe twenty feet; her hull is scratched and badly in need of a paint job.

“It’s the new *Ladybug*.” Hart beams.

The summer of fourth grade we built a boat in Hart’s dad’s auto shop. Hart painted a name on the side and everything: *Ladybug*. I told him that I was pretty sure ladybugs couldn’t swim, but he didn’t seem to care.

By fifth grade *Ladybug* had been eaten by the sun, so we built another boat, and by seventh grade that one was wrecked too. We kept building boats, knowing they’d never last. But it didn’t stop us, because the fun wasn’t in the thing but in the creation of it.

He rattles on. “Miriam was going to scrap it and I talked her into selling it to me. I’ve been working on her engine, repairing stuff, for the last three months. I only have a few more payments, and by the end of summer she’s going to be mine. I mean, ours, and this *Ladybug* isn’t going to disintegrate like the others and . . .”

Hart doesn’t finish because my arms are around his neck, and I’m breathing him in: he smells like lingering chlorine and soap and so much goodness, I don’t ever want to let go.

He laughs, pulling me closer. “Does that mean you like it?”

“She is perfect,” I say, and I mean it. Hart is a terrible secret keeper, and the fact that he was able to hide this from me is astonishing all by itself. But then . . . he went and saved up, has been making payments? It makes my heart want to burst. And I want this too. I want it for him. For us.

He guides me onto the boat where I see the little vessel with fresh eyes. She's not old and dilapidated. She's beautiful in every way. "Why didn't you tell me before?" I ask.

"Because you like surprises." He's still smiling as he sits me on a bench. Its cushion is torn and the stuffing is falling out.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could take her out?" I say.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Hart says, "I just have to make a few more repairs."

I want to know when that will be, but I don't want to put pressure on him, either.

Hart loops his arm over my shoulder. "Well, we can't take *her* out, but Miriam said we could take one of hers."

Before I know it, we're aboard one of Miriam's smaller sailboats. They range in size from twenty feet all the way up to the prized yacht we usually use for group tours.

The mast is already up, so Hart and I quickly rig the sails; we've done it loads of times, thanks to Miriam, who put us through a sailboat training course last summer. And this thirty-foot beauty with mahogany wood, a wide deck, full bow, and comfy cabin is one of my favorites.

A few minutes later we're sailing across the harbor. I watch the moonlight flicker across the black water like tiny diamonds. There's a light breeze tonight, rippling the sails. And all I can think is *Keep going. Let's see where the sails take us*. That's all it takes to kick my imagination into gear: Mexico, Belize, Greece, Cuba. I can't wait to see the world, to taste it, to breathe it all in. To discover pockets that are nothing but magic and possibility.

Once we're out to sea, Hart anchors the vessel.

The boat rocks gently as we perch on the bow. From here the black waters go on forever and ever. A cool wind gives me the shivers. Hart wraps his arms around me. "I love being out here at night."

"It's like we're the only people in the world." I don't look back to see the twinkling lights of El Cielo. Instead I keep my gaze on that dark horizon I can't begin to measure. "When we graduate, before college, promise me we'll sail somewhere."

“I already told you we would.”

I know Hart means it. “I wanna hear it again. Promise me we’ll go to Napier. It’s in New Zealand, and did you know it’s the most art deco city in the world?”

“Rubes,” he says, clearly amused, “I didn’t even know it was a place before now. Where do you come up with these random places?”

“Literally no clue. But I found this cool website recently that selects a random destination for you!”

“Sounds risky.”

“Sounds fun.” I get to my feet, peel down to my bikini, and dive into the water.

“You’re insane!” Hart calls out.

I laugh. “Come in. It’s so nice.”

“You don’t even have a life jacket on.”

I laugh and roll onto my back to flutter kick. He knows I’m a strong swimmer, and there is no way he’s luring me back until I’m ready. I love the water: its rhythm, its moods, its unpredictability. It’s why I joined the swim team, why I win medals. Not because I care about the competition, but because I love who I am in the water: totally free.

A minute later I figure I’ve given Hart enough of a panic attack, so I climb back up the ladder. Hart’s waiting with a towel, which he wraps around me.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” He makes his way to the cabin. A second later, Eric Church’s “Heart of the Night” plays through the boat’s speakers. The country tune is low and moody with a rock vibe. I plant myself on the bow of the boat. When Hart comes back, he’s carrying a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels, and Sour Patch Kids. He holds each product up proudly. “Stale pretzels or a half-eaten bag of Sour Patch Kids?”

“Definitely the sugar!”

He plops down next to me, setting the open bag of candy between us. Then he starts digging through it. “This is such a rip-off. All that’s left is blue.”

“Why are you like this?” I tease, taking the bag from him and popping a piece of candy into my mouth.

“Because everyone knows blue is the worst flavor.”

“Not true,” I say, still chewing. “Did you know they sell a bag of only blues? And who doesn’t like raspberry?”

“When they could have lime?” He frowns, staring into the bag. “Don’t you think it’s kinda twisted that people like eating a bunch of kid heads? Like, why not make it something else, shapes of fruit or cars or . . .”

“Because then it wouldn’t be Sour Patch Kids.”

“Great, so people would rather eat kids.”

I snort out a laugh. “Exactly.” I prop myself between his legs, leaning back into his solid chest. His arms are instantly around me, holding me tight. I can feel his heart beating. In the same moment I look up at him, he’s tilting his head closer. He kisses my forehead, the tip of my nose, both eyes. My mouth. Pretty soon I’m tasting all that berry goodness and his hands are under my shirt, caressing my stomach.

“Your skin is so soft,” he tells me.

“It’s called body lotion.”

“I think it’s called Ruby.”

Laughing, I spin to face him, propped on my knees wedged between his legs, our faces nearly touching. I place a hand over his heart. “We breathe the exact same rhythm.”

He pushes a stray hair off of my face. “What’s up with you? Really.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can tell something is storming in that mind of yours.”

He’s right, but I don’t know how to articulate the ominous feeling I have. I inhale, exhale. “Can’t we just sail away right now?”

“We could,” he tells me with a grin, “but I think Miriam might have something to say about us stealing her boat. And our families might be pissed we didn’t say goodbye or finish school.”

With a pout, I bump my forehead against his. “Why do you always have to be so logical?”

He simply says, “Because you’re the dreamer.”

I lie back, propping my head on a towel and licking the sugar off my fingers. Hart scoots over and lies back too. Ever since we were little, we’ve

played this game to see how far apart we could be and still manage to stretch out our arms and touch fingertips.

For the next five minutes, we stare up at the black sky without talking. It's one of the things I love about Hart. He doesn't feel like we need to fill up the silence. And pretty soon the music fades away and all that's left is the soft swishing of the sea, the flapping of the sails.

We're a good six feet apart. Our arms are outstretched toward each other, but tonight our fingertips don't touch. Or maybe we aren't trying hard enough.

A warm, perfect happiness bubbles up in me and I say, "I really love you."

Hart's quiet. I glance over; his eyes are closed. "Are you asleep?" I whisper.

Just then he opens his eyes, jumps to his feet, and begins pacing. He fires up his phone and begins typing on the screen.

"What is it?" I say, borderline panicked that something is wrong.

"I just thought of some new lyrics for that song I'm writing." He sweeps a hand over his unruly hair, then goes back to typing.

I give him his space, knowing that interrupting the creative moment is a recipe for disaster. After more paces, and more hair sweeping, I can't stay quiet anymore. "Is this the song you won't tell me the lyrics to?"

"Yeah, that one."

"Why is it such a secret?" I'm on my feet now, craning my neck, trying to see what he's typing.

Hart's tense shoulders fall an inch away from his ears. He looks at me for the first time, and I know he's gotten down whatever came to him a minute ago. "Well. If you didn't love surprises so much," he says, "I wouldn't have to keep it a secret."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" I say, pulling my towel tighter around me. "I now officially hate surprises, so you can one hundred percent tell me what the words are."

He's amped up. I've seen it before. This glisten in his eye, this bounce in his body.

“I’m so close,” he says. “Just give me a couple more days. It’ll be worth the wait. I promise.”

“Just one line,” I plead.

“One? And then you’ll be patient?”

“Just one,” I repeat.

His mouth curves up to the right as he inches closer. “ ‘It’s always been Ruby.’ ”

“Hart! I already know that line.”

He says nothing. Instead, he kisses me. His body presses against mine, long and lean and strong. I melt into him, thinking there is nowhere I’d rather be. And then the refrain from earlier hits me with full force: *I hope we never change.*

Just then his phone vibrates. It’s Miriam.

Hart answers, and a second later he’s agreeing to something with a series of *sure*s while I’m searching the horizon, fixed on a giant twinkling star that’s just appeared and will be gone before sunrise.

“Is everything okay?” I ask once he’s disconnected the call.

“She just needs me to fill in for Beau tomorrow night. Some special birthday tour for her cousin.”

“But we don’t report to work until after school is out next month.”

“Rubes!” His whole face brightens and he gets this look like I’m missing something. “She said she’ll pay me double, which means I can pay off *Ladybug* ASAP!”

I want to feel happy, but instead I feel a tug in my gut, strong like the tide. But I don’t say anything, because I don’t want to ruin this perfect night.

I just want to keep floating, wishing that star never had to disappear.

Five
HART

~ One hundred and twenty minutes before the end ~

When Ruby calls, I'm half dressed, late to work, and pressing the last wrinkle out of my Sea Breeze T-shirt.

"I really think you should call in sick," she says.

I'm one-foot hopping, trying to tug on my shoe with one hand and holding the phone to my ear with the other. "Ruby, can we talk about it later? I'm so late."

"I checked the weather," she rolls on, "and it's supposed to rain."

I pull my shirt over my head, ready to have a coronary, because Ruby never checks the weather. Ever. "Look, it's a great gig," I say as I grab my keys and head toward Monster. "And we've been out in the rain plenty of times."

"Hart—I just really think you should stay home. We can watch a movie, order in pizza, watch a rom-com or better yet, a scary movie . . ."

I stop in the driveway and suck in a breath. "Hey, Ruby. One, the scary movie part is not a great selling point. Two, it's all good. This is such a lucky break. And did I tell you Miriam is paying double *and* letting me keep one hundred percent of the tips?" We normally only get half.

"Wow, she must be desperate."

"Which means I can pay for Ladybug's repairs and pay her off ASAP so we can take her out."

She's silent. I hate when she goes silent. I look at the time on my phone, ready to end the call, and then she says, "Fine. Just . . . like, text me when you're in service and come over after and . . . just be careful."

I laugh. "Did you forget who you're talking to? I'm careful to a fault, remember?"

I'm already pulling Monster out of the driveway when Dad flags me down. He's turning sixty this year, and for the first time, he sort of looks his age, even though he's got a full head of hair and stays in pretty good shape. It's just that he looks tired, worn down. Probably because he's been taking on too much business lately and his employees have been no-shows, which forces him to shoulder even more. I help out when I can after school, but it's not enough.

"Hey, I'm late," I call out the open window, trying to avoid one of Dad's long-winded convos. The guy can talk forever and without a breath. I swear his lungs don't need air.

He jogs over anyway. He's wearing his Jorge's auto shop uniform—a blue jumpsuit that's greasy as hell. "You gotta see this new '72 Benz I just got in. She's a beauty. I thought we could work on her together."

"Oh yeah? Sounds good. I'll check it out after work."

He throws a thumb over his shoulder, gesturing to the shop, which happens to be below our house. "It'll just take a minute."

"Sorry, Pops. Miriam will blow a gasket if I'm late. It's some big important family thing."

With a sigh, he taps the top of the Mustang, and says, "Que te vaya bien."

Within twenty minutes I'm on the yacht. Some upbeat jazz music is playing, a party of eight circulates, clinking glasses, laughing, shielding their eyes from the day's last rays of light as Teddy, the captain, drives us into the open sea.

There's this moment when the boat cruises into the ocean and you know that you're no longer in the safety of the harbor, and there's something both freeing and terrifying about that, but it's this moment that I always look back at the red-colored roofs, and the cascading hills perched above town, and the palms that bend and sway like they're saying adiós.

The best part? This view never changes. And it always feels like home.

Charlie, Miriam's six-year-old nephew, is running in circles around the kitchen island with his older sister, Anisa. I'm trying to pull some snack trays out of the refrigerator, but those two are rushing around like they're gunning for trouble.

Miriam comes in then and shoos them out with an evil aunt scowl, reminding them, "Put your damn vests on."

"They're itchy," Charlie says.

"Mom says no cussing," Anisa puts in with a frown.

Miriam sighs. "Well, I'm your aunt and I've got damned authority too."

"What's athoree?" Charlie asks as his sister drags him out, mumbling something about sea witches.

Miriam takes a swig of wine, setting the glass down with "authority." She's a fortysomething three-time divorcée, with this golden skin and black hair that makes her stand out in a crowd.

"You're doing a great job, Hart," she says, lighting a cigarette nervously. "I really appreciate your pitching in like this." She exhales a wavy trail of smoke. "God, did you see that minidress my sister's wearing? She's fifty-one, for Christ's sake!"

Wanting to steer clear of family feuds, I just say, "No prob. Happy to help."

She takes two more puffs and puts the cigarette out in the sink. "Family shit is so dramatic. Why did I even agree to this?"

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to that, so I just nod.

She gives a small smile, looks around the kitchen like she forgot what she came in here for. One of the things I like about my boss is that even though she's loaded, she always helps out. Like now, she's grabbing a charcuterie tray off the counter. Miriam insisted on training all the employees herself, and one of the training sessions was on gourmet foods, and wines (white only, since red can stain the yacht's wood and fabric), even though I can't serve. Well, not legally. But Miriam tends to overlook this little fact when it suits her.

That's where Beau comes in. He's thirtysomething. I totally think he has a thing for Miriam. He's been working for Sea Breeze since he moved here from Napa a year ago, and tonight, his food poisoning is my good luck.

Miriam is almost out of the kitchen when she spins back and says, "Can you bring out the crab legs in about ten minutes? And in exactly one hour, you're going to announce that we're out of wine."

"I am?"

She smiles and cocks her head to the side. "They won't throw *you* overboard."

"Ha, got it!"

After she leaves, I quickly check my phone. No service. But there's a text from Ruby from about an hour ago. It's a close-up of her face, rolling her eyes and sticking out her tongue with the caption: I went with the rom-com and so disappointed. Not enough rom in the com. Waste of time.

Even though I know she won't get the text until I'm back in the harbor, I send a reply: Already bored without me, huh?

I wait a few minutes before taking the tray of crab legs out to Miriam's family as instructed. The sky has gone dark, and a sliver of moon looks like it's hanging by a thread and might fall any second.

Reaching down for a fallen napkin, I see Charlie on the deck below. He's dropping coins off the side of the yacht.

I go down to find out what he's up to and to see if I can divert him to some other activity, like putting on his life jacket. But when I get close, he smiles up at me and holds out his open palm, filled with pennies. "Want to make a wish?"

I don't want to rain on his wish parade, but no, I really don't want to toss a coin into the ocean and unknowingly hurt some sea life and . . . I stop my rattling train of thought. If Rubes were here, she'd say something like, "It's one coin, Hart."

Just then it starts to rain. Charlie loves it. He's spinning in circles, trying to catch raindrops on his tongue. "Hey, buddy," I say. "We'd better get inside the cabin."

But he goes running off toward the back of the boat. I rush after him, finally catching him just as he steps onto the railing.

“Hey!” My heart practically gives out. “Get down from there.”

“Look!” He’s pointing to something in the water I can’t see. Maybe a dolphin.

Lightning flashes. The rain comes harder.

Someone’s calling Charlie’s name, but they sound far away, their voice swallowed by the wind. I only look back for a second, half a second, to see who’s calling. And that’s when it happens. Charlie slips into the water.

“Man overboard!” I shout as I launch myself over the rail, forgetting all my training, like *Throw a flotation device out to the swimmer*. But man, when you’re in the minute, all that stuff just flies out the window.

The water is cold, and the sea is churning so hard, I can’t catch sight of Charlie.

I swim hard, harder than I’ve ever swum in my life. My arms and legs are pumping furiously, desperately. Why didn’t he put on the damn life vest?

There.

Through the dusk, I see him, windmilling his arms, crying, lost in the choppy water that’s rushing into his mouth.

“I’m coming!” I shout.

Just then a bright light from the boat shines across the sea, and a second later a flotation device is cast right in front of me. I grab it, kicking, reaching, praying. And all I can think is *Charlie. Charlie. Charlie*.

Then comes the screaming, a woman’s wailing, an alarm’s blaring.

Almost there. Almost there. “I’m coming!” I shout again.

And then I have him in my arms. He grips my neck violently. The swells grow as we bob along the water’s surface. It takes all my strength to peel him off me and secure the floating belt around his waist. “See?” I manage. “This is going to make you float.”

“I don’t want to die,” he cries.

“You’re not going to die,” I sputter. “I promise. Just do what I tell you, okay?”

The rain is coming harder, faster.

My muscles scream in agony as I haul Charlie back toward the boat. But the damn undercurrent is trying to swallow us.

“You’re going to be okay,” I tell him over and over as screams echo from somewhere that feels so far away.

I’m so spent I don’t remember if I heave him up onto the bow or a hand appears to haul him up. But he’s safe. Charlie’s safe.

With a shaky hand, I reach out toward the boat’s ladder. My fingers trace its edges just as a colossal swell sucks me under.

The waters are dark . . . violent. I fight my way to the top, but it’s not there. I have no idea which way is up. The panic is like a live wire, electrifying my whole body.

They say our life passes before our eyes right before we die, but it isn’t true. I think two things in that moment: *I should have spent that extra minute with Dad. I should have chosen to spend tonight with Ruby.*

The water closes in.

I didn’t finish her song.

My lungs are going to explode.

Why didn’t I finish her song?

I struggle against the painful urge to take a breath. To let the water in.

The music of Ruby’s song plays in me, through me.

The ocean rushes by so fast

Moonlight splinters through the mast.

I never stop fighting, swimming, searching.

Our hands stretch tall toward the stars.

Oh, yes. Yes, the future is ours.

I’m *begging* for air. For a future.

But there is none.

The urge to breathe, to inhale . . . It wins the battle.

Water rushes into my nose and mouth, floods my lungs.

It hurts at first, but then . . . there's a stillness. A glimmer of memory. Ruby's head on my shoulder as we sit at the edge of the boat and watch the sun melt into the sparkling sea.

"How long will you love me?" she asks.

"Always."

She threads her fingers through mine, looks up at me with golden-brown eyes, a smile playing on her lips. "Always isn't forever."

And then, everything just sort of fades away.

Into a darkness that I know I'm never coming back from.

And all I can think is *I'm so sorry*.

OceanofPDF.com

Part Two

The Celestial Record of an Angel

Hart Matías Augusto

Time of death: 8:52 p.m.

OceanofPDF.com

Six
RUBY

~ Five months later ~

Grief is worse than any kind of pain.

It's constant. Endless.

Like a monster that gets off on stealing your heart and mind and sleep and appetite and your whole fucking life. And at first, I let it have at me. I knew the grief was eventually going to swallow me up. And I wanted it to.

My mom didn't know what to do. Gabi was too lost in her own grief to help. It was Serena who got me to finally go see a counselor a couple of weeks after the worst day of my life.

My therapist said I should write everything down, my feelings, things about Hart, or whatever I felt like. But I worried that if I did, I'd float farther away from him. That that kind of "healing" would open places in me that I didn't want to open. That she would do her job so well, I'd somehow move on. And I don't *want* to move on. I just want him.

Now, I wonder, what if my grief is all I have left of Hart?

Numb, I stare at the blank page in my journal. The tears don't come anymore. Not like they did the first few months, when I felt like I was circling the drain every second of the day. I like it better this way. This feeling of control over myself.

Hart. Hart. Hart.

When I first started the journal, that's all I could write. I've got pages and pages of his name scribbled across the page, defying the lines. And then I

started writing other things, one-sentence entries like *I hate summer. How could you leave me? Where are you?*

Those sentences turned into Hart present-tense lists: Hart's favorite things. Things Hart says. Things Hart worries about. But I've run out of lists, and now I guess I'm staring down the one thing I've been so terrified of.

Facing past-tense Hart.

I set the pencil's tip to the page timidly, and for the first time I feel like maybe I can face him, look him in the eye, tell him all the things I haven't been able to say for the last five months.

Dear Hart,

I went back to school a few weeks ago. Everyone lied. Senior year isn't magical or unforgettable, it's blah like the color gray. Yeah, I know—I should give it a chance. That's what you would say if you were here. And if you were here, we'd be eating some burritos and complaining about calc. And you'd be singing the song you were writing that I never got to hear. Did I tell you your dad gave me your songbook? I couldn't accept it. I mean, I thought he should have it. That's what you would want, right? But he insisted, and then about a month after you left, so did your dad. He sold the house and went back to Mexico to be with his family. It felt like losing the last part of you. Anyways, the book's in my closet. I haven't opened it once. It doesn't feel right.

And then there's George. We've sort of drifted apart, like seeing each other was too big of a reminder of you. And what we lost. He took it hard, and you aren't going to like this, but he started cage fighting with his older brothers. I get it. I think the pain makes him feel more alive.

And don't be mad, but I quit swim team. I hate the water. Sometimes I wonder if I could have saved you. I mean, if I had been there. You know I was always the better swimmer.

Mom pops her head through my bedroom door. Her dark hair falls neatly to her shoulders. "I ordered in Chinese food," she says.

I nod, doing my best to take away her worry with little ordinary things like half smiles and shared dinners. I'm furious that everyone's moved on. The earth keeps on turning and people go to work and kids go to school and parents cook and the sun keeps rising and falling. And all I can think is *How? How is that possible?*

Mom's gaze falls on my open journal. I close the book; it's an invitation for her to come in, so she sits on the edge of my bed. "I ran into Coach Winslow."

My old swim coach. I know what she's really telling me is *There's still a place for you on the team.*

"I'm not ready," I tell her. I probably never will be. Just the thought of water conjures up terrifying images of Hart drowning. Funny how something that used to be such a big part of me is now something I can't even begin to relate to.

Mom reaches out and strokes my hair like back when I was little, and I lean into her touch. We sit like that for a beat before she asks, "Do you remember when you were a kid you wanted to set the world record for held breath underwater?"

I snort-chuckle at the memory.

"Then you decided that you should be a mermaid instead," she adds, "and got it into your head that you would grow a tail if you stayed in the water long enough."

"I sat in the bathtub for, like, three hours until my legs got all shriveled."

Mom's smiling, nodding, gently looping my hair around her finger. "You were born for the water . . ."

"Mom . . ."

"And it's okay if you don't want to swim anymore," she says, pulling back so we're facing each other. "Really, I mean it."

"Then why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I know what it feels like to grieve, to lose that kind of love, to think your heart will never ever be the same." She takes a small breath. "And

there isn't a day that I don't miss him."

Something catches in my throat. "I miss Dad too," I say simply, even though I don't remember that much of him. I guess I miss the family we might have been, the memories we might have created. "Love sort of sucks," I blurt. "Like, it always ends in goodbye. No matter what. Someone always leaves even when they don't want to."

"True, but what a lovely ride," she says wistfully. "And in the end, I'd rather let love break me open than never know its depths."

I feel an ache in my chest, one that doesn't want to be there and yet doesn't know where else to go.

Gabi hollers from the kitchen, "I hate cold Chinese. I'm eating!"

Mom stands, and just as she ducks out, I see the spark of hope in her eyes, hope that we're actually talking about Hart, about love and brokenness. I want that hope for her. I really do.

But could I ever want it for me?

With a deep breath, I open the journal and finish the entry I started, surprised by what comes out next.

I should have stopped you. Deep down I knew something bad was going to happen. I could feel those thorny branches of my intuition days before. I'd never felt something so powerful, and I ignored it because I didn't want it to be true. And maybe I was hoping that whatever it was wouldn't turn out to be that bad.

I was wrong.

Anyways, wherever you are—I hope you're happy and you have a guitar. And maybe if you're not too busy, you can send me a sign? Just so I know you're okay, that . . .

And that's where it ends. My words, my hope, my heart.

I close the book just as a cool fall breeze comes into my open window. That's when I see it.

A tiny ladybug resting on my windowsill, daring the wind to sweep it away.

OceanofPDF.com

Seven

HART

I feel like I'm floating through a warm body of thick water, where everything is light and easy and peaceful like a dream. There are no thoughts, no images; there is nothing but perfect calm.

And then, "Hello, Hart."

It's a girl's voice. It slowly pulls me away from this tranquil space. I want to shut her out, but it's too late; a bright light flashes and the quiet floating is erased, gone in a blink.

Now I'm sitting on a stool under a wide canopy of green.

The sunlight sifts through the tree's thick branches. Around me is a meadow filled with white flowers that rise at least six inches out of the earth. For a second, I don't know who I am, where I am, or how I got here. For a second, I don't care. For a second, I take slow, even breaths as I glance around, try to put the pieces together. But the second passes too quickly.

Just then a girl appears right in front of me. She looks my age, maybe a year or two older. She has short dark hair and a solid jawline. Her eyes are two amber stones, shimmering in the sunlight. She's wearing a light-blue leather jacket with silver paint splashes all over it and ripped-up loose-fitting jeans. I could fit a fist through her hoop earrings, which catch glints of light when she turns her head.

"Who are you?" I ask. My voice sounds funny. Distant and close at the same time. Okay, so this is a dream. *That's all it is*, I tell myself.

She tugs on the sleeve of her leather jacket and doesn't answer the question. Not exactly. "I'm here to help you." I swear she's a dead ringer for

Zendaya.

I get to my feet, feeling a sharp twist in my stomach. Why do I feel like I've been punched in the sternum? I'm going to wake up any second. Probably on Ruby's sofa in the middle of a bad movie. But still, I ask, "Help me with what?"

The girl's mouth curves into a subtle grin, the kind reserved for *Hands and arms in the vehicle. It's time for take-off.*

"It's probably better if I show you."

I let out a nervous chuckle. "This is a wild dream."

"This isn't a dream," the girl says, her voice lighter than before. "It was quite noble of you to save that child, Hart, but surely you remember that when you did, you . . . drowned."

And just like that, the reality of her words crash down all around me as the memory surfaces. A memory I don't want to see, to know . . . to accept.

But damned if I don't remember anyway.

"No!" My voice echoes through the trees as the images of that nightmarish moment consume me. "I was . . . I got to the boat!"

The girl fiddles with an earring and leans against the tree, looking down at me. If she wasn't such a killjoy, I'd say she was pretty.

She just keeps staring at me, like she's waiting for me to do something, to react differently. I stretch my memory, searching the last few minutes I remember.

"Are you saying I'm dead?!" I shout. "That this is heaven?" I was expecting heaven to be something better than a flower field, to be honest.

"Look," she says, blinking. Her amber eyes shift to a violet color. It's a cool effect, and if I weren't so freaked out right now, I might appreciate it. "You're not in heaven, and you're not exactly dead."

Okay, I instantly feel better. *I'm not dead. I'm not dead.* That's really good, because Ruby would kill me if I were.

"You were drowning, Hart. I thought you were a goner for sure. As in goodbye, life, hello, heaven. And I felt bad for you."

"Are you saying . . . I wasn't a goner?"

She twists her hoop, shaking her head. “I saw you struggling and I knew it was going to be painful, so I pulled your soul out early to save you from all of that.” Here she looks at me, flashes a bright smile that seems way too practiced. “Isn’t that nice of me?”

Nice? Did she just say nice?

I’m tripping. She can’t hear it, but I am screaming an unhinged scream inside and it takes me a second to wrap my brain around her words. “So, you’re what? An angel?” The dust in my brain starts to settle. “And you . . . stole my life?”

“Yes to the angel bit and no to stealing your life,” she replies almost too quickly. With a sigh she adds, “Like I said, I saved you from the pain and suffering.”

“Okay, well, it’s all good,” I say, thinking there’s a perfect way she can fix this. “Just put me back in my body, right?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

She scrunches up her face. “Uh . . . because your body is at the bottom of the sea.”

“Well, go get it!” I’m in full-blown panic now. How can this be real? My denial is strong, but this reality is way stronger. I can feel the truth in my bones. Well, I guess not bones, exactly, since I don’t have any, thanks to *her*.

“Hart,” she says in a tone that’s like some bullshit shrink trying to talk someone down from a ledge. “It is no longer an option. It’s been five months and—”

“FIVE MONTHS?! No! It was just . . . a few minutes ago!” I’m buzzing all over from the shock.

Our gazes meet. Her eyes are no longer violet. Now they’re a golden color with flecks of black . . . like a predatory bird.

“There is a bright side,” she says. “You can go back to a human life; you can live out your days until your actual scheduled time to die.” She’s grinning while she says this. But there’s a tremble in the right corner of her mouth. “All we have to do is find you a body that is on the verge of death.”

“You mean, like, you’re going to recycle a body?” I grab hold of the stool, feeling suddenly woozy.

“Yes, you must choose a body, and if you don’t, I will choose one for you.”

“Uh, yeah, no, that isn’t going to happen.” I begin to pace. *Another body. Another body.* I let the words and idea settle over me slowly like sediment. And then a bright spot. At least I’d still have *me*.

She exhales loudly as if she has lungs, which I’m pretty sure she does not. “If I don’t correct this situation,” she says, still fiddling with her earring, “there will be enormous consequences.”

“Consequences? Like being taken from the only body I’ve ever known?”

“Not everything is about you, Hart.”

Huh. That’s rich, because I was sort of thinking it was, considering I’m the one without a beating heart. “Pretty sure you’re not going to pay the consequences here,” I mumble.

“You’re wrong.”

I don’t know if I should laugh or scream. “You’re trying to tell me angels get in trouble?”

“You’ve obviously never heard of Lucifer.”

I fold my arms across my chest, probably looking more hostile than I mean to.

“Listen,” she says, “there is a hierarchy to things. And let’s just say no one wants the Death beat. And now it’s quite doubtful I’ll be getting a promotion anytime soon. Unless . . .” She pauses, glances around. “I can remedy this.”

“Seriously? You’re trying to pin your angel career on me?”

“No, Hart,” she says evenly. “I’m trying to fix what I broke, and I need you to be part of the fixing.”

“Hey, no offense or anything . . .” I pause, realizing I don’t know her name.

She gets the hint and says, “Call me Lourdes. Listen, Hart.”

“Just give me a sec.” I’m processing, thinking. A few minutes pass before I can bring myself to say, “And I get to pick the body, right?”

Her eyebrows knit together like she isn't sure she can trust where this is going. "That's what I said."

That seals the deal for me. "Then I want one in El Cielo as close to Ruby as possible." My mind sorts through the possibilities, the pitfalls. "And I need to be a guy and her age or close enough. Preferably dark hair, because Rubes doesn't have a thing for blonds, although that isn't a deal-breaker."

"That might not be an option."

"Okay, fine, if it has to be a blond—"

"You have this all wrong. This isn't a chance for you to reconnect with her. That life is gone. There is no more Hart, no more El Cielo, no more family or Ruby."

"So I get no say in the body you throw me into?" If I had a heart, it would be racing toward full-blown panic mode.

"Bodies are not so easy to come by, Hart. We don't have a warehouse of them just waiting around for souls."

Lourdes glares at me, and for a second she looks more demon than angel. I almost shrink back, but there's too much at stake. I think about my dad, about how this must have split him open, but it's the thought of Ruby that sends an unbearable ache through me. I have to find a way to tell her what happened, to tell her I'm okay and nothing has to change. Five months? She must be out of her mind by now.

Lourdes reads a piece of paper that's just magically appeared in her hand. Except that it's blank. She scans the doc like there are words there. Must be angel script or something. "No. No. No," she says as she reads.

"No, what?"

"None of these bodies will do," she says, her gaze still locked on the paper. "Too old, too sick, too . . ." Then her eyes light up. She looks up at me and grins. "We might be in luck!"

Luck? I want to say, thinking of the poor guy about to kick the bucket, but I say nothing.

A second later we're in a hospital, walking briskly down a busy corridor.

We walk into a dim room. There's a guy in the bed hooked up to a machine. I can't see his face because it's turned away from us toward the

window framing a dark sky.

Lourdes is looking at the paper again. “He’s seventeen; he’s been in a coma for the last two weeks. Motorcycle accident. At least he was wearing a helmet. It says here that he was supposed to make it, but seems things have changed.”

“Hold up,” I say. “What do you mean *supposed* to make it.”

“Life is precarious, Hart. Circumstances change on this side of things all the time.” Lourdes glances down at the blank page again. “His last breath will be in approximately . . .” She looks up at the wall clock. “Four and a half minutes from now. Wow, we really cut this one close. So what’s it going to be?”

A terrible feeling of remorse builds in my gut. Like, what about this guy’s family? Won’t they be able to tell it’s me the impostor and not their son? And then for the first time I think about my mom. Even though she cut out when I was a baby, I bet my death hit her hard. Sure, she wasn’t around much, but she still sent me postcards from her vacations. She even came to a few of my events over the years, like graduations and Communion and even a birthday or two. But she never stayed. There was always a new job, new boyfriend, new place.

“Hart, we’ve got two minutes,” Lourdes reminds me, tapping her bare foot impatiently against the hospital floor that is likely teeming with microorganisms. “Do you accept this body? And before you reject it, I need to remind you that finding a young body is no easy task. And I see nothing else on my list other than a thirty-two-year-old chainsmoker whose lungs aren’t in great shape, to be honest. So that means it’s time to say yes.”

“It’s not that easy,” I blurt. “I’m going to live with this decision for . . .”

“A puny single lifetime,” she puts in. “A blink. You really are making this so much bigger than it needs to be. One minute.”

I walk around the bed to get a look at the guy’s face, the face I’m going to wear for the rest of this lifetime.

And that’s when I stop in my tracks. I don’t need to ask Lourdes what his name is. I know him.

Jameson Romanelli.

OceanofPDF.com

Eight

RUBY

Gabi's slumped in the car's passenger seat watching the gray world go by with her ski hat pulled down low. It's seventy-two degrees and I want to tell her she looks ridiculous, but it's not worth the battle. Because all we've done for the last five months is battle.

Everything about her is angry. From her thick black eyeliner to her shit attitude. So many times, I've felt like screaming in her face, telling her that she doesn't need Hart the way I do. That she doesn't have the right to morph into some woe-is-me story that isn't even about her. She has no idea how empty I feel, how most days it's like I'm bleeding out. How I've become like a shell of who I used to be. How I can't access the simplest things like a good dream or even a smile.

I think in some twisted way Gabi blames me for his death. Like maybe I should have worked harder to stop him from going that night, that I never should have suggested we get jobs with Miriam. And however much she blames me, I've blamed myself ten times more.

I've gone over that day in my head a million times, thinking of all the ways I could have kept him home and didn't. Trying to remember the last things he said to me. The last smile. The last touch.

And with each day that goes by, I feel like my memories of him get a little farther away, and I'm terrified I'll wake up one day and not be able to remember the way his right eyebrow lifted a tiny bit higher than his left when he was about to smile; the way his eyes went all out of focus right before he kissed me; the way his hands looked, rough and calloused, with that jagged

scar over his right thumb from some accident in his dad's shop. I'm terrified I'll forget all the things that made him Hart.

As we pull up to the school, I ask, "Are you going to need a lift home?"

She pushes her hat back so I can see her glaring eyes. "How come you never talk about him?"

I'm stunned into silence. I don't know what to say. *It hurts too much? I don't want to make you sadder, madder? I don't want you to hate me more?*

I look away, focusing on a smashed bug on the windshield, and she says, "If Inez died, I'd never stop talking about her."

Inez is Gabi's girlfriend of the last four months. How can she even compare *this* to that?

She goes on with, "And Hart would want you to . . . you know, talk, to live."

Tears pool in my eyes, stinging like acid, but I don't let her see. And I don't let them fall.

"He'd want you to keep his memory alive," she says. And then she's gone, and I can't even turn in her direction to watch her go, because I'm trembling with shock. Not because she mentioned him but because this is the first time she's pulled the *what Hart would want* card.

I hate her for it. The hate fills me with guilt because she's my sister, and the guilt turns to anger, and the anger turns me to ice. And the ice makes me nice and numb.

Serena's tapping on my window.

I jump out of the car, tugging my book bag with me, but it gets stuck on the seat belt. "Hey," I say.

"What's your deal?" she asks, examining me like the answer she's looking for is written on my skin somewhere. Except no skin is showing. I've got on an old band sweatshirt and a pair of boyfriend jeans that are so big I have to cinch the waist with a belt.

"What do you mean?" I say, playing innocent as I jerk my bag free.

"I was calling your name, tapping on the window for, like, ever. You had that faraway look again and I thought I should save you from your thoughts."

My icy center hardens. "I don't need saving."

“It was metaphorical.” She sounds out each syllable, blowing a bleached strand of hair out of her face.

Serena is all of five feet two inches, but she’s got the personality and swagger of a lady boss in stilettos. She’s the most goal-oriented, focused person I know, and when she wants something? She’s relentless. She always says it’s in her blood, that no way is she wasting the opportunities her parents gave her by coming here from Mexico when she was a baby. I admire that about her.

And she’s got a fierce temper that no one wants to be on the wrong side of. Believe me. Once in fifth grade she punched a guy in the stomach for making some kid she didn’t even know cry. And last year when she found out her boyfriend was cheating on her, her revenge was classic Serena, told in three acts.

Act one: She went ballistic on him. He begged her forgiveness.

Act two: She broke up with him, so he ended up with the other girl, posting their pics all over social media.

Act three: Serena keyed his car, then became friends with the girl, who ended up choosing Serena over the boyfriend.

She’s also the most loyal friend in the universe, and she’ll stick by me forever, no matter how much grief I swallow.

The ten-minute warning bell rings across the senior parking lot. “Hey, my mom’s out of town this weekend,” I say, “if you want to come over and hang out.” Mom’s an insurance rep and her job takes her up and down the coast. I sort of like it, the independence, the freedom, the not having to face her constant worried expression.

“Tempting but . . .”

“But what?” Serena has hung out with me almost every weekend since Hart. My other so-called friends have peeled themselves away one by one. Maybe five months of swallowing the grief with me has finally become too much for her too.

Packs of kids mill around, waiting for the final bell before they race to their morning classes. “Yuli’s throwing a beach party tonight,” Serena says.

But I'm only half listening. As we approach the white stucco building, I get that same drop in my stomach. There are too many Hart memories in these halls. When he first died, I would go out of my way to reroute myself so I wouldn't have to see them. But the small campus made it impossible, so now it feels like his ghost is everywhere.

"Nothing big or wild," Serena goes on, "just a bonfire, volleyball, and some sangria. Want to come?"

I love Serena for inviting me out over and over and over. All my no's must be exhausting, but she keeps trying. Like I said, relentless.

"I . . . probs should watch the house," I say. But what I really want to say is *I hate the ocean*.

I haven't been near it in five months.

"I bet your house will make it through the night."

I crack a halfhearted smile. "You never know."

A hip-hop song blares from someone's car as Serena says, "You can't hide from the sea forever."

I clutch my bag tighter. "Why not?" As soon as I graduate, I plan to get as far away from the ocean as I can, which I've mapped to South Dakota. Not exactly my vibe. But it's better than here.

Serena stops, takes hold of my arms, and spins me to face her. She's got that determined expression on her face. "We've been friends since second grade, and I know you and I know how awful all this is. Like, it sucks bigger than anything. But it's just a bonfire, Ruby, and if you hate it, you can leave. I'll even leave with you, and we'll sit and watch your house together."

Maybe she's right. Maybe it won't kill me to socialize. To try to find a new normal.

Hart would want you to . . .

Just as I'm about to agree to the bonfire, Serena's phone vibrates, and she glances down at the screen in her hand at the same time Martin comes flying in from my left.

"Holy shit," Serena says at the exact moment Martin asks, "Can you believe it?"

"Believe what?" I ask.

“Jameson . . .” is all I hear Martin say as Serena’s eyes find mine and she says, “He’s awake.”

OceanofPDF.com

Nine

HART/JAMESON

I stare out of Jameson's eyes.

The world looks different.

It's hard to explain, but it's like looking through a filter that dulls everything from color to texture. And things are blurry, coming in and out of focus.

The instant I entered his body, it was like stepping into an ice bath. His lungs didn't want to let me breathe; his mind didn't want to let me think, and his heart was thrashing around like it knew there was an intruder. And while I was trying to breathe and think, and not have a coronary, I heard Jameson's voice. I thought he'd rage. I thought he might tell me to get the hell out of his body. But no. You want to know what he said? What his last words were before he checked out for good?

"Don't waste it, man."

"I won't." And those were my first words with his voice. *His* voice!

I clutch my chest and start to hyperventilate. Lourdes rushes to the bedside, fanning me uselessly with her hands. "Hart! Is this about the blurry vision? Because that will correct itself shortly."

Jameson's body feels like it might explode. It takes a minute for me to catch my breath, to steady the trembles running up and down his spine. "My voice . . . It's *his* voice."

Jesus, how am I ever going to get used to this? I look at my/his hands. They're cut up pretty good. Scrapes and gashes trail up to his elbows. And for the first time I feel the pain. A killer combo of throbbing, burning, aching.

I've only been drunk once, and the next day I wanted to die. That's what this feels like, only infinitely worse, like I've been put through a meat grinder.

"What did you expect?" There's a casual tone to Lourdes's words that sends a jolt of resentment through me.

"Expect?" I groan as the sarcasm expands in my chest. "Oh, I don't know. To start senior year as myself, *not* as Jameson Romanelli." I tug on the hospital gown, feeling sick while Lourdes waits and watches, giving me a soft, understanding, practiced expression. Kicking off the sheets, I inspect Jameson's messed-up legs. He must have really eaten it on that bike, but at least he had the sense to wear a helmet. How the hell did he not break a single bone?

"Well," Lourdes says like it's an announcement. "This body looks good on you. And look at the bright side. You'll have new skills you didn't have before, like . . ." She glances down at the paper again. "Like playing football."

She cannot be serious!

"I don't want to play football!" Who gives a shit about a freakin' game? Then my mind races to one depressing conclusion. "What if I can't sing anymore?"

"Hart," she says gently but with a pinch of irritation, "I told you that your old life is gone."

I'm already shaking my head, wishing I could find a way to explain to Lourdes that she's got it all wrong. "Music is more than a body or a voice, it's a feeling, it's spirit, it's . . ." I make eye contact with her now. "It's everything."

She sits on the edge of the bed without making a single indentation. "Go ahead. Try to sing."

"Here?"

"Where else?"

"I feel like I've been crushed under a two-ton wall, and you want me to sing?"

Lourdes looks annoyed. "Do you think it's possible for you to follow instructions just once?"

“Depends.”

Her eyes melt from silver to gold as she waves a hand over me. In an instant the pain that was living in this body half a second ago just sort of floats away.

“That’s freaking amazing.” I look down at my legs. “Hey, how about the bruises and scratches?”

“You humans are all the same—never enough.”

I immediately see her point. “No, I mean . . . I’m grateful. Thanks.”

“Plus, people would notice vanishing wounds.” She raises her right eyebrow. “Now, can we move on to the task at hand?”

“Task?” So much is happening so fast, I’m having a hard time keeping up.

“A song?” she reminds me.

A tremor courses through me. How can the thing that was once as easy as taking a breath now feel like skydiving without a parachute? I clear my throat a couple of times before taking a shaky breath and singing a few simple lyrics I wrote last summer. “ ‘The cab’s dry and the pavement’s wet.’ ”

My heart sinks. Even though Jameson’s voice isn’t terrible, it isn’t good, but worse, it isn’t mine. None of him is *mine*.

“See?” Lourdes says with a painted-on smile. “Not bad at all.”

“I suppose you couldn’t wave a hand and . . .”

I don’t even get to the end of my sentence before she barks, “No.” I sit with the pity and regret for a few seconds, maybe even a full minute, and then I decide I can’t let it bum me out. I can’t let *any of this* bum me out. Not when I have so many other hurdles to jump. I can take lessons, I can practice, I can learn music all over again.

Within thirty minutes of my waking up, Jameson’s mom, Whitney, gets to the hospital.

I heard his parents were divorced and neither remarried. Jameson’s little sister is in the first or second grade, I think. I’m not sure why she isn’t here, so for now, Whitney’s the whole crew.

And she’s all over me, kissing my forehead, squeezing my hand, dripping tears and snot onto the bed. Telling me how happy she is that I’m awake before telling me I can never drive a motorcycle again.

It's so awkward, I have no idea how to even act. So I just nod and agree to whatever it is she says, wishing the whole time I could get the hell out of here. I need air and sky and sea. I need to breathe. To get used to this skin I'm in.

"Your dad was here the last few days," Whitney says like the words are killing her. "But he had to get back."

"Back . . ."

"Back to Colorado? To his business?"

Lourdes checks her sheet of paper, which to be honest seems kind of archaic. "He's a big real estate tycoon in Colorado."

"Right," I say to Whitney, stopping myself before I blurt, *His business must be really important.*

"But don't worry," Whitney says, stroking my hair back. "I called him to tell him you're okay. He wanted to come back, but after your last blowup, I thought maybe you should take some time and check in when you're up to it."

Blowup? What could have been so bad that a coma couldn't fix it? I glance over at Lourdes. She sighs and rolls her eyes. "Not every little detail is in the report, Hart."

"I'll check with the docs to see when we can get out of here," Whitney says brightly.

Then, by habit, I say, "Está bien."

"Oh, Lord," Lourdes squeaks, shaking her head.

My eyes pop wide and my body freezes. Shit! Then my mind starts rapid-firing questions. Does Jameson know Spanish? Did he take Spanish classes? How the hell should I know? All I know about him is he's a spoiled rich kid who stiffed my dad and can throw a ball like lightning. And then I remember how little Ruby thinks of the guy and my heart sinks.

Whitney cocks her head to the side, confused. "Jameson, honey. Are you okay?"

I lie back, twist my mouth to one side. "Just tired."

"The doctor said you might have some blips, or gaps in memory, but don't you worry about that. It'll all come back within a few weeks, and I'll make

sure you have the best medical team available.”

Then she ventures off to talk to the “person in charge.” And by talk, I mean convince, coerce, demand or any other verb that makes sure Whitney Romanelli gets her way. I guess when a wing of the hospital is named after your family, you have some serious pull.

An hour later, I’ve been put through some basic tests, including walking the corridor on my own. The doc seems satisfied and gives me the green light to check out of this place, *after* she monitors me for another day.

Whitney goes to get some “acceptable” snacks while Lourdes groans. “I really don’t want to hang out in this dreary place for another day, do you?”

“No, but why can’t you leave now that you found me a body?” I whisper when the doctor steps out to talk to a nurse about another patient.

“I can’t. Not yet.” But she doesn’t give any more details. “And you’re fine. Fit as a fiddle.”

“How do you know?”

She glances at the paper still in her hands. Her mouth starts to curl but stops short of a smile. “Says so here.”

I wonder what other details are on the single page and how so much can be recorded in such a small space. “Oh yeah?” I say. “What else does it say? Anything about Ruby?”

Lourdes just shakes her head. “You really don’t listen.” Then she sighs and says, “I’ll be right back.”

A few minutes later the doc comes in again, followed by Lourdes, and says, “Good news. You’re all clear to check out of here now.”

I shoot Lourdes a knowing look.

She lets out a laugh that’s halfway to a guffaw, and it takes everything in me not to shoot her a death glare. “An angel friend of mine owed me,” she says, looking supremely impressed with herself, “and he happens to have the ability to manipulate the human mind but only on small matters—never anything related to the heart, so don’t even ask.”

Well, that’s sort of terrifying, I think, but I don’t linger too long on the thought, because I’m going to see Ruby today. I’m going to tell her

everything. And if she doesn't believe me, then I'll just throw some memories out there that only she and I knew, like in the movies.

And then once she gets over the shock of it all, she'll throw her arms around me, bury her face in my neck for a minute before she looks at me with those fierce eyes, and then she'll kiss me. I mean, it'll be hard for her to get used to kissing Jameson, especially since she can't stand the guy, but I know Ruby. She'll get over it, or at least close her eyes until she does because she'll be so goddamn happy that I'm back.

I'm back!

• • •

A couple of hours later, I'm in a new-smelling Jaguar with Whitney, watching the dusky sky grow darker. It reminds me of a lyric I wrote once: *still skies turning, turning gray till only the dark and me remain.*

Lourdes is sitting in the back seat, staring out the window, twisting her earring while Whitney's hands tremble at the wheel, but I don't say anything because I'm afraid she's going to melt into a puddle of tears again. She's babbling, barely taking a breath.

"Are you feeling all right? Want me to roll down a window? What do you want for dinner? Just name it. Victoria is going to be so excited. She's at ballet camp, but she'll be home tomorrow night. Did I already tell you that? Your friends have been calling, stopping by. Want me to invite them to dinner?"

At this I shake my head. I'm not ready to see anyone but Ruby.

Lourdes says, "Wow, she has a lot of words penned up in her, doesn't she?"

Whitney goes on and on, hitting all the polite points but ignoring the real questions about Jameson's drinking problem. A problem that I'm sure has everything to do with his motorcycle accident.

And then, she turns down the radio that was barely audible to begin with and says in a low voice, "And don't worry, we'll take care of the ticket and Jim will get you out of that court date."

“Court?”

“It was a DUI.”

I clear my throat. “Did . . . anyone else get hurt?”

Whitney inhales like it’s going to be her last breath. “Thank God, no. You hit a chain-link fence and were thrown off the bike.” Her entire body shudders like just talking about this is too much. “But we can worry about all that later. Let’s just focus on your recovery right now.”

“Humans always put things off till later,” Lourdes says. “The great procrastinators.”

I ignore her, trying to figure out how the hell I’m going to pretend to be Jameson when I don’t have a single one of his memories, including who Jim is. “My head’s a little fuzzy,” I say. “Who’s Jim?”

“Our attorney? Your godfather?”

Oh. Yeah, I guess I have a lot of learning in the School of Jameson to do. In the meantime, I’ll blame the accident. Call it selective amnesia. Then my mind circles back to *court*.

“Am I going to jail?” I ask.

Whitney stiffens, and the whole doting mom demeanor vanishes. Her voice hardens as she says, “Jameson, you’re a Romanelli. Romanellis do *not* go to jail. Jim will handle all of it.”

Only one word escapes my mouth. “How?”

She throws me a look that tells me I should know this. “We contributed to the judge’s campaign last year and the DA is a friend from college, so you do the math.”

The air in the car feels thinner all of a sudden, and I’m not sure how to respond or how to process it, because when my cousin Luis from L.A. got pulled over for a “routine” traffic stop, his car got searched and he was taken in for no good reason. In the end, he was just glad to get out of there without a crime pinned to his back. But Jameson, with his driving record, can wreck a bike and fence, while trashed, and get away with it?

My voice of sarcasm rears its ugly, angry head. *Cool. So good to be rich. Awesome. So glad I’m white.*

“And there we have privilege at its finest, folks,” Lourdes chirps from the back seat.

And for once I agree with the angel.

OceanofPDF.com

Ten

HART/JAMESON

Once I get to the house, it takes me a minute or two to take it all in.

Floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Pacific, expansive rooms with deliberately sparse furniture, massive abstract paintings, and bouquets of big white flowers everywhere that give off the scent of a funeral home.

The lush multi-terraced backyard looks like it belongs in a resort: perfectly spaced palms, meticulously trimmed hedges, and a sparkling blue Olympic-sized pool lined with lounge chairs that go on forever.

And then there's Jameson's room. It's huge with its own bathroom, a deck that overlooks the ocean, and a bed I'm pretty sure is custom, because it looks way bigger than a king size.

Even though the space is impressive, it's also super impersonal. There aren't any photos or knickknacks anywhere. It's like a hotel room, a *very expensive* hotel room. I like it, mostly because it's so tidy and there isn't a speck of dust anywhere.

I can hear Whitney clanking around the kitchen downstairs, barking orders at the housekeeper as they put together Jameson's "favorite" dinner, which I really hope is chicken enchiladas or caldo, but I'm pretty sure it won't be. That's another thing. This house echoes like it's an empty shell of something waiting to be filled up.

"Way to choose a cushy life," Lourdes says to me as she opens the massive iron-framed door to the deck outside. A cool ocean breeze flutters in, twisting the sheer drapes.

I hope the sheets are clean too, I think, before my brain seizes on the idea that I'm going to sleep in a dead guy's bed with all those skin and hair particles. Not gonna chance it. I start to strip the bed.

"What are you doing?" Lourdes says.

"Uh—I'm going to wash the sheets."

"You do realize it's your body that slept there last, right?"

Good point.

"Still want to freshen things, if you don't mind."

I toss the laundry to the side, plop onto the mattress, and stare at Jameson's hands. They're bigger up close. The guy is lean, but he's still a solid rock. And unlike me, he's super white. And I'm not talking skin color, because Latine gente like me can be white-passing; it's more of what's missing. Like no spicy cumin or pepper aromas in the air, no blaring music, and no guitars leaning against the walls. And then I realize what I really mean is that what's missing is . . . my home. My dad.

I don't want to think about how awful this must be for him.

There's a mirror above Jameson's dresser, and I want to steer clear of it like I did at the hospital and in the car. But I have to get it over with eventually, and maybe it's important for me to get used to this face before I ask Ruby to. Clenching my fists at my side, I stand and make my way over.

Brown hair brushed forward so it touches the tops of my thick eyebrows, long angular face, and hazel eyes. "Hey!" I practically shout. "It's me!" I'm so pumped that I see my face in the reflection that I almost leap into the air.

"I forgot to mention that," Lourdes tells me as she closes the deck door and comes inside. "But it's only for the transition phase."

"Transition?"

"Until your spirit accepts this body, to make it easier on you. We've found that humans are very attached to their faces."

Well, clearly I am not the first person in history to have to recycle a body, and something about that is . . . weirdly comforting?

I nod. "Really good thinking."

Lourdes makes a face. "Yes, most universal designs are."

“Any chance Ruby could see the real me too?” I’m filled with hope that the answer might be, could be, *claro*. But all I get is a big neon flashing *no* followed by, “I already told you, your life as Hart Augusto is over.”

I hear the words, but I don’t accept them. “I have to see her,” I say, feeling both ready and antsy.

I see the refusal in Lourdes’s eyes first, then the determination, and I know that no way am I going to break it, so I pretend to go along with her.

I try a different approach. “What about George?” But I already know the answer before she starts shaking her head.

“My dad? Can I at least check in on him, make sure he’s okay?”

“No.”

“No? That’s it?”

“No, because he no longer lives here, Hart. He sold the property and moved back to Mexico to be with family.”

My whole body goes stiff. Our house is gone? The shop? Everything? “Who . . . who bought it?”

“A couple from D.C. They’re turning it into a rental property.”

I think I might throw up. D.C.? Rental property? My voice is shaking when I ask, “What about the shop?”

Lourdes says, “It’s been renovated too.”

Images of some ridiculous overdecorated Airbnb flash across my mind, including all those strangers going in and out of my home! “How do you know all this?” I ask.

“It’s my job to do the homework, Hart, and to read your file. It helps me be more effective.”

Effective. As if I’m a project. The word gets under my skin. “But my dad’s gotta be out of his mind.”

Lourdes looks away like she’s just now realizing the far-reaching magnitude of all this. “I’m sorry about that. I really am. But you wouldn’t believe what the human heart can endure.”

I’m actually glad my dad’s with family, ideally chilling under a shady tree with a *cerveza*, and if there’s a way to get him a message, to ease his pain, I’ll

find it. But right now? I need to see Ruby. Alone. Which means I'm going to have to ditch the angel.

"I'd better get cleaned up," I say, pointing to the bathroom. "You're not going to follow or be able to see or anything weird like that, are you?"

"No, Hart. I do have my limitations."

"Yeah? Could you name them?" I'm not being a pain in the ass. I'm genuinely curious.

She sighs, counting off on each finger: "I'm not a mind reader, I can't follow you everywhere—or anywhere, for that matter. Not unless you think of me or invite me to, and I don't watch you 24/7. I have better things to do."

Good to know.

So I've got a death angel who wants a promotion, can ease pain, and can *be* a pain, but fortunately, she isn't some omniscient power. I commit each of her rules to memory, thinking my escape plan might just work if I can keep the angel out of my head.

I take a quick shower and yeah, that's uh, weird. As soon as I'm dressed in a pair of jeans and a hoodie (which was hard to find because nearly all Jameson's shirts are golf polos, and that is so not happening), I slip out the bathroom's other exit into the next room. It's filled with golf memorabilia—shelved trophies, two sets of clubs, a dozen hats, and framed tournament photos. Everything his room isn't. It sort of feels like . . . a shrine.

Was Jameson a golfer? That would definitely explain all those polos. Oh, shit. I am not hanging out at the country club so I can spend all day trying to hit a tiny ball into a hole. Maybe I can tell everyone the accident killed the golf gene or something. As I step closer, I see that none of the photos are of Jameson, and none of the trophies bear his name. Only Richard, his dad. And it's not all golf. There's a bunch of old football pictures too. His dad wearing a jersey with the number eleven on it, just like Jameson. But what's up with this setup if his parents are divorced?

Before Lourdes realizes I'm not coming back, I fly down the stairs, and in an instant, I slip out of the house and land in the ten-car garage, which is blowing my mind. There's a freaking Rolls in here! Jesus, why would anyone need so many cars?

There's a series of hooks on the wall near the door with labels: SILVER BMW, RED BMW, BLACK BENZ, WHITE RANGE ROVER like this is a valet garage. There's also a label: STAFF 4RUNNER. The staff . . . have a car? Then my eyes land on a label that makes my heart sing.

I grab the keys and race toward the 390-horsepower convertible Porsche 718 Boxster. She's a sleek gray with black leather interior, and I can practically feel the way she's going to hug the road before I even open the door. Then, like I've been hit by lightning, I realize this car isn't just any car. It's the same one my dad worked on, the same one Jameson decided he wasn't impressed with so he reduced my dad's bill. Anger boils beneath my skin. And as illogical as it sounds, I want to punch myself/Jameson in the face. I pace, take a few breaths, calm my nerves, decide that being pissed off at a dead guy is a monumental waste of time.

With deep respect and admiration, I cruise the beauty out of the garage and down the long winding hill where I cut right onto the open road. And then I let her rip. "Holy shit!" I shout. This baby can fly. God, my dad would love this.

The sea air blows through the cabin, and man, it's never smelled or felt so good. I really need some tunes, but I've got no phone. Or driver's license, which means I need to chill the mad driving. At a stop sign I check out the playlist on the car's music display titled: "Needing Tequila." "Hot Hot Hot." "Shit List." "Mood Is Murder."

"All righty then," I say, going with "Shit List" because why not?

And man, oh man, Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" pounds from the speakers, and everything feels like it's falling into place. That's what music does to me, or I should say the right music. It changes me. It makes me believe things are possible. It can take me from pissed to bliss or send me back in time.

And right now? I'm just flying with Steppenwolf down an open road toward the girl I love. Okay, so at least Jameson's family's into classic rock.

It'll take me ten minutes to get to Ruby's from here.

The engine rumbles like there's thunder beneath the hood as I slip into Ruby's and my neighborhood where the houses make you feel like you're in

some old Hollywood era. They're mostly Spanish style, with red-tiled roofs, bougainvillea crawling up the walls, neatly mowed lawns, and arched porches. I pull up to her house. My heart is threatening to claw through my chest, but I don't slow down. I don't even take a second to make a plan, to decide what I'm going to say. I just need to see her.

As I march across the lawn, I hear a voice coming from the side of the house.

“What are you doing here?”

And it stops me in my tracks.

OceanofPDF.com

Eleven

HART/JAMESON

I turn to find Gabi gripping a full trash bag.

Wow—she looks taller, more grown up. Can that happen in five months, or are Jameson’s eyes playing tricks on me?

“Oh . . . uh . . .” I stammer, lost for words.

She tosses the bag into the bin. “I heard you woke up, but I didn’t know you were out of the hospital,” Gabi says, trailing through the shadows toward me.

“Yeah, um . . . I’m out.” Smooth, Hart. Real smooth.

“I see that. But why are you *here*?”

“I . . . I’m looking for Ruby.”

She takes a second like she isn’t sure what to do with the words. I guess I can’t blame her, given that she’s probably never even talked to Jameson before now. Then in typical suspicious Gabi fashion, she says, “You just got out of the hospital and you’re looking for my sister? Why?”

I nearly laugh at her boldness, but bite the urge back down, not wanting to piss her off. She hates when people treat her like a kid. “I just have a quick question—is she home?”

Gabi shakes her head slowly. The half-moon slips from behind a thick night cloud.

“Do you know where she is?” I ask.

“Probably.”

Okay, she’s going to make this hard. “Can you tell me? Like I said, I just have to ask her something.”

I don't blame Gabi for wanting to protect Ruby from the trouble magnet that is Jameson Romanelli. And that only reminds me I'm going to have to work my ass off to change his rep.

Her gaze flicks to the Porsche. "Nice car."

"Thanks." I almost offer her a spin but I'd only sound like a creeper.

"Why don't you just call her?" she says, crossing her arms.

"No phone. Look," I say, deciding to appeal to her pity. Underneath it all, Gabi's a softy; she just doesn't like to show it. "It's been a wild day," I go on, "and I know you don't know me, but I swear . . ." Even though I'm speaking in Jameson's voice, I reach for my own tone, my own inflection. "I just need to talk to her. Please."

"I do know you. Or did you forget we have a class together?"

Shit. "But you're just a sophomore."

"A really smart one."

"Right . . . Uh, my memory . . . It's kind of messed up a little, so I don't remember. Sorry."

Gabi keeps staring with those dark eyes made darker by the nighttime. Finally, she says, "Give me a ride and I'll show you where she is."

"You want me . . . to give you a ride." Code for *I just got out of the hospital. I've totaled more than a couple of cars. My license is probably suspended. Why would you ever trust your life with a guy whose nickname is Crash?*

Jameson always swore it was his football nickname since he "isn't afraid to crash into anyone," not something a QB usually does, but no one ever believed it. Everyone knew exactly where it came from. And now it seems so wrong.

Even though I know it's a death wish because Ruby is a ballbuster, I agree to Gabi's terms. She's in the car in less than ten seconds and I pull away from the curb. She still wears that body lotion that smells like coconuts with a dash of sunscreen.

"So, where exactly are we going?" I ask when we reach the end of the street.

“She’s at a bonfire, down at the beach. This car is so cool.” She looks over at me. “Are you sure you’re okay to drive and everything?”

I nod, thinking the question comes a little too late.

And I don’t know why but I feel a painful sensation in my chest that spreads to my legs and races back up to my heart with a one-two punch. Beach? I just died and she’s at the beach?

Well, technically, it’s been five months for her, but still!

The whole nine-and-a-half-minute drive, Gabi is touching things in the car, opening and closing the glove compartment, tracing her fingers over the leather and polished wood while I hold Ruby’s smiling face in my mind, imagining how amazing it’s going to be to hold her again. Here’s the thing about love and time: you always think you’re going to have enough, that there’s an endless supply. And then in an instant it’s all gone.

“Oh, hey,” Gabi says. “Is this yours?” She hands me a cell phone she’s unearthed in the glove compartment’s layers of paper.

I fire the phone up. It looks brand new with a full charge. The screen saver is black with white letters: Romanelli Porsche.

Gabi’s leaning over to get a good look. “Wow! You have phones for your cars?”

“Seems like it,” I say. “It makes sense, I mean, if you lose your regular phone or whatever.”

“Or if you’re just super rich and have no idea how to spend your money.”

I chuckle. “That too.” My nerves are killing me so I decide to play some more “Shit List.” This time it’s Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’.”

I’m tapping the steering wheel to the rhythm when Gabi looks at me. “Got anything else?”

I shoot her a playful glare. “What?! You don’t like this song?” I feel affronted.

“I didn’t take you for an old dude who listens to ancient music.”

I shudder-gasp. “You mean classic. This is, like, from the best era. I mean, really listen. It’s all heart and it’s honest and authentic and wild.”

I sing a few lyrics, sadly off-key, but whatever.

After I park the car, Gabi turns to me. “Don’t tell her about this, ’kay?”

“About what?”

She doesn't answer. My big bro radar fires up. “Where are you going?”

“Some friends are chilling down shore. See ya.”

“Well, be careful,” I say as she takes off. She whirls back to face me, giving me a confused look before heading out.

I cross the parking lot and make my way to the north end where we've always built bonfires. I can see a couple of blazes from here, orange sparks flying into the darkness.

I stick close to the shadows, lurking, searching the small familiar crowd for Ruby. I spot Serena and figure Ruby can't be too far away. But she isn't here.

I tug the hoodie over my head, deciding it's best not to draw any attention. And then I see the glow of a screen on the rock formations about fifteen feet above me. In the faint light I can make out Ruby's face, her dark eyes roving back and forth across the screen, reading or studying something. Probably some travel article to a destination no one's ever heard of. Suddenly, it isn't like it's been a couple of days. For the first time I feel the span of time we've been apart, and my heart aches with the worst kind of pain.

A slow song plays in the background, something about an *angel*. The second I hear the word, I of course think of Lourdes and boom—she appears next to me, startling me. “Shit, can you give a warning?” I blurt.

“Hart,” she says angrily. “You are the most annoying, ungrateful, rebellious human I have ever met.”

“I doubt that.” I'm the least rebellious guy I know. Then I nearly laugh at the irony that I'm also in the most rebellious guy's body.

“You cannot just take off like that. Do you have any idea what could—”

I ignore her, my gaze locked on Ruby.

“You're not listening,” Lourdes goes on, but I'm climbing the rock now. My only focus is Ruby.

“You're making a huge mistake,” Lourdes says, appearing at the top of the rock like she's going to throw me down to the ground. “Please listen to me!”

I reach the top. Ruby is at the boulder's edge, staring out to sea. With her back to me, I inch closer.

The waves break against the rocks, misting the air with salt water. And the water's touch, the scent, takes me back to the day I drowned. In these exact waters. My heart is punching hard, like it's going for a heavyweight title. A blanket of fog rolls in, nearly masking Ruby from my view.

"Ruby?" I say, keeping my distance.

I stop breathing as she gets to her feet. Then slowly, she turns to face me. Her gaze meets mine, holds me in place, and for a brief moment we are the only people in the entire world. There is no before or after. Only now.

A spray of ocean erupts from the fissure between us, limiting my view.

"Jameson?" she says so quietly that I barely hear her voice over the ocean. It takes everything in me not to run to her, not to wrap her in a hug. And then all logic is gone and I'm operating on pure instinct. I leap across the gap in the rocks and rush toward her. *It's me, Hart!* The words are stuck in my brain, refusing to come out. Why can't I say the words?

Something's wrong. Everything is still. The waves, the fires, Ruby. I spin toward the angel.

"What did you do?"

"I stopped the moment," Lourdes says, "to save you from making a disastrous mistake."

I don't slow down to ask questions; those can come later. I hurry to Ruby's side. Her hair is longer. Her skin paler, like she hasn't seen the sun in way too long. Still, she looks more beautiful than I've ever seen her. She also looks sad, lost, and my heart feels like it's in free fall.

I trace a finger over the faint half-moon scar above her right eye. I was with her the day she got it. She was eight years old and decided that she could do a genie-drop from the uneven bars at the park. I told her it was too dangerous, but as usual she didn't listen. Her genie-drop ended up being a genie-flop, and the next thing I knew, she was bleeding and laughing. Laughing!

"You're hurt!" I cried.

"You think it'll scar?" Her small hand went to the wound and then she smiled. "I've always wanted one."

Lourdes's insistent voice brings me back to the moment. "You have to listen to me, Hart. You are incapable of telling her anything about your memories or any other clue that you're Hart. And there are no loopholes; there's no way around it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Why? And please don't say universal balance."

Lourdes stares at me, unblinking. "What do you think would happen if you told her?"

The question is like ice water to the face. "Yeah, she'd freak for sure and not believe me, but eventually I could make her see. I know I could."

"It's not just what you can't tell her," Lourdes says, sounding more frustrated by the second. "It's what I've been trying to get through that thick skull of yours. You can't go back to Hart's life. Ever! And that means Ruby too. It means everyone you knew. No one can know the truth and it's not my rule, Hart. I'm sorry. Really. But that is the way of things."

I tear my eyes from Ruby and meet the angel's gaze, refusing to believe what she's telling me. My hope is all I have, it's the one thing I'm clinging to, the one thing that's getting me through this madness.

"What will happen if I try to tell her?"

"Your tongue will get tied, and the words won't come no matter how hard you try to speak them," Lourdes says.

"Then I'll figure out another way."

"There is none."

"There has to be." I was raised on *There is always a way*. "How about you tell her?" I swear the universal laws are only to torture humans, not angels.

Lourdes rubs her forehead. "I could do that, but the knowledge wouldn't last. She'd forget anyways. The human mind cannot hold the vastness of the spirit world. There is a reason that humans don't remember who they were before they came to this world. Do you understand?"

That this is some big cosmic bullshit? Yeah, I get it.

"And this is as good a time as any to tell you something else."

Why do I feel like a wrecking ball is swinging my way?

"Your memory," she goes on, "Hart's memory. It will fade soon. You won't remember anything of who you used to be."

When her words land, I feel like I'm drowning all over again. I don't know which way is up or down and the pressure's building in my chest and throat and all I want is air, but I know it's not coming.

"So I have to what?" My voice rises. "Live as Jameson?"

"No, you'll have Hart's spirit, just not his memories, and no, they are not the same thing."

I want to scream at the sky, but there isn't time to feel sorry for myself. I didn't come all this way to throw in the towel now. And universal design or not, I'm getting Ruby back. "How much time do I have before my memories are gone?" I ask.

"What does it matter?"

"Just tell me!"

Lourdes looks away, and her voice lowers to a near whisper. "I don't know."

"Check that paper of yours!" I demand. "Surely there's a time limit there." Except she isn't carrying it anymore.

"A couple of weeks," Lourdes says. "Maybe three? Everyone is different. But the fading process will begin after your first sleep, and memories will continue to drain out of you each night. That much I'm sure of."

A couple of weeks?!

"I won't let that happen!"

Lourdes's eyes glow silver in the mist. "You can't stop sleeping, Hart."

A new anger grips me, an anger occupying the space between confusion and fear. "You did this," I growl. "You never told me I'd lose all my memories."

"I told you that you cannot go back." Lourdes lowers her voice. "And if I had told you that you were going to lose all your memories, would you have chosen to stay in the in-between place?"

I feel a tightening in my stomach. I look at Ruby and I know. Memory or no memory, I'd make the same choice all over again.

"Is that why you're hanging around? Is this the transition you were talking about?" I nearly shout. "You can't leave until you steal absolutely everything from me?"

Her jaw tenses. “Like I told you before. You’re not the only one facing consequences.”

I don’t know why but my whole heart softens. Maybe it’s the way she says it, or maybe it’s the sadness in her eyes, or maybe I’m just a sap. “What’s going to happen to you?”

She gives me a tiny shrug and says quietly, “I’ll find out soon enough.”

OceanofPDF.com

Twelve

RUBY

I'm at this party and it feels like I'm just standing on the sidelines like the ghost of a life that doesn't exist anymore. But that isn't what gets to me. It's the song that starts to play, one that floods my mind with memories of me trying to teach Hart the two-step in his backyard, and I have to choke back a sob. The last thing I want is for anyone to see me lose it, so I take off. And before I know it, I'm climbing the jagged boulders up shore.

I used to love this coast, the Pacific, which, ironically, means *peaceful in character or intent*. Now, as I stare at the dark churning waters, all I can think is that it's like death: dark, mysterious, all-powerful, and unknowable until you're in its depths with no exit plan. And I hate it.

I hate it for stealing Hart.

And I hate that it didn't even have the decency to give Hart's body back.

Sometimes I imagine he floated to an island somewhere and is living off of fish and coconuts, and one day I'll open my door and he'll be there, telling me he's sorry it took him so long. A sudden exhaustion wraps its arms around me. Maybe my therapist is right. Maybe hate makes you tired. I've spent the last five months drinking grief from a fire hose, and now all I want is to stop.

I catch sight of a white sailboat cruising across the moonlit water. I pretend that it's *Ladybug* and Hart's on board. I'm out there with him, too, and we're headed to the Marble Caves in Chile. He's strumming his guitar while I read up on our destination and map out every detail. I look up and he flashes a smile; it's an invitation, but he doesn't wait for me to come to him. Hart makes the first move, and before I know it, I'm on my feet and in his

arms, swaying to some sappy love song I'd usually make fun of and our rhythm matches the sea's and for once the horizon doesn't look so far away.

As always, the fantasy trails off like smoke.

"I miss you so much," I say, and my voice is so small I almost don't hear it over the waves hurtling themselves against the rocks. "And I don't know how . . . I don't how to do this thing without you, and sometimes I feel like I drowned with you and like I'm still drowning."

Tears roll down my cheeks, and I wonder if I cry hard enough, if I spin out into a really good, ugly, blubbering mess kind of cry, all the sadness will finally go away.

"I can't keep doing this," I say, "but I'm scared of who I'll be if I don't. Scared I'll be giving up on you, which doesn't make sense, because you're gone and . . ."

The sailboat I've been watching vanishes into the night just as a cold breeze drifts across the rocks. That's when I think I hear my name. Far away like it's coming from under the ocean.

It's like the same dream I have of Hart every single night. I'm standing on a foggy shore and I hear his voice calling me. When I look over my shoulder, he's there. I run and run and run to him, but he fades away before I can reach him.

Now I turn to leave, and that's when I see a hooded figure standing in the fog a mere fifteen feet away. I don't even have time for a breath before it registers just as the moonlight catches his face.

"Jameson?"

What the hell is *he* doing here?

He starts to say something, but then the mist swallows him. "Jameson?" I search for him, but he's gone, and I realize I must have imagined him. But why would I see him? Why couldn't I have seen Hart standing there?

And then I feel those familiar tiny branches sprouting inside, telling me something is off. Way off. But what?

I hike back down, gripping the rough rocks harder than before, and once I reach the sand, I run. Away from my friends.

Faster.

Away from the ocean.

Harder.

Away from my life.

And before I know it, I'm on Del Mar Avenue, a few blocks from the beach. Breathless, I slow to a walk as the burn in my lungs radiates to my head, giving me that runner's high. The street is filled with business offices and some retail shops, most closed at this hour. And then there's a small photo gallery owned by a guy my mom used to date a few years ago. I'm glad they stayed friends, because Esteban's super cool, cooks like a boss, and used to tell Gabi and me magical, mystical stories from his childhood in Nicaragua. Sometimes I think I got the travel bug from him.

As I pass the window, I see Esteban, dressed in a knee-length camel coat, black jeans, and matching ankle boots. He's stepping behind one of the half walls in the gallery. The place isn't a wide-open space, but more like a mini-labyrinth that makes you feel like you're somewhere mysterious. Hart and I helped him repair and paint those walls when we were in the eighth grade. That was the same summer Esteban taught me how to use a real camera, a little point-and-shoot. He showed me how to see things through an artist's eyes.

"Except I'm not an artist," I told him.

"Everyone is an artist."

So there I was with that camera around my neck, walking around town, feeling super official as I snapped a million photos of little things others might not notice: a lost sandal on the beach, a branch shaped like a heart, a stack of Hot Tamales boxes on someone's dashboard, an umbrella resting in a shop corner on a sunny day. I showed everything to Esteban. He always quirked his right brow, rubbing his chin as he studied the photos on his computer. And I'd wait for that spark in his eyes, for the beginnings of a smile before he said, "That one! That shows real promise." I'm miles from home, but all I want to do is walk and pretend I'm just some tourist checking out the town on a Friday night. I shoot Serena a quick text so she doesn't freak out that I'm gone.

Hey, I left. You don't have to come over. I'll call tomorrow.

Serena: I'm coming over now

I'm not home.

Where are you?

Just then it starts to rain, big fat drops that come in a slow and steady rhythm. Out of habit, I tilt my head back and open my mouth to catch a few when the downpour comes.

An angry crack of thunder explodes in the distance. With no shelter in sight, I quickly backtrack to Esteban's shop, grateful the door opens. A chime announces my arrival. But no Esteban.

Wrapping my sopped hair in a low ponytail, I cruise around the gallery, soaking in the silence and the new black-and-white photos he's displayed on the front wall. All sea and sky.

I turn the corner expecting to see Esteban, but instead I see a framed series of musical instruments, small in their own shadows. There's a viola, cello, saxophone.

A guitar.

I imagine it in Hart's hands, resting on his lap while he's bent over it with a pencil in his mouth as he puzzles out the next notes for a song.

The memory surfaces unexpectedly. It was the last time I ever saw him. We were on Miriam's sailboat. Hart had jumped up suddenly, excited that the lyrics for a new song he'd been working on had come to him. He had typed the words into his phone, a phone that drowned with him.

My mind follows the memory and I wonder, would he have gone home that night and written the lyrics in his songbook? Is that song, or part of it, tucked into the back of my closet?

"Ruby?"

My heart collapses as I turn toward the familiar voice. It's Miriam.

"Hi," I say. I haven't talked to her since Hart's funeral, and to be honest it's all now kind of a blur. But I remember all the *sorrys* and tears and *I wish I could have done somethings*.

It's kind of twisted to be around someone who was there when the person you love most dies. Like you want to get behind their eyes and see those last moments before the world tipped upside down. For a while I blamed her for

Hart's death. If she hadn't called him into work, if she hadn't invited her nephew.

If. If. If.

But those *ifs* were killing me, and one by one I had to let them go.

Her gaze flicks to the storm outside. "It's really coming down."

Weather. Good, safe topic, I think before I say, "Yeah, it just started, so . . . I came in for cover."

Miriam smiles. "I'm buying a piece from Esteban," she offers like she owes me an explanation.

"That's cool." I'm not sure what else to say, but I'm holding my breath because I'm scared of what she might say next and I'd rather go back to the convo about the rain.

"You doing okay?" she asks.

My stomach dips.

My usual response is to let people off the hook with something like, "Yeah" or "Uh-huh," but tonight something comes over me and I blurt, "I'm trying." It feels true. And that feels good.

Miriam inches closer. She smells like expensive perfume. Her black hair hangs straight to her shoulders like a sheet of silk. "I've reached out a few times," she says, "to see what you want to do with her."

Her. *Ladybug*. The boat that was supposed to be mine and Hart's.

Miriam's words are code for *She's yours when you're ready*.

But how can I ever be ready to see *Ladybug* again? How could I ever take her out to sea? No, I think, I'll never step foot on that boat again. And yet, I can't bring myself to sell her. Hart was so proud of her, and it was his last gift to me.

Sometimes I play this game: *What Would Hart Say*. And in this case he'd tell me, "Rubes, you gotta keep the *Bug*."

"I . . . I'm not sure yet," I tell Miriam.

"Ruby!" Esteban sings as he comes over, arms open wide with a large paper sack in one hand. I fall into them, letting him give me a tight squeeze. When Hart died, Esteban called or texted me every day for a month, inviting me out, checking in on me. Those messages dwindled to a few a week, but

he's never stopped. He was also the one who recommended my therapist, Aera, whom I haven't seen in over two weeks because I'm pretty sick of listening to myself talk about the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result or some profound moment of clarity that is probably never going to come.

"I wanted to get out of the rain," I say.

"You're always welcome here." Then Esteban raises a single dark brow, which is about all the hair he has on his face or head. "Are you alone? This late at night?"

"Uh, I was at the beach with some friends but was headed home when the storm blew in."

I see Esteban's interest pique with two words: *friends* and *beach*. He offers me an uncertain smile because he doesn't know yet if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

"I'd better go," Miriam says as a car pulls up in front of the shop, flashing its lights twice.

Esteban kisses her cheek and says, "I wrapped it extra tight, but be careful. Don't get it wet."

Miriam promises, and then she's out the door and into the waiting car in mere seconds.

"Quieres café?" Esteban asks. "It'll warm you up and then I can take you home?"

I immediately reach for *no* but then I feel a tug, reminding me it's time to start saying yes. This is my seesaw reality. No. Yes. No. Yes. But mostly no's because they keep me entangled in Hart, in his memory. "Sure," I say, "con leche."

"I remember," he says, leading me to the back where there's an office, a storeroom, and a tiny kitchen. The walls are covered in pinned photos, mostly of beautiful, exotic places. There are also quotes, poems, and pages of books that make the wall look like a giant collage of memories.

Just then my phone buzzes. When I see it's Gabi, I step into the office to answer it.

"Did he find you?" she says, sounding like she's just climbed a hill.

“He?” This office is a definite fire hazard. The desk is piled with books and magazines. There’s a bookcase stacked with supplies like photo paper, framing materials, and various art utensils. And on the far wall is a long black lacquer table loaded with images.

“Jameson,” my sister says.

My chest does this fluttering thing as I remember. Maybe Jameson was standing on the foggy boulders with me tonight. “What are you talking about?”

Gabi goes on to tell me Jameson came by the house looking for me. “He looked so bummed when you weren’t there, and I sort of felt sorry for him, so I told him where to find you.”

“You told him I was at the beach?” My voice hits a high note as I mindlessly shuffle through another stack of photos.

“Don’t be mad,” she says. “He just got out of the hospital and looked like if he didn’t talk to you, he was going to die, and I didn’t want that on me.”

It feels weird. Out of character. Maybe he really did hit his head. I mean, Jameson isn’t exactly the dramatic type.

I hear indecipherable sounds in the background, telling me Gabi isn’t home, but I’m not in the mood for *that* fight. “Why do you think he wants to see *you*?” she asks.

I only half register Gabi’s question. Maybe I’m losing it. Maybe it was too soon to go to the beach.

Before I can answer, she adds, “So I guess he didn’t find you?”

The rain patters on the rooftop; the sky explodes in a burst of brilliant white just as I come to a photo of Hart. It’s one I took from that summer, one that was supposed to be lost because of a “tech issue” forever. He’s staring up at the sun mid-sneeze. His face all contorted and twisted. A tremble works its way through my body.

“Ruby?”

Tears pool in my eyes. I don’t even remember this moment, and it makes me wonder how many more moments I don’t remember. Is that how this is going to go? Each day I’ll forget bits and pieces until nothing is left.

“Maybe,” I finally say, more on autopilot than anything else.

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe he found me. I gotta go.”

Gazing at Hart’s image, I disconnect the phone.

Esteban opens the door, startling me. His eyes fall to the photo in my hand, and an expression of recognition passes across his face. I stare at him, waiting for him to tell me how this photo survived. “I thought . . . they were lost. Are there more?”

He shakes his head. “This is the only one. I found it on my computer a few months ago and decided to print it. I . . . was waiting for the right time,” he says softly.

My phone buzzes again. Gabi must have forgotten to tell me something, but when I look at the screen, it’s not my sister. It’s a text from an unknown number.

Hey . . . it’s Jameson. Can we talk

Thirteen

HART/JAMESON

I wake to a slant of sunlight spilling in through the window.

It takes a second for me to roll back the shadows of the last day and remember everything that's happened.

I sit up, shirtless, scrub a hand over my jaw, check to see if Ruby texted back. She didn't. I'm not surprised. I roll out of bed and stand just as my mind lands on a sticking point I'd rather not accept.

The fading process will begin after your first sleep.

I did everything I could to stay awake last night. Energy drinks (hate them), jumping jacks (boring), internet surfing (bad idea). Finally, I put on some horror flicks, thinking they would scare me awake; they worked for a couple of hours, but sleep is that unrelenting monster that eventually wins.

It's a weird (futile) thing to check my memory for any gaps, because how would I begin to know anything was missing?

Which is why I wanted to make a video, like that guy in *50 First Dates*, to remind myself of anything I might lose during the night. I couldn't get the video on the phone to work, so I made a list.

1. Your name is Hart Augusto.
2. You've loved Ruby forever.
3. You play the guitar and piano and write music.
4. But you died (sorry, it's true) and it wasn't your time.

5. Lourdes (the angel who messed it all up) found you a new body.
¡Hola, Jameson Romanelli!
6. Every night you're going to forget pieces of yourself until there is nothing left.

The list went on and on, reaching fifty. To be honest, I'm kind of surprised I remember so much. Maybe that's why Lourdes called it a fading. I grab the pad of paper off the nightstand to add a few more items.

It's blank. All the words and memories gone, gone, gone.

Shit!

I guess I'm not even that surprised since Lourdes told me there are no loopholes. It doesn't matter where or how I record the memories; they'll only vanish.

But isn't memory like a muscle?

Maybe if I can keep just one, it'll be enough.

Lourdes said I have a couple of weeks, three tops, before all my memories fade. And let's just say it's a worst-case scenario, and I only have two weeks—is it enough time to make Ruby see the truth, even if I can't come out and tell her I'm Hart? I feel so desperate to let her know I didn't leave her, that the future we had planned can still happen, just not in the way we had hoped. If I can just reconnect with her before my memory vanishes. My mind stalls.

I'll find a way to make her understand. I have to. And the only reason I let Lourdes drag me away from Ruby last night was that I needed to make a more solid plan. I coned myself into believing that plan was to text Ruby last night. You know, to test the waters. I don't know what I expected. She can't stand Jameson, which makes this whole thing even trickier. I guess that's why she never texted back.

The air is cool and smells briny as I step onto the balcony and watch the waves roll onto the shore. That's when I notice a steep set of wooden stairs that lead to the beach below, a small detail I hadn't observed yesterday.

And Lourdes is perched on the top one.

I don't know why, but I'm surprised to see her, surprised she hasn't bailed on me. But yesterday she told me, "I can't leave. Not yet." And it's the *yet* that has me curious. Does it have to do with her consequences, the price she has to pay for stealing my life?

Just as I'm about to call out to her, she turns, shields her eyes from the sun, and throws me a half-hearted wave. For a split second, she looks normal, human, just a pretty girl watching the ocean.

I wave back and am suddenly gripped by a hunger like nothing I've ever felt. I've never been a fan of breakfast, but it seems Jameson's body thinks otherwise, so I throw on yesterday's hoodie and a pair of board shorts and make my way into the kitchen, where I find Whitney settled at a massive white marble island, sipping a cup of coffee. Her face is planted in a health magazine.

She looks up, wearing a smile that does nothing to hide the dark circles under her eyes. "How did you sleep?" she asks.

"Good," I lie, opening a few cabinets in search of a coffee cup.

"Want me to make you an omelet?" she asks. "Or a protein shake?"

Is she kidding? I'm ready to pass out from carb starvation and she wants to load me up on protein? "Got any tortillas?" I ask, thinking a breakfast burrito sounds like heaven right now.

Whitney purses her lips. "You hate tortillas. So I never have them in the house."

Who in the hell hates tortillas? Wow. Jameson was way more messed up than I ever imagined.

I grab a sad little banana out of a fruit bowl, peel it, and take a bite. "You know what they say about comas, right?" I'm 100 percent improvising here. "It's like getting struck by lightning and sometimes people wake up and can speak languages they didn't know before or paint masterpieces or play the piano or guitar. It's a trip. Where are the coffee cups?"

She's still pursing her lips. "You gave up caffeine last year for football."

I am really hating Jameson about now. Coffee is the elixir of the gods! Whitney points to a cabinet behind me.

“Like I said, comas do weird things to people, and right now?” I grab a jumbo white cup that could pose as a small cereal bowl and head to the fancy espresso machine on the counter, pressing a button that fortunately fills the cup. “I’d love a tortilla smothered in queso and chile. But if that’s a no-go, any carbs would do.” I take a drink of the dark magic and nearly spit it out. Jesus, it’s bitter! What the frick? I am not going to be able to take it if this body doesn’t like coffee!

Whitney frowns at me. “Don’t you want cream with that?”

Oh.

She gets to her feet, searching the massive refrigerator, which is stocked like she’s running a five-star hotel.

“How about that?” I cast aside the nasty brew and point to a grande loaf of carrot raisin bread.

“Coco made that for your sister, for when she gets back tonight.”

I reach for Jameson’s sister’s name but come up blank. “I bet she won’t mind sharing with her big bro.”

While she gets a plate, I search for a knife. A second later, I’ve cut the loaf in half and am ready to get down to the beach when Whitney stops me. “Coach Feldman called.”

The head football coach at Seaside High. His call can only mean one thing. He wants Jameson back on the field.

Whitney echoes what I already know. “He wanted to know when you could get back to practice, but I told him it would be a week.”

Panic rises. I do *not* know how to play QB. A week? How about never? “Or maybe even the whole season,” I say.

“Jameson!” Whitney looks like I’ve just thrown the knife at her. “You can’t sit out the whole season. College scouts will be at homecoming next month. This is your dream. To play at Stanford, go pro. Remember?”

Except that I don’t remember. And I’m not interested. At all.

“Look,” I say, thinking I can play on her mom sympathies. “I’m not sure I’m ready. I’m still pretty banged up.”

“I get it. I really do. But your dad talked to the docs. *We* talked to them,” she amends. “They reported that there’s no physical damage,” she says with a

long breath that sounds like relief or disbelief. “And they’ve given the green light for you to begin practice next week. And I really think you should try, Jameson. You know your dad won’t let up until you do.”

“Dad called the docs but not me?” How messed up is *that*?

Whitney draws in a long breath. “He called last night when you were out.” Her face goes rigid, revealing that she knows I went for a joy ride in the Porsche.

Oops.

“Yeah, about that,” I say. “I just needed some air.”

“Look, you may not remember, but things haven’t been good with your dad since the divorce, and, well, you started drinking. A lot.” Tears well in her eyes, and I feel so awkward I want to dig a ten-foot hole and jump inside. “I’ve gone to bat for you so many times, Jameson, and he’s made threats.”

“What kinds of threats?”

“To go to the courts, paint me as an unfit mother.” She rubs her forehead with a trembling hand. “We just need to know when to throw him a bone.”

I’m pissed, but a part of me wonders what it must be like for Jameson’s dad, to have a son who’s a drunk, troublemaking mess of a human. Maybe he thinks he’s doing the right thing.

I hear her message loud and clear: *get my ass to practice*.

She grabs what looks like a shiny new cell phone from a nearby counter. “Fortunately, the carrier was able to retrieve messages, but all the photos are gone.” She looks up at me with pale blue eyes. “Don’t worry. I didn’t snoop. It’s not my style.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“So Dad’s really big into this whole football thing too?” I ask, remembering his shrine upstairs.

Whitney’s face falls. “He played in college, almost went pro.” She looks away like she doesn’t want to remember the *almost*.

“Is that why we’ve got a trophy room for him upstairs?”

Whitney hesitates before she says, “You made that room for him when you were eleven. You thought it would bring him back to us.”

My heart does a weird flip like it remembers. “But why keep it?”

“After our last big fight with him, you tried to take it down, but then Victoria begged you not to.”

I shake my head, more focused on the fact that Jameson did something for his sister that was in direct opposition to what he probably wanted. I guess he really did have a heart in there somewhere.

“Jameson,” Whitney says, shifting the topic back, “Coach is expecting you, and without football, Stanford just isn’t in your future.”

“My grades aren’t good enough on their own?”

“They’re fine, but football will give you the edge; it will seal the deal, and it’ll get your dad off my back. And yours, so will you go to practice?” she asks.

Next week? I push the worry aside, doubling down on my number one priority. Ruby. “Sure, I’ll think about it,” I lie because this convo is going nowhere.

Seeming appeased, at least for now, Whitney exhales and says, “Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Call your dad.”

The guy who bailed before his own kid woke up from a coma? That’s not going to happen, but I don’t want to steal Whitney’s hope or cause any more waves for her, so I nod before I take off to the beach and the angel waiting for me.

Fourteen

HART/JAMESON

I count exactly sixty-one steps down to the sand.

On the way down I polish off the carrot bread. It's amazing, an explosion of sweet and salty that only makes me want more. Lourdes is leaning against a small shed at the base of the stairs.

"Hey, Lourdes." I tug out Jameson's cell phone. For a second, I think Face ID is going to fail, but the damn thing recognizes Jameson's face, which does something to me; I feel like I'm sinking.

He's got a ton of texts from well-wishers, people I know he wasn't "real" friends with, but isn't that how it goes? When tragedy strikes, everyone wants to be in on the drama. There's a bunch of missed calls from Richard Romanelli and some voice mail, but before I can check them out, Lourdes is in my face with "We have to talk."

Still staring down at my phone, I say, "Does a body takeover make you hungry like a lion?"

"Everyone is different," she says with an uninterested sigh, "with different physical responses."

Everyone. What I wouldn't give to read *that* history.

"Well, I could eat out a whole buffet," I say, patting my stomach. "So what do you want to talk about?" I ask as I pocket my phone and look up.

She rakes her eyes over me and that's when I see it for the first time. There's something sad in those eyes, some kind of regret. But how is that possible? I thought angels were above all that human stuff. That's when I notice how different she looks. Her dark curly hair is a couple of inches

longer. She's got a few tiny freckles sprayed across her nose, her eyes are light brown, and she's wearing a long floral sundress with thin straps. But the biggest change? She's got on a pair of flat gold sandals. She must see me register her new appearance because she says, "This is my consequence. To be human."

My mouth goes dry. Wait. Did she just say human? I can barely get the words out without stuttering. "What? Why? For how long?"

She rubs the bridge of her nose, taking deep breaths. "I already answered the *what*. The *why* has something to do with pulling you from your body too early. I'm a death angel, after all. I should know better. So, I'm being forced into this form until I can prove my worthiness of joining the angel ranks again. And what was the last question? Oh, right. How long?" She snorts. "If I don't prove myself by the time your transition has taken place . . ." She pauses, looks away.

"What will happen?" It's not like she can get demoted.

She levels me with a steely gaze. "I have to be born to this world. To do this"—she throws out an arm to illustrate—"human school. I'll forget who I am."

So, we're kind of in the same boat. I try to click the pieces together but am coming up short. What kind of sick game is this? "How in the hell do you prove yourself?"

"That's for me to figure out," she says with a sad grin. Then with a shrug, "The universe loves mysteries."

I don't know what to say, how to make any of this better, but I feel like I have to, or I want to. "I'll help you."

"How?"

"I'll fight the transition. Drag it out. Give us more time."

"We've been over this. You can't, and I still have a duty to guide you." Then, just like that, somber Lourdes changes into all-business Lourdes. "So we'd better get to it."

It?

She points to the shed door, which has a combination lock on it. "See if you can open it."

“What? Why?” I think maybe she’s playing me until I see her frown getting deeper. “How would I even know . . . Is this some kind of test?”

Lourdes tugs on an earring and pins me with a gaze that’s trying to be fierce but isn’t hitting the mark. What’s with her today? “Bodies carry memories. I need to see if any of Jameson’s are still in there.”

I let out a nervous laugh. Is that why the coffee tasted so awful? Because Jameson’s taste buds are losers?! “Well, I can tell you I’ve got no clue what the combo is.”

“But your body might,” she says.

“It’s not *my* body!”

“Please, Hart. Can you just try?”

I’d be kidding myself if I didn’t admit the shit irony of it all has my blood racing and my heart thrashing and my anger soaring. The same transition that will steal my memories is the same one that will possibly free Lourdes. What kind of universal balance is that?

I wipe my hands on my shorts and go to the lock just to prove my point. I spin the dial, watching the numbers whiz by. “Nothing,” I say, but in the next breath there’s a flash, a vision of Jameson’s hands opening this very lock, and before I know it, I’ve nailed the combo and the door creaks open.

The shock overwhelms me.

Lourdes pats my arm awkwardly. “Deep breaths. Just calm down.”

“No!” I jerk away from the angel. “I don’t want his goddamn memories!”

“Hart . . .”

Inside the shed are some beach chairs, towels, blankets, a surfboard, wetsuits, and a row of footballs in every size. The little ones must be from Jameson’s childhood.

My body responds before my mind catches wind. Impulsively, I reach for a football. A force of unnamable energy rushes through me. I take off down the shore with the ball cradled against my body. There’s a battle going on inside of me right now, a war between who I am and who I’m supposed to be, and it’s like swimming against the current; the harder I fight it, the stronger this body’s will becomes.

Anger pulses at my temples. My muscles twitch.

I clutch the ball.

“Jameson?”

I spin. It’s Coach Feldman. Tall, fit, bald Feldman. He’s wearing a smile that says more than the words that come from his mouth. “Happy to see you back in the zone.” He nods to the football.

“Uh, hey,” I say, pulling myself together. “What are you doing here?”

“I came by to check on you,” he says. “And I’m certainly glad I did. I knew you’d reach for the ball first thing. It’s in your blood, Champ. How about you throw it to me?”

I want to tell him, *I’m not who you think I am. I’m a fucking musician!* And yet every cell in this body is screaming to launch this ball.

He’s already jogging down the shore: ten yards, twenty, forty. He turns closer to sixty and holds his hands out expectantly. I want to refuse, but this amped-up body rebels, and before I know it, I hike my arm back and let the ball fly. As I watch it rocket through the air, a perfect tight spiral, I feel alive.

Coach catches it, then jogs back wearing a big smile. “You’re ready. And we need you.” His expression tightens as he hands me the ball. “This is too big an opportunity to squander. Do you understand me?”

Are we back to Stanford again? All I can do is nod. Jesus, I’ve only lived in Jameson’s body a day and I already feel like shit. Imagine how bad he felt living his whole life under this kind of pressure.

“I’ve got the best trainer ready to get you back, and the guys are eager. Wait until I tell them that your throwing arm is still a rocket.”

I know it’s useless to argue. They don’t call Coach Feldman “No Prisoner” Feldman for no reason.

“If you need anything at all,” he says, “you just call me.” Then he turns on his heels, stops at the base of the stairs, salutes me, and says, “See you at practice Tuesday. And don’t worry. We’ll take it slow.”

Tuesday. That’s three days from now. Shit.

Lourdes scowls at the back of Feldman like she might burn a hole in the base of his skull. “Pushy sucker, isn’t he?”

“Okay, Lourdes,” I say, still revved up on adrenaline, “you want to do this? Then we’re doing it my way.”

She faces me now. “That isn’t the way this works.”

“You stole my life. You took everything from me.”

“I’ve explained . . .”

“And if I only have a few weeks, then you’re going to help me.”

A group of seagulls circle overhead as a northern gust blows down shore.

“Listen, Hart,” Lourdes growls. “I am an angel of the highest order; do you understand me? I can make this easy or hard, and right now? I want to make it impossible.”

I toss the ball into the air and catch it. “I have an idea.”

She looks wary or like she’s going to be sick. It’s hard to tell with that human face I’m still getting used to. “What kind of idea?” she asks.

“We can help each other.”

“I’ve already told you that you can’t have your life back, Hart. Please stop making me say it.”

A smirk plays on my lips as I continue to toss the ball up and down. “Yeah, but here’s the thing. I’m not asking for my life back.”

This surprises her, forcing her to ask the question I know she doesn’t want to ask. “Then what do you want?”

“What I’ve always wanted. A chance to get Ruby back.”

“That’s the same—”

“No, it’s not,” I cut in. “Look, I get that I’m going to lose my memories. I get that I have to live in this body until . . . well, whenever. But that doesn’t mean I can’t try to make Ruby understand what happened, that I can’t somehow find a way to tell her that I’m still here before there is nothing of me left. And I know you told me there is no way, no loopholes or whatever, but I have to try.” I pause before launching into the best part. “And maybe this will prove how angelic you are. What’s better than reuniting two people who love each other? See? Win-win!”

Lourdes scowls. “You are infinitely the most stubborn soul I have ever been around.”

“So we’ve got a deal?”

“I didn’t say that, and with only a few weeks, that means I have to make every moment count. I have to do all sorts of good and pure deeds.” She

groans like the thought of it is going to kill her.

“Okay, but you have to admit that it’s a start, that standing up for true love has to count for more than helping an old guy across the street.”

Lourdes presses her lips together tightly. I clearly haven’t done enough to convince her, even when I framed it in a way that’s in her best interest.

“And if you won’t help me . . .” I swallow hard. “I’ll die of a broken heart anyway. Total waste of a redo body, wouldn’t you say? Is that what you really want? To kill me twice? I doubt it.”

“I didn’t kill you!”

“You kind of did.”

Lourdes chews on this for a second like she’s vacillating between two responses. Both look like they mean murder. Finally, she insists, “It may not feel like it now, but there will be other loves, Hart. The human heart was specifically designed to maybe not forget, but certainly to heal.”

I stare hard at the angel. Something loosens in my chest. “There will never be another Ruby. And no matter how many memories you drain out of me, no matter how much of my heart you steal, I’ll know. Somewhere inside I’ll know something is missing the same way you’ll know your wings are missing, and what kind of a life is that?”

There’s a beat of silence when the only sound is the waves rolling to the shore. Lourdes looks away. “You’re preposterous.”

I launch the ball across the sand. It’s just as blissfully perfect as last time. “So, we’re a team?” I say, turning back to the angel.

“I don’t like to fail, Hart, and even with my help, what you’re attempting is impossible. It goes against universal law.”

“Impossible or nearly impossible?” There’s a difference.

“Let’s just say no one would take this bet, not when the odds are a million to one.”

“I’ve never really cared about odds.”

Lourdes toes the sand, keeping a tight gaze on me like she’s trying to decide if I’m worth all this trouble.

I tell her, “I . . . we just need more time.”

She nods. "I'll do what I can, try to get us an extra week or two, but I have a condition."

My pulse rockets. "Name it."

"You try to settle into this body, no fighting, no resisting, no complaining. No trying to stay up all night. No making futile lists. And you go to practice Tuesday."

"That's more than one condition."

"And no more arguing ridiculous counterpoints."

"But I thought we were going to prolong it, buy ourselves more time."

"The powers that be don't like to be made fools of, Hart. They'll catch a whiff of what we're doing eventually, so we have to be a bit covert. Not draw any attention. Got it?"

I'm so psyched she's going to help me, I nod excitedly, agreeing to whatever conditions she can throw at me as long as my story ends with Ruby.

Fifteen

RUBY

Last night feels like a blur between a dream and a reality that my brain is struggling to register.

Why would Jameson want to see *me*? The guy just woke up from near death and should have been calling his buddies, or one of his girlfriends. It doesn't make any sense. Why would he come here . . . to my house? Looking for someone who can hardly stand him?

Whyyyyyy?

And I know he was there last night. I saw him in the fog with that hood around his face, and I could swear I heard him call my name, but then I blinked and he was gone like some kind of ghost. My thought process went like this: *I'm seeing things. I imagined him. I'm deranged.* All could be reasonably argued, but then came the stirring in my gut, telling me something was up, telling me to keep looking.

I would have interrogated Gabi more when I got home last night, but she was already in bed. I guess my one café turned into three and a marathon conversation with Esteban. We talked about art, music, politics, and his next trip: the Uyuni Salt Flats. It was on my list of things to see with Hart.

I took the sneeze photo of Hart home and slept with it under my pillow, but it wasn't enough to keep the same terrible dream away.

I chase him.

He vanishes.

It's the first photo of him I've been able to look at without breaking down. I couldn't keep seeing them every day when I opened up my phone. But I

couldn't just erase him, either. So I backed up the ones on my phone, then deleted them. I don't know, I guess thinking about them lingering in some cloud somewhere feels right . . . at least for now.

The sun has already been up for an hour and I can't wait another second. I head into Gabi's room, make some noise, and open and close some drawers, but she doesn't stir. I swear, she could sleep through an earthquake. So I throw off her covers. "Yoo-hoo—Gabbbbiiii?" I sing her name softly, but still the rock that is my sister doesn't move.

"Hey!" I nudge her leg. "Wake up! I need you to give me every detail about Jameson."

Gabi groans, pawing blindly for the pink elephant blanket she's had since she was a baby. "Later," she mutters, pulling a pillow over her head.

I throw myself onto the bed, making a show of how much bounce her mattress has. "Gabriella." She hates when I use her full name, but sometimes it's the only way to get her attention.

She peers from under the pillow, giving me a one-eyed glare. "Why the hell does it matter? Maybe he hit his head harder than we know. Maybe he's having an identity crisis."

"I think I saw him on the boulders last night. Like he was there, Gabi."

"And?" my sister says like she's bored.

"And, in the next blink he was gone as if he were a ghost. Don't you think that's weird?"

Gabi sits up. Her tight curls stick out in every direction. "Yeah. So what? Lots of things are weird."

"So, I need to know everything he told you, and you can't leave anything out because it could absolutely matter."

"Matter how?"

I shrug, embarrassed to say the words that want to come out, that have been wading in a pool of anxiety ever since last night because my mind and instincts are battling it out for victor status. My head is telling me, *Let it go*. But my gut is sounding a clarion call. I already know who's going to win.

"Matter how?" she asks again.

This time I let the words out of their cage. "Whether I call him or not."

Gabi's sleepy eyes bulge. "Why would you do that?"

I pick at a loose thread on the blanket. "Because Jameson Romanelli doesn't do anything for nothing. And something just feels off and I want to know what it is." My mom and sister might be great at fortune-telling, but my instincts are on point every single time.

"I bet it's some near-death recovery apology junk," Gabi says under a yawn. "You know, like making amends or something like that."

I realize at that moment that I'm talking, really talking, to my sister. Talking like we used to, batting ideas around, annoying one another, outwitting each other. Wow—I've really missed her.

Gabi grabs her phone off the nightstand, scrolls through it, and a second later says, "Jameson hasn't posted anything on social, which is weird for him. Let's face it: he's the kind of guy who would be bragging about coming out of his coma, but he's got his own hashtag, *prayforjameson*. Want me to read the posts?"

I shake my head, knowing that the answers I need aren't on Instagram.

"Were you drunk?" Gabi asks.

"Ha. Ha." Gabi knows I might sip, but I would never get drunk. I'm too much of a control freak to give myself over to a substance.

"Maybe it was his ghost," Gabi puts in.

"Except he didn't die."

Die.

The word brings an uncomfortable silence to the room. Gabi clears her throat, smooths her bedspread, then begins to repeat the details of Jameson's visit last night, as if she wants to get as far away from the silence as possible. I'm not sure if the truth slips out because she's on autopilot, but she confesses that Jameson gave her a ride to the beach. And by the look on her face, I can tell she regrets the big reveal the second it's out in the open.

"Tell me you didn't get in his car!"

Scooting back toward her headboard and away from me, she says, "Why are you asking me to lie to you?"

"It's a rhetorical question and you know it."

“I needed a ride, okay? And I actually had to talk him into it. But he was nice, Ruby. I mean, he’s always ignored me before, but he’s different now. And he drove super slow and then . . . he did something super strange.”

Here it comes.

“What?” I’m doing my best to control my anger, because if I lose it, Gabi will just shut down and crawl back into the hole that’s separated us the last five months.

“He told me to be careful.” Gabi screws up her face. “Like he’s my big brother or something.”

I’ve seen Jameson with his own sister around town and he’s not exactly attentive. So I have an impossible time imagining what Gabi’s telling me, but my sister isn’t a liar. It isn’t part of her DNA.

Gabi’s eyes are roving back and forth like she’s having an epiphany.

“What?” I ask.

“Want to hear something weirder than the big bro act?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer, just barrels on with “He was listening to old rock and he, like, knew the words.”

“So? Lots of people listen to it.”

“Except that I remember very clearly being stuck next to Jameson on the beach once and someone was blaring some rock and he shouted for them to *turn that shit off*, and then he cranked up some country.”

“Okay, so? Maybe the coma changed him.”

Gabi twists her mouth. “I think you’re right. Something’s off and you need to find out what it is.”

“I could ask Martin, or Tristan?”

“You think they have answers?”

I shake my head. “No idea. I can’t exactly walk up to them and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got this sixth sense that tells me things.’ ”

“I’ve got an idea,” Gabi says excitedly. “How about a reading?” She’s out of bed and digging through her nightstand drawer before I can say no. And I want to say no because I don’t trust anything mystical since Hart died. I always believed that there was some guiding hand, some supernatural beings

watching out for us, but if there really was some benevolent force, why would they have taken the best person I've ever known?

"How will a tarot reading help me figure out what Jameson is up to?" I ask. The cards don't peer into other people's lives and hearts, and only work if you're somehow connected to the bigger question, which in this case is *What does Jameson want from me?*

"We want to see if or how you're connected. Shuffle," Gabi says, shoving the cards into my hand. It's her Tides of Fate deck, given to her by our tía Lydia, who literally *dreamed* the deck for Gabi.

"It's a special gift from the ancestors," she told us. Then she worked with an artist, had the cards printed, and voila—ancestral magic at my sister's disposal. The cards are simple, thin card stock, but the mermaid images are what make it amazing. Hard to believe anyone could dream such details, but in my family? It's more probable than losing a remote between the sofa cushions.

Here's the even more bizarre thing—Gabi's readings have never been wrong. And because of that she keeps this gift from her friends, because imagine? They'd be all over her with questions, and truthfully? Some futures really shouldn't be seen.

"I . . . I don't think . . ." But I'm out of excuses. And my curiosity is killing me. I take the cards and immediately like the familiar and comforting way they feel in my hands, as if there's an answer waiting in the deck and all I have to do is ask the right question.

"Let's start with a single card for Jameson," Gabi suggests. "And keep your focus on what you saw last night."

When I feel the tingling in my palm, I turn a card faceup: the World. The colorful drawing is of a beautiful mermaid floating beneath the sea while she holds the globe in her hands. I've been around tarot long enough to know that this card is about coming full circle: when one thing ends, something else begins. Blah. Blah.

So what that Jameson has a new beginning? I could have guessed that without these cards. But here's where my sister's giftedness comes in. She

takes the World card in her hands, closes her eyes, and meditates for as long as necessary until she gets the “message” from our ancestors.

When she opens her eyes, a painful sixty-two seconds later, there is no trace of sleep. “I . . . I don’t get it.”

“What?”

“Jameson is going through big changes; he’s had one kind of death and now a birth.”

“Yeah, I get what the card means, and it makes sense given the whole accident and coma, but what’s the *message*?”

“That’s just it,” Gabi says. “There isn’t one.” She twists her mouth to the side. “It’s like it’s hidden from me, like there’s something we aren’t supposed to know except . . .”

My stomach clenches. This has never happened. “Except what?”

“I heard a single whisper; it said, ‘Message.’ ”

“That’s it?” I frown, and my pulse picks up speed. “How is that helpful? What message? Whose message?”

“We need full clarity, so let’s do one on you,” Gabi says, pulling me back to the moment. “We can do a universal reading,” she suggests.

She’s suggesting one of her made-up spreads, which is basically an opening for the universe to tell me whatever it wants to, which is kind of unnerving all by itself. “What if I don’t like what it has to say?” I fight the shivers running up and down my legs.

Gabi pushes a mass of curls from her face. “I could give you only the good parts.”

I throw her a smirk. “What’s the point in that?”

“What’s the point in asking the universe for a message you don’t want to hear?”

Argh. For fifteen and a half, she’s super wise. A regular Yoda, but taller. Reason number 5,023 why I adore my sister and also find her extremely frustrating.

I shuffle the deck again, trying to open myself to whatever the universe wants to tell me. But then I feel a hot stirring between my ribs, radiating into my chest, clutching my heart. I’m not ready for this.

Shaking my head, I shove the cards away. “I can’t.” And then I bolt out of the room.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixteen

HART/JAMESON

Now that Lourdes and I have agreed to help each other out, we get down to the nitty-gritty.

“Okay, so what’s my story?” she asks.

“Come again?”

“My identification. Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I hanging out with Jameson Romanelli?”

“Good point.” I begin to pace. “Uh . . . how about . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I’m thinking!”

“Well, think harder.”

“What if you’re a new student who just moved here from Kansas?”

“Kansas? Really, Hart? And how will we explain that I have no parents, no house?”

“Good call.” I snap my fingers, smiling at my own genius. “I’ve got it! You can be a foreign exchange student from Canada.”

She gives me a look of disdain.

What does she have against Kansas and Canada?

“I should be from Brazil,” she says, “or France or . . .”

“You’d have to fake an accent,” I say. “That would complicate things.”

And just like that, Lourdes throws her head back and laughs with total exaggeration before she says, “I am so happy to be here,” in what sounds like a pitch-perfect French accent. I’m about to toss all my weight behind the new French Lourdes when she shakes her head and sighs. “It’s too boring.”

“It sounded pretty good to me,” I say.

“Except that I don’t speak French, which could get us into trouble, so we should go with London. Even more boring than France, but”—she launches into a flawless British accent—“by far the safer choice.”

“London it is,” I say, admiring her spunk. Then another thought occurs to me. “Damn!”

“What?”

“You need a host family.”

“That’s easy.” Lourdes waves a hand nonchalantly. “I’ll live with you. You’ll tell Whitney things didn’t work out at my last house.”

“Like what?”

She gives me a scowl. “Do I seriously have to do everything?” Why is she still speaking in a British accent? “Make something up. Whitney isn’t going to mind. She’s so happy to have you home, she’ll do anything for you. I can stay in the pool house, and as far as records and that sort of thing, just leave it to me.”

I wonder if one of Lourdes’s other skills is forgery, but I don’t ask. “Does this mean you’re going to school with me?”

Lourdes flashes a smile that’s on the verge of sinister. “Do you want to go all in or not?”

All of a sudden, I’m not so sure it’s a good idea to have an undercover angel that could double for Zendaya cruising the halls of Seaside High. Too many things could go wrong, but in the end all I care about is winning Ruby back. “Okay, I’ll introduce you to Whitney tonight,” I say. “But right now, I’ve got some stuff to do.”

I take off. She’s right behind me.

“I’m going alone,” I say.

She smirks and tilts her head to the side like she’s about to roll out a thick carpet of sarcasm with *You’re so cute*. Instead, she says, “I’m going with you. I have to begin my angelic deeds as soon as possible, and that means I need to be among the people.”

“That sounds weirdly political.”

“And I’m going to start with you. I’ve seen Jameson’s closet, and most of his clothes scream *frat boy*—not exactly the vibe you’re going for.”

“Uh, pretty sure shopping isn’t going to get you back into heaven.”

“It’s not shopping,” Lourdes counters. “Call it improving one’s self-esteem.”

“Whatever it is, I’d feel bad spending Whitney’s money.”

“Trust me,” Lourdes assures, “it’s fine. I saw a platinum AmEx in your top drawer upstairs.”

• • •

Lourdes and I are downtown at a local shop that carries basic tees, board shorts, and hoodies. I pick out a bunch of stuff while Lourdes wanders through the store, tracing her fingers over everything she comes close to. That’s when I realize that she’s probably going to need more than the dress she’s wearing.

“Hey, you’re going to need some new clothes too,” I tell Lourdes.

She picks out some basic sweaters, tops, shorts, a few pairs of jeans, and a week’s worth of sundresses.

“Want me to start a dressing room?” a soft voice says from behind us. I don’t recognize it, but Jameson’s body must because I feel a clench in my gut.

I turn to find Mariah, a girl from school, smiling at us, but the second she sees my face, all color drains from her already pale cheeks. Shit. Jameson must have done something to piss her off. Big surprise.

I decide to play chill. “Hey,” I say, wondering how fresh the diss is.

Lourdes jumps in with “No thanks. These will all fit.” Something unnerves Mariah, I see it in the tightening of her jaw.

“Nice day, huh?” I gesture to the sun streaming into the windows like it’s a rare thing.

Mariah looks like she’s fighting the urge to roll her eyes; she gives a curt nod and helps us take our things to the register. She glares at me every time

she rings up an item with unnecessary force. “These don’t seem like your style.”

“Just evolving, you know, trying some new stuff out,” I say before my brain can process the effect of the words.

Mariah doesn’t look convinced. I don’t know why but I *want* to convince her. Or maybe I just want to make her feel better.

“You’re new to town?” she asks Lourdes.

Lourdes offers a smile that seems to say, *I’m sorry Jameson hurt you*. And that’s all it takes. Mariah’s shoulders relax, and her face unfolds into a natural and pleasant expression as Lourdes responds to the question in a cheery voice, “Foreign exchange student. I just transferred. I’m staying at Jameson’s house.”

Mariah’s nodding but I can see the question in her eyes: *Are you two a thing?* Even though she isn’t bold enough to ask it.

“We’re related,” I throw in, instantly earning a confused look from Mariah. “I mean, like, third cousins,” I say, thinking that will set this all straight. The last thing I need is people thinking Lourdes and I are some kind of item, especially Ruby.

“I really love your earrings,” Lourdes says with a level of kindness that immediately changes the vibe from tense and awkward to chill and friendly. And I can tell she means it.

“Thanks.” Mariah tugs on the silver hoops as a smile creeps over her lips. She continues to ring up the items, which land on the grand total of \$1,223 plus some change, which is more than I’ve ever spent at one time in my entire life except for on *Ladybug*.

“Give me a sec,” I say, stepping away from the register and out of Mariah’s earshot. “Lourdes, that’s tons of dough.”

“I already told you, it’s fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“You’re insulting me.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Everything okay?” Mariah says as I turn back to the counter.

“Uh . . . yeah,” I stumble over my words and decide to just shut up.

Mariah says, “Your new look is better.” But this time there’s no jab of annoyance in her voice, only curiosity.

I hand her my card. “Yeah, not sure what my hang-up was with all those polos. I mean—”

Lourdes pinches my arm, bringing my babbling to a halt.

“I’m glad you’re going to be okay,” Mariah says without a trace of BS.

I quickly sign the slip, realizing after the fact that my hand knew exactly how to form Jameson’s signature, a perfect match for the one on the back of the card. “And I’m not the same,” I blurt. “I mean . . . near-death and all that . . . it changes you and . . . my memory is super fuzzy, but I’m sorry for anything I did or said to you.”

Mariah tilts her head to the left. She doesn’t let me off the hook, but she doesn’t trash my apology either. She says, “I hope it lasts.”

Outside the shop, I slip on some shades and head to the car to unload the bags since our next stop is within walking distance. “What was that back there?” I ask Lourdes.

“What was what?”

“That smile, the way you . . . I don’t know. It was like you cleared the air.”

Lourdes shields her eyes from the sun. “It’s called empathy and when an angel offers it, the pain melts away. Jameson hurt that girl, Hart. He used her, made her believe he cared, but it was all just a game. And in the end her pride and heart were wounded.”

Something is different in Lourdes’s tone, in her inflection. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s no sarcasm, no irritation, no irony. Just a simple truth that sucks big-time.

I hate to point out the truth in case she’s already forgotten but I say, “You’re not an angel.”

“Of course I am.”

“But you said . . .”

“I’m in human form but there is no doubt what my essence is, Hart. For now, at least.”

“Well, I guess we’re both in different forms but at least you get a clean slate,” I say. “I’m going to have to make people believe there’s a new

Jameson in town.” Lourdes opens her mouth to speak when I hold up my hand to stop her. “Please don’t tell me how bad the odds are.”

“Actually, I was just going to say you have something stuck in your teeth.”

I scrub a finger over my teeth and clear out the crumb. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just did,” Lourdes says breezily.

I lock the Denali, the simplest wheels I could find in the garage. If I’m going to be a new Jameson, I can’t be racing around in an overly flashy car. Man, I miss Monster. I turn back to Lourdes. “How do you know all that about Jameson and Mariah?”

“It was in his records.” She twists her hair over her shoulder, looking away and letting me know the convo is over. “Where to next?”

“One of my favorite places in town. Come on.”

• • •

We take a shady walk down to Bright’s Music Shop. It’s a family-owned business where I took guitar and piano lessons as a kid. It’s also where I got my first and second and third guitars as well as a baby grand piano.

Fortunately, the shop is empty today, but I still brace myself for strange looks, because Jameson didn’t play any instruments. As a matter of fact, he used to give hell to the band kids, cracking jokes, and poking fun whenever he could. Maybe because in his eyes there was only one thing in this world worth practicing and being good at: football.

“Hart,” Lourdes says, tugging on my arm as I go to swing the shop door open. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Look, you said I had to agree to accept this body, to not resist, but that doesn’t mean I have to let go of my soul.”

“A bit melodramatic, don’t you think?”

I laugh. “I’m a songwriter, what did you expect?”

Lourdes grunts and just as I’m about to go into the store, my phone rings. It’s Richard. I decide to get the father-son chat over with.

“Hey,” I answer.

“Jameson,” he says, “you haven’t answered my calls or texts.” Richard’s voice is distant, calculating, confident.

“Uh, yeah.” I’m sort of pissed this guy wasn’t around for Jameson so I add, “You took off.”

There’s a grunt of disapproval or maybe exasperation. I expect him to tell me he’s glad I’m alive, that I woke up, that he’ll be on the first plane, but he does none of that. He says, “I had an emergency that couldn’t wait, and the docs . . . They didn’t think you were going to wake up anytime soon, but I always planned to come right back.” He doesn’t even wait for me to respond. Instead he rushes on with “Your mom and Coach confirm you’ll be at practice.”

Heat rushes my whole body. “Yeah.”

“That’s an excellent decision, Jameson.” He’s silent a moment, then says, “Things have to be different this time. Your mom might baby you, but I won’t.”

Wow—does this guy hear himself? “Different,” I echo.

“Anyhow,” he says so breezily I want to deck him, “glad practice is on the agenda. Can’t waste any time.”

Something in my (Jameson’s) heart gives way like a rubber band snapping in half. I don’t blame this body, not when Richard is acting more like an investment partner than a father. “Right,” I say angrily. “Can’t waste any time.”

“And don’t forget our deal,” he says.

“Deal?”

Someone must come into the room, because I hear a muffled voice talking to Richard. “I have to go,” he says, “but we can talk about that later. You just rest up and knock ’em dead at practice.”

He hangs up before I can tell him he’s up for the year’s worst-father award. “Wow, that guy sucks,” I tell Lourdes.

“I know.”

“It was in the folder?”

“No, I heard the conversation. Even in this human guise, I have excellent hearing.” She sweeps past me into the store. Mr. Bright looks up over his

glasses. “May I help you?”

Just being in here and seeing old Mr. Bright washes away the bad feelings Richard caused. The place has a clean smell—like freshly cut wood. I just want to hold a guitar, pluck the strings. “Hey,” I say, “I’m here to check out what you have in guitars?”

Fortunately, Mr. Bright doesn’t know Jameson and doesn’t read the papers or internet news where Jameson’s pic was plastered after his accident. I googled it, and man, it was ugly. So many headlines, but the most memorable and cruel came from a sports blogger: *Promising Football Star Collides with Fate*.

I go right to the guitar wall that’s lined with instruments for beginners, pros, and everything in between. My hands reach for the acoustic Gibson Hummingbird. For the first time since I died, I feel entirely like myself. It’s as if it doesn’t matter that Jameson’s hands are the ones cradling this beauty. I strum a few strings. The tone is bold, and the low, steady hum is perfectly clear.

I grab a pick from the shelf and launch a power ballad: “I’ll Be There for You” by Bon Jovi. It was one of the first songs I learned to play. The opening riff is simple, the chords are even easier, and it’s one of Ruby’s favorite oldies.

“That’s a fine instrument,” Mr. Bright says. “It comes in two finishes: Antique, the one you’re holding, and Heritage Cherry.” He turns to Lourdes. “You play too?”

She blinks and smiles. “I’m more partial to the harp. He’ll take it.” As if it’s nothing to spend thirty-eight hundred bucks on a guitar.

I give her a wide-eyed stare. I am so not okay spending Whitney’s cash like this, even for a guitar this beautiful. “I can’t,” I tell Mr. Bright.

“He can,” Lourdes says.

Mr. Bright’s eyes volley back and forth like he isn’t sure who has the reins here.

Lourdes tugs me away, and under her breath spits out, “You said you would accept and not resist, and that means accepting Jameson’s

circumstances, which happen to be wealth, so get over yourself and give the man the card!”

I can feel sweat beginning on my neck as I turn back to Mr. Bright. “I’ll take the Yamaha.” The one that’s only four hundred bucks and will be good enough for now.

“A man who knows what he wants,” Mr. Bright chirps happily. I really love the old guy’s good nature.

We head to the register, and that’s when I see the flyer for a used Yamaha baby grand. I peer closer at the photos, specifically the one with the lid closed. Wait. It’s not any used piano. It’s mine. I know for sure because there’s a cigarette burn from the previous owner on top of the lid.

Mr. Bright notices my fixation on the photo. He clears his throat and manages, “That one’s special. It was donated to the music department at the local high school, but they’re trying to raise funds, so it’s up for sale.”

I take a shaky breath. My dad donated it. That sounds like something he would do. He was always helping where he could, donating any used item in the house because someone would need it, and he was a sucker for every Little League and ballet raffle in town, buying up at least twenty tickets each time. Damn, I miss him.

Staring at the picture, my pulse races and I know it’s going to be mine before I can even ask, “Do you deliver?”

Once we’re outside the store, Lourdes socks me in the arm. “Honestly, Hart! Could you have been any more obvious? Buying your own piano?”

“Right, because he’s going to think, *Hey, I bet this kid is really Hart possessing Jameson’s body.* And you told me I could spend the money! Plus, it’s for a good cause.” I stop in my tracks.

“What do you think Whitney is going to say when a baby grand shows up at the house?”

“You tell me, since you seem to know everything anyways.”

Lourdes scowls. “She’s going to think her kid has lost his mind.”

With a smile, I say, “Or that he’s expanding his horizons.”

Just then my phone rings. I’d set it to only ring for a select few numbers, including Martin, Ruby, and George, whose numbers I know by heart. All of

whom I happened to text last night with the message we need to talk. I was bummed, but not surprised Ruby hasn't called. I look down at the screen and smile. A friend of mine and Jameson's, my new Switzerland.

"Hey, Martin," I say, trying to tamp down my excitement.

"Bloody hell, you finally answer my calls. Did you see all my texts? Bro, you doing okay?"

"Yeah," I say, trying to sound chill. "Never been better."

"Coach says you're coming to practice? You sure about that?"

I look at Lourdes, remembering my promise. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Man, I'm glad you're okay. That was some stupid shit, driving all loaded."

"Yeah, it was," I say, "but . . . things have changed."

"Right," Martin says like he doesn't really want to dive into the middle of *that* conversation. "Okay, so uh . . . I think you should know something."

"What's that?"

"I got a call from Ruby."

My heart starts to hammer, but I play it cool because that's what Jameson would do. "Yeah?"

"She was asking about you. About why you went looking for her. What's the deal? You know she hates you, bro. Are you stirring shit up already or what?"

"Really?" I blurt. "She was asking about me?"

Martin snorts. "You feeling okay, Crash? I mean . . ."

Lourdes is simultaneously rolling her eyes, shaking her head, and sighing.

"How about I explain over tacos?" I say.

"Tacos? You don't eat Mexican food."

"Like I said. Things have changed."

We make arrangements for tonight and disconnect.

When I look up, I see her on the other side of the street. She's wearing cut-off jean shorts and an oversized sweatshirt. She stares at me through yellow-tinted shades that don't hide that familiar but beautiful glare that could seriously break glass.

It's Ruby.

She looks as beautiful as ever.

I cross the street and have to fight the urge to wrap her in my arms. To tell her it's me and it's all going to be okay. Lourdes's elbow bumps me, a warning for me not to slip up.

Ruby lifts her shades. Her golden, impenetrable eyes sweep over me with cool calculation.

I can't think straight with her gazing at me like that. I can't think at all.

The words circling my brain are *I miss you*, and the harder I try to say them, the more my tongue thickens just like Lourdes promised. Blood pounds in my ears. And all I can manage is "I like your shades."

OceanofPDF.com

Seventeen

RUBY

*D*id he really just tell me he likes my shades?

“Excuse me?” I inch back, realizing he’s invading my space.

Jameson folds his arms tightly over his broad chest. “I meant that . . .”

My eyes flick to the pretty girl with the gorgeous skin standing at his side in a breezy sundress. “I’m Lourdes,” the girl says, saving him from his own awkwardness. “His cousin from London.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say to be pleasant, but nothing about this is pleasant. It’s hell, but I’m going to get that message no matter what.

“You have to excuse him,” she says lightly. “After the accident, he just gets these brain freezes and things don’t always come out right.”

“I don’t have brain trauma or anything,” Jameson corrects, “just some memory stuff, but it’s all good.”

He looks different. His expression is softer. His stance more vulnerable. Can a coma do that to you?

“Oh, sure,” I say, feeling bad for the second time in the span of one minute. “Is that why you texted me? A brain freeze?”

“I have . . . I have a lot to tell you,” he says.

He’s shifting his weight from one foot to the next. Why is he so jittery? And why is my heart pounding against my rib cage? Why is my solar plexus on fire? I plant my shades on my head and brace myself for the message.

“Okay. Tell me.”

“How about tonight?” he says.

“How about now?”

“Uh . . . that isn’t possible, but later we could hang out.”

I don’t like how pushy he’s being. “No thanks.” I start to walk away.

“Wait!” His hand darts out, takes hold of my arm. “Please don’t go.”

Something like warm liquid is moving through my body.

I jerk free of his touch. But my skin still feels his warmth. Suddenly it’s like I’m slipping off the edge of a cliff. Every cell in my body is vibrating with an energy, with a knowing that isn’t registering in my brain. A knowing that’s telling me to listen to what Jameson has to say, but dinner feels too risky. “Just tell me now,” I say again.

“I can’t.”

Lourdes smiles and waves a hand through the air. “What he means is that it’s a long and sordid tale and we have to be somewhere right now, so if he could get on your calendar sometime tomorrow, that would be terrific.”

Long and sordid? Is that, like, a British thing to say? Did she seriously say *calendar*?

A part of me wants to tell him no. The other part of me, the one entangled in my intuition, is screaming yes and before I can decide, I’m blurting, “Monday after school. I’ll meet you . . .”

“The pier,” he suggests.

No, nothing near the water. “Tesoro Park over on Third,” I say, shocked that the words are coming so easily, but they have an immediate calming effect, one that tells me, *Yes, ride this sixth sense wave. See what’s on the other side.*

Jameson’s face brightens and for half a second, he looks like a giddy twelve-year-old. He reaches out like he wants to shake hands, then quickly draws back. “I’ll be there. And I won’t be late.”

I put my shades on, turn, and walk away. But the whole time I can feel his eyes and that smile on me as the last of the hypnotic warmth exits my body.

Eighteen

LOURDES

I might be stuck in human form, but my job still has to be done. I watch as Hart sleeps. He's dreaming of her. In the dream they're kids, seven years old, rowing across a placid bay. Laughter fills the air. Hart tells Ruby, "There's a monster under the water."

Ruby says, "Will it eat us?"

Hart looks very sure of himself for being so young. "Probably, but we won't die."

"We'll just live inside the monster," Ruby says with an innocent delight that only a child can possess.

The dream instantly morphs into a wannabe future. Hart and Ruby are nineteen. They're gliding through crystal-blue waters, swimming toward a white sandy shore. They throw themselves onto the warm sand, breathless. Ruby reaches for him, entwines her fingers in his. She pulls him closer, kisses him. So close there isn't an inch between their bodies.

I know what comes next.

I leave this dreamworld and stand, keeping my gaze on his sleeping face. This is the part of my job I detest the most. The part that is necessary and yet feels so unforgivable. This is the part where I steal the memories. Piece by piece.

Not just one. Or two or three. I take dozens, shredding them like paper. Some he won't even miss. When I try to pluck the memories of Ruby, I feel the resistance. As if Hart knows I'm here.

Slowly, I take parts of Ruby too.

OceanofPDF.com

Nineteen

HART/JAMESON

*H*ere's the drill.

As soon as I open my eyes, I check my memory. But it's like doing an inventory of your refrigerator. You know there's ketchup and probably milk, but you can't possibly list every item. And I'm cool with it because it would be humanly impossible to remember every moment with Ruby anyways. As long as I remember *her*. So I walk myself through my memory slowly, starting with the first one. Ruby's still there, freeing the ladybugs. She's there laughing in the sunlight. She's there on the beach carrying a lost crab back to the ocean. She's there dancing with Martin.

Speaking of Martin—it was good to see him the other night, to break bread—or tacos, which, fortunately, I 100 percent enjoyed enough to eat seven. Everything was chill and went as well as expected. Zero truths. Mountains of frustration.

With a big exhale, I roll over to a small face with big blue eyes staring at me from the edge of the bed.

“AAHH!” I scream.

“You look funny,” the girl says as she rubs the tip of her nose. She's wearing a light pink sweatsuit with a unicorn silk-screened onto the shirt. This must be Jameson's sister, Victoria. Seems like a really big name for someone so small.

She and Whitney must have just gotten home. Whitney called last night to tell me she ran into a traffic accident on her way back from Victoria's camp; I

guess it was pretty bad, because the highway was closed for hours, and since it was getting late, Whitney decided to stay in a hotel for the night.

I sit up and glance at the clock on my nightstand. 7:31 a.m. “Hey . . .” What does Jameson call his little sister? Sis? Vic? Creepy urchin?

Victoria peers at me with curiosity like I’m some rare species she’s never seen before. “You’re not going to die anymore?”

Oh. I guess we’re going to get right to the topic. “Uh . . . no,” I say. At least not anytime soon, I think.

“Did it hurt?”

“Nah.”

Her eyes sweep over my beat-up arms.

“It looks worse than it is,” I say with a laugh.

She twists her mouth to the right like she isn’t sure she can believe me. Then a second later, she seems to sweep away all her worry and says, “Want to see what I learned to do?” She steps back and rises onto the very tip of her toes, holding her arms above her head in a ballet pose. It’s actually pretty impressive. “Nice. Did you learn that at camp?”

“Really?” Her whole face lights up like she just won a lifetime supply of ice cream. Then she says with a frown, “But you told me ballet was stupid.”

How is it possible to feel guilt for something I didn’t even do? “I was stupid to say that. I mean, I can’t stand on *my* toes.”

She smiles, revealing a missing front tooth. “I can teach you after school if you want.”

“Absolutely,” I say, running a hand over my face. “And what do you mean I look funny?”

“Just different.” She comes closer and whispers, “That girl is really pretty.”

“Girl?”

“I like the way she talks.” Victoria twirls, squeals, and runs off. She’s met Lourdes. Which means Whitney has too. Which means (Shit. Shit. Shit.) I have some explaining to do.

Just then my phone rings. It’s Richard. I’m about to ignore it, but I’m curious about our “deal.”

“Hey,” I say.

“Today’s the big day!”

“Yup.”

“You ready?”

White-hot anger burns a hole in my stomach. I manage to control it. “I think so, but uh . . . you mentioned a deal?”

Richard pauses. He’s tapping a pen or something against a hard surface. “You’ve been in a lot of trouble, Jameson. And the drinking—it has to stop.”

“I’m not drinking.”

“Your mom will keep bailing you out, but I won’t, so if you don’t get recruited, you’ll be coming to live with me.”

You mean after you report Whitney as an unfit mom? I see black spots dancing in my vision and think I might be sick. “In Colorado?”

“Of course in Colorado.” There’re some voices in the background. Richard covers the phone; he mumbles some orders. When he comes back, it’s on the tail of a heavy sigh. “I’d hate for you to waste this chance to get your life on track.”

No way am I moving to Colorado, so I assure him, “I’m not going to mess up again.”

“I’ve heard that before, Jameson,” he says. “Listen, I’ve busted my ass to get you this opportunity. Called in a few favors, but you’ve gotta do the rest.”

So basically I have to live this guy’s dream or I’m sunk. What a load of crap.

“And that means,” he goes on, “that if you can’t bag Stanford, you’ll finish up senior year here where I can keep an eye on you.”

I get it. This is Richard’s twisted way of controlling me.

I’m guessing no one argues with Richard Romanelli, and he’s not a bluffer, so I agree. I’ll kick ass on the field because no way am I moving away from Ruby.

How can this guy call himself a dad? My dad would never give me some bullshit ultimatum. Ever. So many times I’ve wanted to call my dad, to check on him, but it would only make me feel a thousand times worse, especially when he treated me like the stranger I am to him. So I checked in on the fam

through social. He's doing okay. He even met someone. And that makes me happy.

• • •

I quickly shower and get dressed in some jeans and a plain T-shirt and head downstairs in search of Lourdes. Some kind of snobby French café music is coming from the kitchen. When I walk in, I find Whitney and Lourdes sitting at the bar, sipping coffee, chatting and laughing like they're old friends.

So awkward.

Whitney's eyes light up when she sees me. "I was just going to wake you, but Victoria wanted to do the honors. I hope she didn't bother you."

"Not at all," I tell Whitney. "She's sweet."

A curve plays at the edge of her mouth like she isn't sure if she should smirk or smile, or check my temperature.

"So you guys met," I say as my gaze flicks to Lourdes, who gives me a look that translates to *Nothing to see here. I've got you covered*. Then in an exaggerated British accent she says, "Is that what you're wearing to school?"

Where's the knife drawer again?

I glance at her denim miniskirt and throwback sweatshirt. Loose brown curls fall around her freckled face, and to be honest I'm amazed at how easily she's slipped into human skin.

"Lourdes is lovely." Whitney is so pleased her cheeks turn pink. "She told me everything, Jameson, and it's so thoughtful of you to offer her our home. I had no idea you two had met last summer when we were in London. And how unfortunate that her host got sick."

I'm nodding, following the story crumb by crumb so I don't screw it up later. I briefly wonder if Lourdes has brainwashed Whitney like she did with that doc at the hospital. "Yeah, it's pretty awful," I say. "Just glad to help."

"And how lucky that we had stayed in touch all this time," Lourdes says. "And that you were only an hour away!"

"So lucky," I say, forcing the words past my lips.

“We were just talking about the places I used to haunt in London when I studied abroad there in college.” Whitney looks like she’s on cloud nine, like reminiscing is her new favorite pastime. She jumps up like she just remembered something, and grabs a linen-lined basket. “And look, tortillas.”

A small bloom of sympathy unfolds in my chest. Wow—she’s really nice. So nice, it makes me feel like a total prick that I’m pretending to be someone I’m not.

I grab a tortilla and take a bite. I’m only three chews in when I gag and spit it into my palm in disgust. “What’s in this thing? Gasoline?”

“I told you that you don’t like tortillas, or least flour ones,” Whitney says, holding back a laugh. “I could make you an omelet.”

I shake my head, cradling the tragically smashed tortilla bits in my hand as I search Lourdes’s face for an answer, but all she gives me is a blank stare. It doesn’t matter. I already know. Jameson’s taste buds are deranged little assholes who have no idea what they’re missing!

My heart sinks as I toss the tortilla and “leftovers” into the trash. No way José am I living a lifetime with no tortillas. I’ll train my taste buds every day and every night until they shape up.

“Is that new?” Whitney points at my gray T-shirt with an arched brow.

“Uh, yeah.”

“We went shopping Saturday,” Lourdes says, swinging her legs back and forth under the bar like she’s enjoying herself. “Even bought a piano. It’ll be delivered today.” She lifts a huge coffee mug to her lips. What’s her deal? Is she trying to piss me off? Trying to alert Whitney that this is all a farce?

Right on cue, Whitney tilts her head in surprise. “A piano?”

“And a guitar,” Lourdes throws in.

I throw my all at *calm, cool, and collected* mixed with bald-faced liar. “Yeah, when I was in the coma, I heard music . . . a song. It was so perfect and amazing and I can’t really explain it, but I think it . . . it’s what brought me back, and—”

“And he plays like Mozart,” Lourdes says.

I don’t.

Whitney looks like she's going to faint. She leans against the counter, nodding like she's collecting herself. "So you can play the piano and guitar now? That seems pretty inconceivable."

Lourdes says, "I've read about people who suffer trauma like that, and how it changes them. Like that girl in the Philippines who got struck by lightning and when she woke up, she could speak five languages and paint like Picasso. It was all over the news. So wild."

Whitney's nodding like she's already a believer. She pushes a light brown strand of hair behind her ear slowly before turning her eyes on me. "You don't think this will affect how you play football, do you?"

I get a sinking sick feeling in my gut. I originally thought Whitney was the football Dreamweaver, but now I see she just doesn't want her son to move away.

"Don't worry," I say. "I got this."

"He can still throw a rocket," Lourdes blurts, nodding like she's got a neck spasm. "It's a miracle, really, that he's alive and has all these amazing new skills. Like gifts from heaven."

Her voice drips with a sarcasm I know Whitney doesn't hear, because all she can do is look at me adoringly, and for a fraction of a beat I feel riddled with guilt. I'm not her son and I don't know what's worse: Her believing that I am? Or having no son at all?

"We better get to school," I say, and as Lourdes and I head out, I feel a flutter of anxiety in my stomach, wondering how people will react when they see that Jameson is back and he's nothing like he used to be.

Twenty

RUBY

*T*hings I know:

1. Jameson is different. As in not himself. As in not entirely revolting. And that's super creepy.
2. What the hell was that bizarre warm water thing when he touched me?
3. Why do I feel some weird connection to him?

The only way to find out is to do the tarot reading Gabi wanted me to do the other day.

Maybe it could help us understand the ancestors' single word: *message*. As soon as I hear Gabi get out of the shower, I bolt into her room and plop onto the bed. "I'm ready."

She's got on a tattered Snoopy robe and a big fluffy towel wrapped around her wet hair. "For?" she says.

"The reading, Gabi!"

"Oh, right, because I'm a mind reader now too and should for sure have understood that's what you meant." She sinks into a beanbag near the bed. "Why now?"

I explain what happened with Jameson. "And my insides were on fire and I felt this weird, warm, tingly thing when he touched me." I hear the words

coming out of my mouth but still can't totally acknowledge them. And then a wave of embarrassment sweeps over me.

Gabi's mouth opens slowly, silently.

"What?" I ask, scared of whatever it is she's thinking.

"Tingly?"

"Gabi, it isn't like it sounds. It's my sixth sense trying to tell me something."

"Mmm . . . well. It has to be part of this message business," she asserts. "I knew we should have done your reading right after his, and now the energy might not be as strong and we might not get as accurate a reading and . . ."

Pressing my thumbs into my eyes to combat a sudden headache, I say, "Gabi . . . the reading."

My sister pulls her cards from a wooden box on top of her dresser and hands them to me. Quickly, I shuffle. Then I pound on the cards twice, and as I'm about to fan them out and select one, two fall out of the deck: the Fool, and the Eight of Swords.

Gabi and I gasp at the same time. When cards select themselves, we know nothing is being left to chance. They're basically screaming, "PAY ATTENTION."

Except the meaning of these two cards is super generic and not at all helpful.

I pick up the Fool. The card shows a majestic mermaid walking out of the water on two legs, carrying a staff and a small bag.

"You're out of your element," Gabi says, examining the card. "And you need to be ready for the unexpected."

"I didn't need the cards to tell me that," I say in a whispery voice as I pick up the Eight of Swords. A card that's hard to look at because it's a mermaid in bondage. And she's so vulnerable because she's out of the water. Her element. She's blindfolded and tied to a rock surrounded by eight swords jammed into the sand. I know what the card means.

Be more than the limitations of your heart. Dig deeper. What seems like a weakness will be your strength.

When I glance back up, my sister is staring at me with an expression of empathy and curiosity, her hand outstretched.

Hesitant, I place the cards in her palm, wondering if this is the right move, wondering if I really want to know what the ancestors have to say.

She presses the Fool and the Eight of Swords against her chest and closes her eyes like before.

My pulse races. I hold my breath, waiting. For the next thirty-three seconds I try to read my sister's expressions that go from grimace to blank and everything in between.

When Gabi finally opens her eyes, all she says is "That's weird."

"Please quit using that word." I'm still not breathing.

"Did you put your energy into it?" She's eyeing me with doubt.

"Yes!"

"You should shuffle and try again." She places the cards on top of the deck and starts to pick the stack up, but I stop her, pinning her hand in place. "What the hell, Gabi. You've always said repeat shuffles are useless. So, just spit it out already."

She twists her mouth to the right as the morning sun drifts in through the sheer drapes. "It's like the cards are lost in time, like this makes sense for your reading a year and a half ago. But . . ."

I rub my forehead, trying to push away the massive headache coming on. "Gabi, just tell me."

She won't look at me, just the cards, and she's still shaking her head. "It's all wrong."

"These cards are never wrong, and you know it!" I take a gulp of air as a new panic forces its way into my chest.

"Well, they are today, probs because too much time has passed and you didn't do it right."

She's 100 percent BSing me. I force my sister to look at me and in the softest voice I can find, I say, "Please."

She presses her lips together before licking them. "Just don't kill the messenger." Then she closes her eyes and says, "You won't see it coming,

you won't be ready, you'll fight it, but in the end . . ." She pauses, opens her eyes, and stares deep into mine.

There's a volcano in my chest that's about to erupt. "What's coming? Fight what?"

"You're going to surrender your heart . . . and soon."

In a fit of anger and confusion, my hand sweeps across the bed, throwing the entire deck, and my reading, onto the floor. "This is ridiculous! These cards are broken! You heard the wrong message."

Nodding, she picks at her chipped yellow nail polish. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "But you know that the ancestors are never wrong."

"And you know there is NO way I'm giving my heart away or surrendering it, or whatever . . . to anyone."

"I know that, but maybe you're looking at it wrong. Maybe surrender means moving on."

I'm too amped up to listen. "And what the hell does this have to do with Jameson and what the ancestors said about a message?"

"I don't know, but I think that whatever that message is, it's related to you." My sister's eyes prick with tears but they don't fall.

Fuming and filled with regret that I ever picked up that effing deck, I stand and storm for the door. I'm nearly over the threshold when I hear my sister's trembling voice. "Ruby?"

I turn back to Gabi, whose gaze is on the cards strewn across her carpet. All of them are facedown except for two cards. The Fool and the Eight of Swords.

I freeze.

You won't be ready. You'll fight it, but in the end, you're going to surrender your heart.

I feel sick. Sicker than sick. Jesus, I feel like throwing up.

"Ruby," Gabi says, slowly walking toward me, but I don't look up; I don't take my eyes off the cards. How could the universe or my ancestors be so cruel? So wrong?

How can I surrender what I don't have anymore?

Gabi rests her hand on my shoulder, but she doesn't say anything. Her touch soothes my nerves. I can ignore the cards. I can ignore the ancestors. I can ignore my intuition.

Taking a long deep breath, I fill my lungs with air. "I know," I say without having to tell my sister anything else because she knows it too.

There is no way I can ignore any of this.

• • •

After school, I set those two wretched cards on my bed, staring at them like I can will the illustrated mermaids to rise up and dispel the mystery, to speak plain English.

Just then Serena calls. She doesn't even wait for me to say *hey* before she launches into "Should I do early admission to Yale?"

I put her on speaker while I start sorting laundry, anything to keep busy. "I thought you wanted to leave more options open."

"I do but I think it's just my ego wanting lots of acceptances because I'm built like that, as you know."

I've been down this road with her before. She sets goals, achieves them, and then becomes riddled with self-doubt that her plan was ever the right one to begin with.

"Did you make a pro/con list?" I ask, suddenly grateful to talk about normal nonmystical things.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear you ask that."

I hear footsteps and Serena's voice getting closer. She walks into my room with her cell glued to her ear before she ends the call and tosses the phone onto my unmade bed. "I have had my life planned since I was five years old, and now? Now that time is shrinking and everything is becoming so real, I'm losing it." She collapses onto the mattress with a big huff.

"You're overthinking this," I say, sitting next to her. "Maybe you just need to get your mind off it for a while. You know, de-stress. Take a break." Sound advice I should be taking.

I can tell by the expression on her face she's weighing the costs and benefits when her eyes flick to my pillow where the cards I pulled from Gabi's reading are poking out.

Serena grabs them before I can stop her. "What's up with these?"

I get up and toss a pile of clothes into the wicker basket, trying to be as nonchalant as possible. "Gabi gave me a reading."

"About?"

I tell her what happened with Jameson on the cliff and the ancestors' cryptic message and the stirring inside of me I can't explain. I leave out the heart-surrendering part, knowing she can only take so much mysticism in one bite.

"I know you don't believe in this stuff, but you should have Gabi give you a reading, too—you know, help you pinpoint a college."

"Ruby."

"I know what you're going to say," I tell her, suddenly feeling defensive. *But there's an itch under my skin, one I can't ignore and one logic and reason can't scratch.*

Be more than the limitations of your heart. Dig deeper. What seems like a weakness will be your strength.

"No. You. Don't."

"Really? You're not going to tell me that this is ridiculous? That no way can Jameson disappear off a cliff or that my weird sixth sense is just a distraction?"

Serena's face is a mix of concern and confusion. She lets out a long exhale. "I wasn't going to say any of that."

I step away, wanting to create some distance from her, from what she has to say. But then her words are out in the open, floating between us. "I don't want you to get hurt."

I fix her with a cold stare, hoping she sees the irony of that statement.

"Okay, I know," she admits. "You're already hurt, but is this the answer? This chase for something that probably doesn't exist?"

"I shouldn't have said anything," I growl. "You've never understood my family's abilities."

“But I understand you. And I worry that this is a way for you to stay locked in a world where you don’t have to mingle with us mortals. Which, okay, I get that, but I just don’t want . . .” She smiles a sad smile. “I hope that this isn’t your way of holding on to something that is only going to cause you more pain.”

My chest constricts and I’m having a hard time finding breath. “Gabi’s never wrong.”

“Except that the ancestors weren’t exactly clear. You said so yourself.”

“So?”

“So what do you plan to do? Ask Jameson why he maybe vanished off some cliff? Why you feel weirdly connected to him?”

I know I can’t poke holes in her reasoning, but I try anyway. “You don’t think it’s weird he’s so eager to talk to me?”

“At least go slow,” she says. “Be careful.” She comes over and give me a tight hug. “I love you and only want to see you happy, friend.”

What if happy isn’t an option?

These words are begging to be set free, but I keep them locked away.

Twenty-one
HART/JAMESON

Seaside High looks exactly the same. Not that I was expecting anything different. But when your whole life is turned upside down, it's almost like you assume the world would have flipped with it. I pull into the lot, under a shady tree, trying to ignore the stares I'm getting. I look up at the brick facade, thinking of any excuse to not get out of this car right now. With sweaty palms, I grip the steering wheel.

"Fun fact," I say. "This place used to be a mental hospital way back in the day, and since it's on the historic register, no one wanted to tear it down, so they made it a high school. Twisted, right?"

Lourdes stares at the school indifferently. "Recycling is part of the cosmic plan."

I ignore the double meaning and go on talking, because it keeps me from thinking about what's next: facing everyone. "The school's halls are loaded with legends from ghosts to demons," I go on. "But my all-time favorite? A. Bookmaker. She was a Jane Doe who was checked in with no memory, and according to the story, she was obsessed with books. Get it. A. Bookmaker?"

"Har. Har. Stop stalling," Lourdes says.

"And what are you planning today? Any good deeds on the agenda?"

"I've already signed up to volunteer at the dog shelter," she says. "And I'm going to scope out this high school scene and see who I can help or make feel better, which shouldn't be difficult because teens these days are so hard on themselves."

"Okay, what's the first step?"

Lourdes smiles coyly. “The principal’s office, of course.”

“I meant with Ruby.”

“First things first, Hart.”

It’s about three hundred feet to the admin offices, and each step I’m either high-fived, patted on the back, or given a thumbs-up or finger guns. Jameson is what I call a high school god who most everyone outside his circle can’t stand but pretends to worship for fear of some wrath. Which is why I thought there’d be some covert sneers or scowls, but everybody seems genuinely chill and happy to see Jameson. That’s when it hits me that almost dying makes him/me sort of untouchable and maybe, just maybe, it will give him/me a fresh start.

Of course, that doesn’t stop the curious stares that Lourdes gets. She doesn’t even seem to notice or care; she just lifts her chin higher like some kind of lioness stalking the jungle, throwing out an occasional glare to ward off anyone who might risk contact.

“You’re going to have to act friendlier than that if you want to survive here,” I say. “And get those wings back.”

“Are you saying angels aren’t friendly?”

“How should I know? I only know one.”

“I can be friendly,” she says. “When it serves a purpose.” We arrive at the admin offices. “Like now.” She puts on a movie-villain smile. “Watch and learn, human.”

We spend forty minutes in the front office that goes something like this:

1. Lourdes the forger enrolls in school using some bogus paperwork that the secretary immediately accepts. She’s clearly under Lourdes’s “friendly” spell, because she gives her every class she wants, including Shakespeare, poetry, French, and woodshop, not caring whether they’re graduation requirements or not.
2. Citing memory issues (which is really coming in handy), I get a copy of Jameson’s schedule. Only four periods of classes; the last two are reserved for football.

3. I try to get the secretary to tell me what classes Ruby is in (using Lourdes's friendly approach) but I'm only met with a death stare.

Lourdes takes off with her new "guide," a tall skinny dude with acne, baggy pants, and untied shoelaces. "Thanks so much for being my guide," she tells him. "You're really helpful."

The guy eats it up and I can practically see the points flashing over Lourdes's head.

"Yo, Jameson!" I spin to see a few guys from the football team pushing through the crowd toward me. After some low fives, they bombard me with questions that make me feel like a ball in a pinball machine. "Dude, what happened?" "You okay?" "Did you get my texts?" "Is it true that you still throw bombs?"

Wow. News travels fast.

We walk and talk; well, they talk, and I nod mostly. Jesus, this is so weird. And then I'm standing in front of a locker. Presumably Jameson's locker. I guess my legs knew which way to go. One by one, Jameson's friends peel off toward their classes, leaving me with Tristan, Jameson's go-to wide receiver. They're so in sync on the field, they've been compared to legendary duo Roethlisberger and Brown.

Like at the beach shed, I roll the combo until the lock clicks open. The locker's got a few books, a football, and a very smelly sweatshirt. I pull out the American history book.

A couple of girls smile in my direction, and a few others wave from a distance like they aren't sure if it's safe to go back in the water.

"So, uh," Tristan begins, "is it true? You're all ready to play?"

"I'm going to practice tomorrow, to feel things out," I say as we cruise down the corridor, weaving between students who are still throwing me high fives.

"Yeah, that's good." He leans in so close, our shoulders touch. "I hear your memory is sort of . . . on the fritz, so you think you'll be good with the plays? Like, remembering them?"

My ego gets the best of me. “I’ll be good,” I say, freaking that I have absolutely no idea how to read a goddamn play.

“I could run them with you or go over them or . . .” He shrugs. “Anything you need, bro.”

Just then I see Ruby. She’s coming this way, book bag slung over her shoulder. She’s got on leggings and a T-shirt that reads I LITERALLY DO NOT CARE.

Serena is walking next to her, telling her something, but I can tell Rubes is a million miles away.

“Hey, Ruby,” I say, all smiles and exaggerated waves. “I like your shirt.”

Ruby barely looks in my direction as she passes, giving me the courtesy of a head nod. Serena, on the other hand, delivers a perfectly timed scowl with the message *Get lost*.

Tristan smacks me in the chest. “You feelin’ okay? You like her shirt?”

“Yeah, I like her shirt. So what?”

Tristan holds up his hands. “Whoa, man.”

I take a breath, realizing this uptightness is souring my mood and it’s not cool to take it out on someone else. “It’s been a long day.”

“Er, the day just started.” Tristan laughs and takes off, leaving me standing in the stream of moving people, and I suddenly feel dizzy.

. . .

I head into class and take an empty seat by the window just as the bell rings. A few other students say, “Hey,” and another tells me, “Congratulations,” like I just won the Super Bowl. A minute later, Gabi rushes in, planting herself in the chair behind me. She’s wearing black cotton overalls with a tank top. Her hair is tied into two braids.

I turn, arm curved across the back of my seat. She’s busy shuffling through some papers in her bag. When she finally looks up, I smile. Her face contorts into a *What’s your deal?* expression.

She glances around at the other students lost in their own convos and says, “You’re here.”

“So are you.”

Our teacher Mr. Ortega is talking to a student at his desk, giving me and Gabi more time to catch up.

She says, “I just thought maybe you would need more time off.”

“I feel great, really.” I’m overselling this with the head bobbing and smiles, but it’s hard to reel myself back in when Gabi is family. When sitting this close to her makes me think I really *can* have my old life back. No matter what the grouchy angel says.

She simply nods like she’s all out of words and goes back to more paper shuffling.

“So,” I say. “How’s Ruby?”

“I told her you were looking for her. Did you ever find her?”

I’m not biting. I know Ruby would have told Gabi everything, so that means Gabi is fishing. But for what?

“I ran into her over the weekend,” I say, fighting the smile sitting on the edge of my lips. “But you already know that.”

Gabi, smart, sweet, calculating Gabi, grins. She leans back and folds her arms across her chest. Suspicion fills her dark eyes. “You’ve got a secret, Jameson Romanelli.”

Whoa! Where did that curveball come from? I swallow the lump in my throat that has just grown to the size of a small peach. Does she know something?

I form the words in my head: *I’m Hart stuck in Jameson’s body*. But the wires get all crossed and just like before, the words die a slow and painful death in my mouth.

“Well?” she says, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Well, I mean . . .” I really hate cosmic rules right now.

Gabi yawns, not bothering to cover her mouth. “I did a tarot reading, you know,” she said. “You might not know what that is, but . . .”

“I do!” I nearly shout. A few other students look our way, so I lower my voice. “I totally know what it is. What did the cards tell you?” *Please tell me they revealed the truth.*

She leans forward so we're only a few inches apart. This could be the answer to all my problems. If Gabi has it figured out, then she can tell Ruby the truth!

In a whisper, she says, "I'd tell you but then I'd have to kill you."

And just like that I go from inflated balloon to sad, deflated un-champion one.

"Gabi," I say, desperation in my voice, "I really need your help."

Her dark brows come together. "How so? Because if it has to do with Ruby, that's off the table. Like, never going to happen."

I wish I could tell her everything, but I realize that there is nothing I can tell her that will make her see the truth. Still, that doesn't mean she can't maybe be a lifeline.

"I need your help with this class," I say, rushing headlong into my sudden brilliant idea that I really hope doesn't crash and burn. "Just to get caught up. You know . . . since my memory." I rub the back of my neck in a dramatic show of suffering. "If you don't mind?"

Gabi's considering the request. Her softy side makes an appearance with its belly up. "Okay. On one condition."

"Name it."

"Don't mess with my sister. She's had enough to deal with."

"Right. You mean her boyfriend." My heart is hammering. And let me just say for the record, talking about yourself in third person is crazy making. "That must have been awful."

"Worse than that," Gabi says, biting her lip. She looks like she's going to cry, and this is the instant I realize how hard my death must have been for her too. Gabi and I got each other. She's the sister I never had. She was my *Ruby* consigliere, helping me understand her super-complex brain. Plus, she 100 percent agreed with me about horror films and the general lack of cleanliness in the world. And she's a beast at karaoke.

"I'm really sorry." I pick at a worn groove in the seat. "I know you were close to him too."

Gabi's eyes flick back to mine. What isn't she telling me? She says, "How would you know that?"

“I . . . I just heard stuff and it makes sense. I mean, you knew the guy a long time, right?”

“Okay, class,” Mr. Ortega announces, “turn to page one eighty-two.”

“Don’t talk about Hart,” Gabi says defiantly.

I nod my agreement, wait for the pain on her face to pass, then say, “So we have a deal?”

Gabi chews on a fingernail, then looks up at me and says, “Yeah. We have a deal.”

And that *yeah*? That’s my backup ticket into Ruby’s world in case everything blows up in my face today.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-two
RUBY

When the last bell rings, I weave between small crowds toward my car, throwing waves and half smiles so I seem okay. Because there's nothing worse than being surrounded by "normals" when you feel anything but.

When everyone found out about Hart, he became an instant saint and all anyone could talk about was him saving that little boy's life. And I became the girl to steer clear of because people just didn't want to get swallowed up in my shock and grief. I guess I don't blame them. I mean, who wants to walk alongside a shadow all day?

Something about Serena's words this morning have stuck with me all day—this idea of being happy. Is happiness something that just happens to you? Or do you choose it? Or is it a mindset? Or is it something else? Or none of the above? What if happiness isn't even all it's cracked up to be? What if being okay is good enough? If Hart were here, he'd tell me, "Where's Ruby? The girl who wants to see every corner of the world, to soak up the sun and the moon and the stars all at once?"

I cross the senior parking lot, where Martin is holding court at his lifted truck. I catch his eyes as I pass. He blows me a kiss, and I offer him a wink. He's been hounding me to look at Hart's music book, but I can't. There's something about it that makes his death feel so final. Like if I do it, I'll have no new "Hart" ever again. It will have all been used up.

"Ruby!"

I turn to see Lourdes heading toward me.

"Hey," I tell her once she makes her way over. "How was your first day?"

“It was fine, I guess. If you pretend the food in the cafeteria is real and the bathrooms are clean.”

I laugh. “Yeah. That’s pretty accurate.”

“Hey,” she says. “I was wondering if you know anyone who’s in need of help.”

“Help?”

“I’m uh . . . well . . . I have this assignment. Part of travel-abroad experience and I’m supposed to do some good deeds, but I don’t know where to start.”

“Oh, uh . . . how about volunteering at the food kitchen or at the domestic violence shelter or something?”

Her face brightens. “I’ll definitely add those to my list.”

I realize then that she must feel pretty out of sorts being the new girl at school. “I could introduce you to some people,” I tell her. “Show you around if you want, since you’re new and all.”

She offers a thin smile, nods slowly, then says, “That’s so nice. And you’re right. I mean, I have Jameson. He’s so great. Like, the nicest guy in the whole world, but a girl’s perspective would be better.”

I’m still tripped up on *nicest guy in the whole world* when she says, “You really don’t have to. I’m sure you’re busy.”

But oddly, I want to. I like the idea of having a friend who knows nothing about me or my past or my grief. Maybe this is the space I’ve been needing to find my way back to myself.

. . .

Once I’m in the car, I tip the visor down and Hart’s sneeze photo falls onto my lap. It might sound weird, but I love this goofy picture because he’s in the middle of a breath, a moment frozen in time. It seems inconceivable that the person in this photo could be gone.

The next thing I know, the passenger door has swung open and Gabi is sliding into the seat.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as I shove the picture back into its place.

“Why didn’t you answer my texts?!” she growls.

I tug my phone from my bag. “It’s off.”

“You really need to evaluate your priorities, hermana,” she says. “You could have missed the biggest news in the world.”

“I doubt that.”

“Oh yeah?” She unties one of her braids and her curls spring to life. “Well, I talked to Jameson today.”

“That’s news?”

With a smug expression, she says, “Kind of, but that’s not the big part. The big part is that it’s official. He’s for sure changed.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He was just all, like, soft and fuzzy in class this morning. It was weird and I wanted to tell you at lunch but I had to go home, so I sent texts that you obviously didn’t get.”

“Soft and fuzzy?” Nicest guy in the world? Have Gabi and Lourdes been drinking from the same fountain of derangement? Except that I feel and see and sense it too.

“Yeah, like, you know”—she puts on a pathetic expression—“like a puppy dog. That coma really messed him up. Or I guess you could say made him better? I’ve heard of that—of people almost dying and then changing their lives when they get a second chance. Kind of like Scrooge.”

“Except this isn’t some Dickens story.”

“Right. And just so you know, I get Sister of the Year, because after I talked to him, I ran home at lunch to consult his cards again, to see if the ancestors had more than *message*.”

My heart is fluttering wildly. “And?”

“Nada, but after talking to Jameson, I think I figured something out.” She pauses, inches back, frowns. “I think Jameson has a message for you.”

“I’m not computing.”

“Maybe we should talk outside, because I don’t want to be in an enclosed space if you lose it.”

“You’re scaring me,” I tell her, trying to control the tremble in my voice. “Just spit it out.”

“What if . . . he has a message from the other side, from Hart . . . since he was so close to death?”

I feel my entire body reject the preposterousness of her theory, except for my center that’s firing hot missiles across my ribs, screaming YES! For the moment, I allow logic to speak first. “Gabi, that’s ludicrous. Why would Hart . . .”

“Do you want some water or something?” Gabi asks. “ ’Cause you look sorta pale.”

I grip the steering wheel, take a deep shuddering breath. “But why Jameson?” I ask, clinging to logic but wanting desperately to follow instinct and hope. “Why wouldn’t Hart just talk to *me*?”

“Because Jameson is the only one who has been in the Twilight Zone lately, tonta. And the afterlife is tricky business,” Gabi says. “And you take what you can get, so if Jameson was the only one around, well, Hart might not have had a choice.”

My heart is lodged in my throat and I can’t even swallow. I can barely breathe that there is even a possibility that Jameson could have crossed to some place where he might have seen Hart or gotten a message from him. Lucky bastard.

The thought of it sparks a memory. Hart and I were nine years old; he fell off his bike and hit his head pretty good against the asphalt, hard enough that it knocked him out. I was big-time freaking, but then he opened his eyes.

“Hart! Are you okay?”

“I’ve never been knocked out before,” he said, like it was some silly badge of honor.

Seeing he was fine, I smacked him in the chest. “Don’t ever do that again!”

“Fall off my bike?”

“Leave me like that.”

Hart sat up, rubbing his head. “Did you think I was dead or something?”

“Don’t be dumb!”

“I’d never do that, you know.” He got to his feet, lifted his bike up, and looked up at me. Those were the days when I was two inches taller.

“Never do what?”

“I’d never leave and not say goodbye.”

Is that what this is all about? Hart finding a way to tell me goodbye? Why does that feel so empty, so not enough?

Gabi starts bouncing up and down while her fingers fly across her phone screen. I haven’t seen her this excited since her soccer team won second in the state championship two years ago. She stopped playing after that. When I asked her why, she just smiled and said, “I want to go out on top.”

“Who are you texting?” I ask, feeling a knot of tension tightening in my stomach.

“Tía Lydia.”

“Why?”

“I asked her if she could read someone’s aura using a photo.”

The closed-up car is beginning to feel hot, so I start the engine and turn on the A/C. “Even if she could,” I say, “why does it matter?”

“She might be able to, I dunno . . . shed light.”

I look at the dashboard’s digital clock, realizing I’m going to be late to see Jameson if I don’t get a move on, and now I wonder if I’m even in a good enough mental space to do it.

“Okay, well, hop out,” I tell my sister.

She looks wounded. “No way. I’m so going with you. I won’t even get out of the car. I’ll duck down and he won’t know I’m here.” She scrunches up her face and clasps her hands like she’s praying. “Please? Pretty please?”

“Gabi.”

“If it wasn’t for my reading, you wouldn’t even know he has a message, so tokens for me, which I would like to cash in now.”

“Ugh. Fine, but you better not let him see you. I don’t want to spook him or anything.”

Gabi puts on her seat belt with elation like she’s securing herself into a roller coaster. “Vámonos!”

On the drive over, we talk about glorious nothingness. It doesn’t matter that it’s shallow chitchat over some Hollywood gossip, what matters is that right here, on this small stretch of road I feel reconnected to my sister, to life.

And for a few splendid minutes I almost feel like I could be happy. Gabi's going on about some celebrity of the minute when I hear *boom* and my car veers hard to the right.

"What the hell was that?" Gabi says.

"I think we blew a tire."

I pull to the curb in the residential neighborhood and get out to survey the damage. Gabi is right behind me.

"It's shredded," she says.

"Great observation, Watson."

"Why do you always get to be Sherlock?"

I go to the trunk and lift the spare out, setting it on the sidewalk. "Because I'm older."

"You may be older but I'm an older soul, so there."

"Okay, old soul, can you step back?"

She doesn't move an inch. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"But you'll be late! You can't change a tire. Not when there's a cosmic message waiting for you!"

"Look," I say, tugging a scrunchie and pulling my hair into a messy bun, "if the cosmos cared so much, it/they/whatever wouldn't have blown the tire."

Gabi scowls.

I go on, "The only way to get to the park, which is four miles from here, is to change this thing. So, unless you can fly."

"What are the odds?" Gabi's shaking her head, pressing her lips together disappointedly. "Like, couldn't this have happened tomorrow? And when did you learn how to change a tire?"

"I learned from Hart's dad at his shop," I say as I tug the jack out of the trunk.

"Define *learned*," Gabi says. "Like, can you actually do this? Or did you see Hart's dad do it and now you think you can, too, because let's face it, you totally overinflate your abilities and think you can do things you can't."

"I do not!"

Gabi leans against the car. “Remember when you thought you were Lara Croft and you took those aerial yoga lessons and told the instructor you were advanced and then you pulled your back out and had to go to the chiropractor for a week?”

“One occurrence. One.”

“No. Not one. ’Member when you were obsessed with *Top Gun* and so you thought you could ride a motorcycle down a mountain? Even though the only motorcycle-riding lesson you ever took was literally just classroom bookwork and some eighties VHS they played for the class.”

I pull my phone from my pocket. “You just wish you were as cool as me.”

Gabi says. “Are you doing the smart thing and calling Triple A?”

“Are you kidding? They’d take a year to get out here,” I say. “I’m texting Jameson that I’m going to be late.”

I’ve barely typed out *Hey, it’s me* when Gabi says, “You won’t need to.”

I look up at my sister, who’s pointing down the road. “He’s already here.”

Jameson pulls his shiny black SUV behind us like some secret service guy. He’s even got the dark aviators.

“This is going to be rich,” I mutter.

“Can you just be nice?” Gabi says, already smiling in Jameson’s direction.

“Gabi, Jameson Romanelli couldn’t change a tire to save his life. The guy failed out of shop in the ninth grade because he didn’t know the difference between a Phillips head and a flat head.”

“I’m sure that’s an exaggeration.”

I raise a single eyebrow, challenging my sister to prove me wrong. “And he couldn’t build a basic bench *with* the teacher’s help,” I say, making my point. “He said his hands were only meant for one thing.”

“Football?” Gabi guesses.

I roll my eyes as Jameson hops out of his car. His plain T-shirt and loose-fitting jeans give him a low-maintenance vibe that is the polar opposite of the preppy, self-obsessed guy I’ve always known. And I hate to admit it, but it’s a good look for him.

“You got a flat?” he says, taking off his shades and hooking them into the neckline of his shirt.

Wow. He's a genius.

Gabi nods. "It just blew out."

Jameson's mouth turns up into a slight smile that favors his right side more than his left. "I guess it's lucky I'm right behind you," he says to me. A wedge of sunlight spills through the trees, briefly shading his blue eyes. "Can you turn on your hazards and make sure the parking brake is on?"

Did he google that before he got out of the car? I wonder.

"I can change it," I say as he sets the wheel wedges in place, starts to remove the hubcap, and looks irritatingly 100 percent efficient. I watch in shock as he removes the lug nuts masterfully, as if he's done this a thousand times before.

I place the jack under the vehicle, because no way is Mr. Failed Shop going to outmaneuver me.

"Thanks," he says, wiping his forehead with his forearm, pushing back a heap of light brown hair.

"Wow, you don't look like a guy who failed shop to me," Gabi says, snapping a quick picture of Jameson when he isn't looking. I'm sure she's sending it to Tía Lydia to read the guy's aura or whatever.

I hit her arm. *Way to make it obvious we were just talking about him.*

Gabi shoots me a dirty look as Jameson squints at me and smiles. "I bet there are a lot of things you don't know about me."

A feeling of *déjà vu* ripples through me and I back away from him. My legs are trembling, and all I want to do is run. But I stick it out because Hart would want me to, and if he went to all this trouble to get a message to me, then surely I can withstand changing a lousy tire with Jameson.

He finishes the job fourteen minutes later. I'm stunned. Ready to fall over, because I didn't think he had it in him. Sure, facing death can change you, but that doesn't mean you become Mr. Handy.

He throws me a side (very proud-looking) grin as Gabi announces, "I'll take the car home. You go with Jameson. I know you guys have a lot to talk about and you probably don't want me around for it."

I swear on the baby Jesus that I am not a violent person. But in this moment, I want to poke my sister with a very sharp object. "You just got

your license, Gabi. No way.”

“Wow! When did that happen?” Jameson asks as if he’s got some personal investment in Gabi’s driving history. He’s got a grease smear on his right cheek, but I say nothing about it as I shoot him a warning look.

“A couple of weeks ago,” Gabi says. “The house is two miles from here, Ruby.”

“Most accidents happen within a mile of your house,” I say. “And you’ve already had two fender benders.”

“Those weren’t my fault.”

“One of the cars was parked, Gabi . . . in the owner’s driveway.” I look over at Jameson, who is smiling ear to ear. “Is something amusing?” I ask.

The grin vanishes and he puts on a pretend scowl. “Right. It’s cool, Ruby,” he says. “You don’t have to drive with me. I can just follow you to the park. No biggie.”

“Sure, okay,” I say as he heads back to his secret service SUV. Isn’t it illegal to have windows that blacked out? Would it be rude to call in a police tip?

Planted back in my car, I adjust the rearview mirror, keeping my eyes on his every move. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Gabi starts to turn to look over her shoulder. “Don’t look,” I warn.

“Then why did you ask me if I saw something?”

“He put on his blinker.”

“Wow! His blinker?” She laughs. “You so do not deserve to be Sherlock.”

“Who puts on their blinker to pull away from the curb in a residential neighborhood when no cars are around?”

“Like I said, *Watson*,” Gabi says, “he’s changed.”

I roll my eyes, then lay into her. “And I can’t believe you suggested I be stuck with Jameson! In his car! What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s the big deal? You said no. Can we go now?”

“He’s got a terrible driving record.”

“Which is probs why he puts his blinker on now.” Gabi glances down at her phone. “Ooh. Tía Lydia texted back.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“She said she’ll need some time to check out his aura since it’s a pic.”

I pull back onto the road. “Feels kind of, I don’t know . . . underhanded.”

Gabi sighs and crosses her arms over her chest. I look into my rearview mirror again. Jameson is right behind us, jamming out to some tune, tapping his steering wheel, belting out a song I can’t hear but suddenly wish I could. What the holy hell? He’s too cool to so much as tap his foot to a beat at school dances, and now he’s going all flyboy?

“I really hope,” Gabi says, “that there was some mystical reason for Jameson’s transformation.” She hesitates, then adds, “Something that made him worthy of . . .”

My breath hitches in my throat. “Hart’s last message?”

Gabi nods, and suddenly I’m not mad at her. That would come an hour from now when I blow a gasket and call the president for the nuclear codes because my sister does the unbelievable.

Twenty-three
HART/JAMESON

As soon as I pull up to the park, I see it's fenced off with signs that read NO TRESPASSING. UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

Just as I kill the ignition, I hear a tap on my window that startles me. It's Ruby. Her shades are an inch too low on her nose. Wisps of hair hang loose from her low ponytail. Even in those sweats and her I LITERALLY DO NOT CARE shirt, she has to be the most beautiful human on the planet.

I jump out of the car. "Looks like we'll need to find somewhere else."

Her frown is so deep she could hide baby hamsters in there. "I'm sure that's a joke," she says. "It's just a fence. Come on."

Shit.

Of course Ruby would ignore the signs and the chain-link fence that is probably charged with voltage that could land us in the hospital. And if that doesn't, then the security cameras will land us in the slammer.

Gabi hangs her head out of the car window. "I'll keep watch and if there's any suspicious activity, I'll call."

Why doesn't that make me feel any better?

"Hey, Ruby," I say, running after her. "There are signs and I bet security cameras and we could totally talk here. This is a good place. Right here on the sidewalk."

She doesn't even slow down. "I saw an opening we could slip under when I drove by," she says. Then she offers me a smile most people would mistake for friendly, but I know the truth behind this one: it's a gleeful, almost hypnotic expression for the trouble we're about to get into.

My nervous system is losing its shit. Which must mean this body is starting to accept me as the new landlord.

“Hang on,” I call to Ruby, circling back to the car and parking it to face the street. Like I said, quick escape mode.

I jog back to Ruby, who is tapping her foot impatiently. “Really? What do you think the invisible security is going to do? Chase you down in their golf cart?”

“Always best to be prepared.”

She pauses. Why is she looking at me that way? Is she holding her breath? “You okay?” I ask.

She turns and leads me to the “opening.” Yeah, if you’re a small child, or a troll.

Ruby shimmies underneath like a ninja, then holds the fence up, creating a bigger gap for me. I follow. Of course I do.

We hike a small grassy hill, past stacks of fresh turf, into a wooded area not visible from the street. There are stacks of fresh turf every few feet.

“See?” Ruby says, hiking ahead. “No boogeyman. No problems.”

“Not yet,” I mumble, hurrying to catch up to her, my eyes darting across the shadows.

We emerge from the trees into an open grassy area filled with park benches, a playground, and basketball hoops, all of which have been dismantled in some form or another. There’s a tractor, and there are piles of wood, and other colorful scraps that must be the new playground equipment, including a red tube slide.

The only thing left standing is a rusty metal swing set.

“So,” she says, turning to me.

My palms are sweating. “So . . .”

“You said you have a lot to tell me.”

Believe me, it sounded good in the moment, but now that we’re here all alone and she’s looking at me so expectantly, my words dry up in my drier mouth. “Uh . . . yeah.” I stuff my hands into my pockets and look at the trees, wondering what to say that won’t (a) freak her out, (b) piss her off, (c) make her want to punch me in the jaw, or (d) alert the cosmic forces.

I can feel the weight of her stare.

“Yeah,” I say, “but I’m not sure where to begin.” I take my words slow, assessing each one before I put it out there.

“How about at the beginning?” She plops down onto the grass.

That’s a good sign. If Ruby isn’t comfortable in a situation, she always stays on her feet, one second from bolting. I sit next to her as she looks down, picks clovers from the grass, and twists them between her fingers before tossing them to the side. “Did you know you only have a one-in-five-thousand chance of finding a four-leaf clover?” She glances up at me. “I hate statistics. Kills people’s vibe, ya know? I mean, why not think you’re going to be the exception?”

I wonder what Jameson would say right now. Probably that statistics rule his life as a football player. That they define him in every single way. But if I fell into that trap, I’d throw in the towel right now, because one-in-a-million odds of finding my way back to Ruby are the worst odds ever.

“Yeah, that’s a good way to look at it,” I say.

“It is?”

I nod.

“Like us being here,” Ruby says. “Against all odds, right?”

I see what she’s doing. She’s trying to break the ice, to make this easier for me, to loosen me up so I start talking in actual complete, coherent sentences.

There’s so much I want to say, to tell her. And the hardest part? Acting like the person I love most in the world is a stranger. My phone vibrates.

She must hear it because her eyes dart to my pocket.

“Do you need to get that?”

“People are kind of piling on,” I tell her, “and to be honest I don’t even know if we were really friends, because my memory is all jacked.”

“Maybe I can help.”

I tug out my phone and flash Levi’s name to Ruby.

Ruby nods. “He plays on the team. I think he’s the guy who gives you the football.”

“The center?”

“Yeah, that. But he’s cool. Doesn’t ever say much. I heard he has an out-of-town girlfriend.”

I read the message: Saturday juices? I show Ruby. “I have no idea what that means.”

Ruby laughs. “Well, I’ve only heard rumors, but it’s code for you and your buddies to drink yourselves into oblivion, and apparently it happens most Saturday nights.”

She takes my phone and scrolls through it, stopping on each message. “Katrina? She’s had a thing for you since tenth grade. And Misha? You guys went out for all of ten seconds last year.” She goes on and on down the line, and I get an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach, telling me Jameson didn’t have many real friends at all.

“And Martin wants to know if you want any of his mom’s black-eyed peas. Says he’ll bring them over.”

Did Jameson like black-eyed peas? What even are they? Peas? Beans? And how come Martin never offered *me* any? “So I guess that one is a yes?” I ask my new social guru.

Ruby texts a yup to Martin and hands me my phone, which I turn off and pocket.

We sit silent for a few seconds that feel like they’re in danger of stretching into awkward minutes.

I begin with “I know you think I’m an asshole.” I swallow the lump in my throat.

She doesn’t interrupt me, so I go on. “And I don’t blame you,” I say. “I’ve pulled some stupid stunts, done some awful things but . . . I’ve changed.” I’ve just given her a lot to digest, and what Ruby says next matters more than she’ll ever know. So I stop there.

And I wait.

“Look, Jameson,” she says. Her voice teeters on the edge of a tremble. “It’s all good. Really.”

She gets to her feet, so I stand too.

“But you didn’t come out here to tell me only that, did you?” she asks as she makes her way over to the lone swing set.

I follow, lean against the metal frame, and look up at a flock of birds swooping across the sky. “I guess . . . I wanted to tell you what it was like.”

Ruby’s eyes go wide. “What do you mean?”

“I want to tell you what it felt like to die.”

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-four
HART/JAMESON

The words feel thick and heavy.

They cause an ache low in my stomach that makes me feel sick. Jameson is dead. He's never coming back and I highjacked his life, his world. His body. And even though Lourdes said he was going to die anyway, I still feel like I should do right by him and give him some kind of send-off. I want someone to know that he looked happy when he left this world.

"When I was in the coma," I say, careful to frame this as Jameson's story, hoping maybe I can sneak it by the all-powerful cosmic eyeballs, "there was this moment when I knew I was going to die. And I was in this . . ." Not *field*. "In this place with a . . ." Not *angel*. "With a girl. She told me it wasn't my time to die."

Ruby's now sitting on the swing, gripping the chain, staring at me with those eyes that I would give anything to see smile. Even now I feel the intensity between us—the one that's always been there, that even death can't erase. She blinks, says, "When you thought you were dying, did . . . it hurt?"

I want to hug her so bad right now and tell her that nothing was as awful as losing her.

"I felt weightless and calm," I say, "and like everything was going to be okay." I take the seat next to her. "And there was this moment when everything sort of faded and I heard a voice."

She draws in a quick breath. "Whose?"

"I don't remember."

Her entire body is facing me now. "What did it say?"

“The voice told me . . .” I take a couple of breaths. “To make everything count. Then I woke up and I knew that I had a second chance to live, to be . . . different.”

Ruby’s gaze falls to the dirt. She chews on her bottom lip. She’s disappointed, but why? What was she expecting to hear?

“I’m glad, Jameson,” she says quietly. “Really. But I don’t know what that has do with me or”—she turns her dark, penetrating eyes to mine—“why you came to my house the other night.”

I wanted you to know that I’m back. That I love you. That I’ll always love you. And before I know it, I’m trying to say the words, the truth that lingers on the tip of my tongue. Of course, the words are confiscated by some cruel universal force before they can make their way out of my mouth.

“Jameson? Are you okay?”

I nod. “I just get these headaches.” I want to find a way to sing the song I wrote her, the night before the end. But there’s no telling how bad it could come out. Like, what if Jameson is totally tone-deaf?

Ruby holds my gaze, searching for a truth she knows is hiding right in front of her. “You didn’t answer my question,” she says. “Why did you come to my house the other night?”

I try again. This time with success. “I wanted you to know that I’m alive.”

Twenty-five

RUBY

I didn't know talking about death would suck so bad.

While Jameson talks about his experience, all I can think of is Hart's.

It might sound cold or uncaring, but the first question that pops into the open air is "Why? I mean, I'm not being a jerk, but it isn't like we were friends," I say. He's holding back. I saw it just a second ago, like he was trying to disclose something but then stopped himself. "Are you sure there isn't anything else you want to tell me? Because if there is, I'll believe you. Even if it sounds off the charts."

"About dying?"

I can't work up the courage to ask if he has a message from Hart because I'm terrified of the answer.

I rock the swing back and forth, so slow my feet scrape the dirt. "When you were dying, did you see anyone? Any family? Or people you love?"

A cool breeze blows across the sandbox and there's a moment of strange silence right before he says, "I'm sorry, Ruby."

"You already said that."

"I'm sorry about Hart."

Everything in me goes cold. I grip the chain so tight my knuckles whiten. I look up. My gaze meets his. His blue eyes look darker in this light, more like the ocean than a summer sky. "I don't want to talk about that," I say. About *him*. With *you*. "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

“Unless you have something to tell me, like . . . a message from the other side.”

He stares at me silently, blankly, heartbreakingly.

“A message?”

I swear I feel something break inside of me. I stand, step back. “Look, I only came here so you could tell me whatever you had to and . . .”

“But I didn’t tell you about the music yet.”

I feel a chill inching up my spine, spreading across my skull. “Music?”

“Yeah, it um . . . it brought me back.”

There’s a tilt inside of me. Is this it? Is this the message? It would be just like Hart to use a song to tell me something. A bitter cocktail of adrenaline and hopefulness begins to course through me. And then the heat begins to build in my center, like those tiny branches are on fire, hotter and powerful until I feel like I might combust. “What . . . did it sound like?”

Jameson rubs the back of his neck. “If I hum it, will you laugh?”

I shake my head. My heart. Is in. My throat.

Then he starts to hum. One note. Two. But it’s all wrong—there is nothing in the melody that even resembles one of Hart’s songs.

Jameson lets out a small laugh. “It sounded better than that, I swear.”

I’m filled with something worse than disappointment. Dashed hope. God, why did I let myself go there? I know better. Clouds move across the sun, casting a purplish gray light over the demolished playground. A terrible pressure builds in my chest and I think I’m going to cry, but I swallow the tears and turn away from Jameson, training my eyes on the twisty slide that hasn’t been erected yet.

Hart hated slides. Said they were riddled with germs. Then in the second grade he saw me playing on one at school with some other boy. He ran into the classroom and came back with his Batman cape, which he promptly wrapped around himself before sliding down.

The memory makes me smile. That was so Hart. He always found a solution, always found a way to reach me, to stay close to me. Maybe it was too much to think he could do that from the other side of death. I guess I was

so wrapped up in the possibility of it, I let go of all logic and reason. But no more. This hurts too damn much. "I'd better go."

Jameson gets to his feet too. "But you haven't heard the weirdest part."

I head back toward the parking lot.

"The music was all soft notes," he goes on, trailing me. "Piano and guitar. And when I woke up . . ." He pauses.

All I hear are the words *piano, guitar*. Hart's hands on the keys, his fingers strumming the strings. I halt and face Jameson. "When you woke up, what?"

He's struggling again, like the words won't come. I do something I would never do, but desperate measures and all that. I reach out. I touch his arm. My fingertips warm against his skin. A tiny jolt of energy passes between us. I don't move my hand away. There's a strange unnamable comfort in touching him. I like it more than I should. "It's okay," I tell him. "Just say it."

His eyes meet mine. We stare, unmoving. He puts his hand over mine. That same feeling of *déjà vu* worms its way through me. I try to hold it, but it's gone before my next breath. I step back, trying to put distance between us, but there's an uncanny tingle running up my spine that makes me want to get close again. What the hell is wrong with me?

"When I woke up," he says, his voice taut, "I could play both instruments."

"What?!" I'm too afraid to hope it's even in the realm of possibility that he somehow knew one of Hart's songs. But what if . . .

"If you want, I could show you."

In that moment Jameson looks different, he looks . . . I search for the right adjective and am surprised at the one that pops into my mind: *adrift*.

"Hey!" an angry voice shouts from the distance.

A burly dude in a yellow construction hat is heading our way. "You're not supposed to be here!"

"Oh, shit!" Jameson says.

I take off. Jameson is right behind me.

We run. Fast. Through the trees, down the wet grassy hill. Jameson snorts, chuckles, manages, "Turn up the speed!"

So I do, and then I smile.

“Stop!” the man yells.

We race across the field. My legs and lungs are pumping at full capacity. The man is gaining on us. He’s surprisingly quick.

“I told you we were going to jail,” Jameson says, but there is a playfulness in his voice that is sort of endearing.

I reach the opening in the fence. “Hurry!” I tell him as I slip under the chain link. After a short struggle to get his shoulders all the way through, we’re free.

We don’t slow down to enjoy the moment of victory because Mr. Hard Hat is still coming after us.

I sprint to my car, but it’s gone. As if vanished. And this is why I’m calling the prez for the nuclear codes and aiming all available missiles at my sister’s head!

“I’m going to kill her!” I growl.

Hard Hat Man is running along the perimeter of the fence to the locked gate right in front of us, shouting, “I’ve already called the cops.”

I turn to Jameson. “You were right. We’re going to the slammer.”

And then he does the unexpected. He smiles like the idea of getting arrested is thrilling. “Good thing I parked for a quick getaway.”

In less than five seconds we’re inside Jameson’s secret service vehicle, speeding away from the scene of the crime. “That was way too close,” I beam, glancing over my shoulder. “Did you see his face? He was pissed!”

“I thought he popped an artery.” I can hear the beginning of a chuckle in his words as he turns onto the main road. Which only makes me laugh.

Now he’s busting up, too. An old man’s guffaw from his gut. And call me crazy, call me high on the rush of a wild escape, but I swear his laugh, that tiny hitch right before the release, reminds me . . . of Hart’s laugh.

It stops me cold.

The bubble we just occupied has vanished. Now we’re back in the real world with other cars, pedestrians, and traffic lights, and the distant glint of the sun-soaked sea up ahead.

Jameson holds up his hand in a high-five motion, still smiling. “That was amazing!”

I limply make contact and stare out the window, riddled with guilt. How could I laugh that hard? How could I forget Hart like that? How how how?

“Ruby? You okay?”

I can’t even look at Jameson. This whole playful, flirting, bonding BS has to end.

And it has to end now.

OceanofPDF.com

Twenty-six
HART/JAMESON

Ruby doesn't answer me, just gives me a barely there nod that takes the wind out of my sails because man, I was flying high there for a second.

We ran like banditos. Me and Ruby. Just like old times when she always found trouble and I joined because I wanted to be with her, I wanted to be *like* her. Fearless. I am so going to write a tribute song for Mr. Hard Hat.

I glance over and see Ruby slumped in the seat, the light in her eyes now a darker shade of nothingness, and I know. She's thinking about me. She's thinking it's wrong to be happy.

I'm right here! I want to shout.

"I think I should go home now," she says.

Seeing her like this makes me feel sick. It's too soon to push her; I know that, so I give her the space I know she needs. "Sure," I mutter. "I can show you the music another day."

We drive the next few miles in silence. I'm mentally maneuvering big-time, trying to find a way to make this right. I don't want her to get out of the car, regretting spending time with Jameson. When I get to her house, she hops out of the car so fast, I barely have time to say, "Ruby?"

She turns back.

"I know what you're thinking."

"I doubt that."

And then something moves through me, a shot of pain and heat. The words fly out of my mouth unexpectedly. "I was in love once."

Where the hell did that come from? My mind races for answers, record scratching on something Lourdes said to me: *Bodies carry memories*. I need to see if any of Jameson's are still in there.

Jameson was in love? With who?

Ruby blinks. She studies me. I can see her deciding, calculating her next move or words. She'll be into this. She's a sucker for romance and forever kind of love. But no. Not today. Today, she says, "I'll see you later." And then she's gone.

• • •

The house is quiet when I come in. The setting sun casts an eerie pinkish light through the living room windows. I go looking for Lourdes, but I don't have to look far, because I hear a song. Being played on a piano.

I follow the soft, dreamy, unfamiliar tune down a wide hall that ends with a set of tall double doors. Slowly, I open them.

The room is all windows and light. There's a white sofa, a huge painting of black squares like a chess board, and there's Lourdes, sitting at my piano positioned right by the window with a view of the shimmering Pacific. In the corner, behind her, is my new guitar.

If it's possible to be happy living in another body, then I think I'm feeling it. Just seeing my piano does something to me. There's a fluttering in my chest, a tingling in my hands.

Lourdes must not hear me come in because she continues to float her fingers over the keys. She's good. Really good.

A few seconds later, with her gaze down, she stops and I think I see a small smile curling around the edges of her mouth. At least until I ruin it by saying, "You play?"

If I startled her, she covers it like a pro. She stands and comes over. "Whitney cleared out this room for you. The delivery guys just left an hour ago."

I go to my piano, run my hands over the smooth honey-colored wood, mesmerized. "What was that song you were playing?" I ask.

“It doesn’t matter.” She stands and props her hands on her hips like someone’s mom. “How did things go with Ruby? I tried to set it all up for you. Told her how awesome you are.” She shakes her head. “She’s a hard sell, and it’s going to take more than my word.”

I feel like saying *Told you so*, but I manage to refrain and just stick to the facts.

“It started out really good.” I sit at the piano and begin to play the first few notes of her song, the one I never finished because I thought I had all this time.

*The ocean rushes by so fast
Moonlight splinters through the mast.*

The music moves through me like a dream, pumping life into my heart. I play a few more notes from other songs before Lourdes clears her throat. I rest my fingers on the keys and look up. “And then something happened, I’m not sure what. We were laughing one second and the next she closed up, went into a shell.”

Lourdes forces out a loud exhale. “Being human is so complicated, but maybe you made headway?”

“I just need a lot more time.”

Lourdes falls onto the sofa and hugs her knees to her chest. “Well, I have good news and bad news.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Good news is that I survived the day as a human and did four good deeds. The bad news is I couldn’t get you—us—an extension of time. I’m sorry.”

I don’t know if it’s the funk I’m in or that I was expecting this news, but I merely nod, then grab my new guitar and begin tuning it. I know it’s only been a few days in my timeline, but it really does feel like I haven’t held a guitar in forever, and this one feels amazing in my hands.

Like the football.

I hate that there's even a comparison. I can barely accept how alive I felt when I threw that ball. That it's the same feeling I have right now. There are other changes, too, like how I'm not germ focused like I used to be. Half the time I don't even think about all the bacteria living everywhere waiting to infect us all. Case in point: I actually ate a hot dog at school today after the concession clerk touched it with her bare hands. I don't know, maybe dying changes your priorities, your fears, because the worst has already happened.

"Hart?" Lourdes says. "Did you hear me?"

Loud and clear, but damn, I can't lose my shit now. "Yeah, so we just uh . . . have to work faster and smarter," I say, still strumming a few chords.

"Okay!" she says like it's the idea of the century. Then she quirks her head, "So, how do we do that?"

"I'm thinking and I think best when I play music."

I play one of the first songs I wrote, moody and slow, as I stare out at the ocean, at the sunlight twinkling like diamonds on the surface.

And then it hits me.

I jump to my feet.

"What's wrong?" Lourdes practically shrieks.

I look at her and offer a small closed-mouth smile. "What if I could play Ruby one of the songs I've written? She'd have to know it was me, right?"

Lourdes tilts her head, considering, but she in no way looks sold. "Music *does* have its own language."

"So you think it could work?"

"It *could* fool the other angels." She drops her voice to a whisper. "At least for a few seconds, maybe more. Maybe I could distract them."

I feel a jolt of excitement until I remember.

"I think I need to give Ruby some space, though," I say. "I think I pushed her too far, too fast."

"Mmm."

"What does that mean?"

"It means mmm. It means I'm pondering the possibilities. It means we don't have the luxury of space." She begins to pace. "I've already set it up so Ruby will show me around town, so maybe we do that, and you show up out

of the blue and be charming or something.” She snaps her fingers. “Or maybe I could invite her over and then . . .”

“I’m not so sure seeing me again wouldn’t act as more of a repellent,” I groan.

“Well, this isn’t just about you, is it? This is about me, too, and I’ve been thinking that you were possibly maybe onto something when you said my being of great help to you might tip the scales in my favor, so how about you do it for me?”

If I wasn’t so bummed, I might unpack all that, especially the part about me maybe being right. “On one condition.”

“I hate conditions.”

“You need to be honest with me about everything from now on.”

The angel glowers. “Why do I think there’s an accusation in there?”

I set the guitar down and lean against the piano. “Did you know Jameson was in love? Was that in his file or whatever you were reading when we were looking for a body?”

Lourdes blinks and in the space of that blink and the next, I already know. She says, “Yes, he was in love and yes, it was in his folder.”

This truth comes at me like a hammer to my ribs. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“How was it relevant?”

“Because I felt it today,” I spit out.

Lourdes inclines her head. “You knew this body would harbor memories.”

I don’t know why but I’m suddenly pissed. “Who was she?”

“That’s classified.”

I give her a hard stare. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“God, you are so dramatic, Hart Augusto.”

“Yeah, well, if you won’t tell me, I’ll start digging and find out anyway.” It feels so wrong for this body to be in love with someone else. Jesus, this is all so twisted.

“Fine, if you must know, he met her last year while skiing in Colorado. It was instant, Hart. So cliché and unrealistic, like the kind you see in the movies.”

It's hard for me to imagine Jameson falling that hard.

Anyhow," Lourdes goes on, "they grew close. Spent the two weeks of Christmas break together in a cocoon of their own making. They stayed in touch every day, nearly every hour through New Year's. She changed him, his heart, his goals, his dreams. And he changed her. I suppose that's what love is supposed to do, right?" She spits out the word *love* with disdain.

"Okay . . . so what happened to this instant love?" I ask. "Did they break up?"

Lourdes goes silent for longer than is comfortable. She heads to the window and with her back to me, she says, "She had a rock-climbing accident. She died."

I feel an ache deep between my ribs that shoots into my heart. And then there's a flash of a fur hood wrapped around a girl's small, pale face. She's smiling, staring right at me like I'm a camera recording her image.

"Hart?" Lourdes says. "Are you all right?"

I nod, trying to process it all. I can *feel* how much Jameson loved her. And I can feel his loss. It goes to show how little I knew about him.

I feel sick. And sad. Sad. And sick.

"That's why he started drinking," I guess.

"Loss and grief and pain force people into dark places, Hart. And all they can do is search for any light they can find."

A name sparks across my (Jameson's) memory. "Her name was Elle."

Lourdes nods.

If Jameson's heart is capable of this kind of intense emotion, then maybe it's capable of holding my memories of Ruby.

That night I fall into bed, questioning everything I thought I knew. Everything except my love for Ruby, and it doesn't matter what memory this body holds of Elle, it'll never be enough to keep Ruby out of my heart.

Twenty-seven

RUBY

I find my sister in the backyard watering the flowerpots.

“I cannot believe you left me, punk!”

She backs up, pointing the dribbling hose at me like it’s a weapon. “Some guy told me I was trespassing, and he made me leave. I texted you, like, a hundred times.”

I look down at my phone. Lots of *warning, get out, and run* messages.

Just then Inez comes out of the house with two glasses of iced tea. “Hey, Ruby,” she says, setting both drinks on the table.

Inez is petite with small features, triple-pierced ears, and shimmering red hair found only in a bottle.

“Hey,” I say.

“Can you give us a second?” Gabi says to Inez.

“I have to go anyways. My brother has a soccer game.” Inez gives my sister a peck and takes off out the back gate.

“Tell me everything,” Gabi demands. “Did he . . .”

“No, he had no message from Hart.” I tell her everything, including the *against all odds* connection I feel between us that I hate. Everything except for the laughter. “But he said he heard guitar and piano right before he woke up.”

“Those were Hart’s instruments.”

“And now he can supposedly play,” I add with a dramatized eye roll.

Gabi is holding the water hose askew now so that it’s only splashing an empty pot. “Holy wow . . . you think Hart’s message is in the music? So

brilliant!”

I drop into a rattan chair miserably. “I don’t know what to think but it was all too much, so I came home.”

“Ruby! You need to hear Jameson play. This could be it. This could be the message!”

I give my sister a pathetic look. “I’m not sure my heart can take it.”

Gabi switches off the hose and pulls up a chair next to me. “What’s that sixth sense of yours telling you?”

“That it’s broken?”

“Seriously.”

“Only that I need to follow this through, but it tells me nothing about what I’m going to find at the end of it all, which pretty much feels useless.”

Gabi tilts her head back to stare at the sky. “I did another tarot reading on him, but it turned up nothing. Universe is blocking me out, man . . . Either that or I am losing my touch.” She sighs, closes her eyes. “But if the universe is keeping a secret, it usually means it’s waiting to see if you can figure it out. Which I think means your gut is right on.”

Gabi looks at me now, waiting for a response.

“A part of me just wants to let this whole thing go,” I say. “It’s stirring up all this stuff and it’s . . .” I suck in a shaky breath. “It’s so hard.”

Reaching over, Gabi places her hand over mine like *she’s* the older sister. “I know if you don’t hear him play the music, you’ll always wonder. And that means you’ll nag me about not doing it forever.”

I chuckle. “I am not a nag.”

Gabi raises her dark brows as a firm objection.

“Okay,” I tell her, “I’ll do it. But I need you on standby with loads of chocolate and bad rom-coms and worse horror flicks.”

I expect my sister to smile, to leap up in triumph, but instead she lifts one shoulder and says softly, “I miss him too. I know it isn’t the same, but there are days I forget he’s gone and I think, *I need to tell Hart about this* and then I remember and my heart shrinks.”

I fight the urge to cry. I’ve been so lost in my own pain that I never took the time to consider that other people were suffering too. That maybe my

sister needed *me*. This is the first time we've had this conversation and it makes my cheeks prickle with heat. But I'm not on the floor in a puddle. The world hasn't crashed in around me. "So then we're in this together," I say, striking the deal.

Now she smiles. "Oh, and one more thing. Tía Lydia called me and said she's still working on the photo. She feels like there's something about him she can't quite put her finger on, so she's going to study the pic more and get back to me."

My phone rings. A name I haven't seen on my screen in months pops up. It's George, Hart's best friend.

I flash the screen to my sister.

"Answer it!" she demands.

Ring.

"Why?"

She grunts in exasperation. "Remember when I said the universe is keeping the answers locked up and it's up to you to find them?"

"You said the universe doesn't want us to know something."

Ring.

"Well, just because the universe doesn't want to make it easy doesn't mean that it won't help you," Gabi grinds out like the words are daggers aimed at my thick head.

"And you think George is the universe calling?"

"No! I think it's weird he's calling right now after all this time and in this exact moment."

Ring.

I answer the call. "Hey," I say, my heart thudding nervously. After the funeral he sort of drifted away further and further. And not just from me, but from Serena, from everyone. Or maybe I did.

"Why the hell are you hanging with Crash?" he growls.

"Hello to you too," I say, immediately infuriated that he thinks after all this time he can interrogate me.

"I'm serious, Slay." That's been his nickname for me since sixth grade. He's always sounded like an out-of-date dad. Back then everything for him

sounded like this: “You slayed that test, Ruby.” “You slayed that dance.” “You slayed that wave.” And then in ninth grade, he shook his head and said, “You slayed Hart.”

“Why do you care?” I ask, immediately regretting I ever picked up this call.

“Uh, because he’s an asshole?”

“Listen, George. I get it. I really do . . .” I finger-knead the growing tension in my forehead. “But he’s different somehow.” The big bro act with Gabi. The old-timer music. His awkwardness and kindness.

“Seriously? You’re going to fall under some shit spell?”

“Did I say that?”

Gabi mouths, *What’s he saying?*

I pull the phone back and growl-whisper, “This definitely isn’t a call from the universe!”

“Whatever,” George groans. “Do what you want, but I just thought you should know the dude has been texting me.”

“What?! Why?”

I relay the information to my sister silently as I put George on speaker.

“He said we need to talk,” George tells me. “About you.”

I feel a hot flush rushing up my neck. “Me?”

Gabi’s eyes go wide. Her arms are wigwagging wildly like a badly coordinated cheerleader that I interpret to mean *I TOLD YOU!*

“Is there something I don’t know?” George asks. “Like, I thought you could barely stand the guy. And now you’re in his car laughing and shit, and he wants to talk about you?”

My heart is pounding double time. Why do I feel the need to defend myself? “It’s not how it looked.”

Gabi mouths, *Laughing?*

George is silent. “You free right now?”

“Hang on.” I press Mute because I can tell Gabi is about to lose her shit. “YES, you’re free!” she screams. “God, Ruby. You are so lucky I’m here to help you!”

“I haven’t talked to George in months,” I remind her.

“So?”

“So, it’s . . .”

“Enough excuses. Do you want to know the truth or not?” Gabi inhales like there’s a shortage of oxygen. “What if this is a lead?”

I unmute the phone and tell George, “Yeah, I’m free.”

“Meet me at Extra Extra in thirty. I’ve got something else to tell you.”

This is one of my least favorite personality quirks. Dangling knowledge in front of someone with not so much as a nibble of info. “Tell me now,” I insist.

Gabi’s nodding her approval.

“I’m not somewhere I can talk,” George says. “See you soon.”

He hangs up before I can ask more questions.

. . .

I’m at the café in twenty minutes, grabbing a table near the back. The walls are lined with newspaper clippings, mostly old stuff from way before I was born. Tonight the place is poppin’, with nearly every table full.

From where I’m sitting, I can see the front door. George walks in, more like swaggers in, and settles into the seat across from me. He grabs a menu. “You gonna eat?”

I stare at him blankly. He belonged to Hart but by extension he belonged to me, too, and then he was gone when I needed him most. How can he act so casual? So cool? Like the last five months of silence between us never happened.

“Not hungry,” I say, crossing my arms, trying to match his detached tone. “So what gives, George?”

He must see my anxiety or anger or both, because his badass facade relaxes. He stands, gives me a hug, and sits back down. “I forgot to say hi. Sorry.” This simple, familiar gesture takes me back to when things were normal, and for a split second, I pretend nothing has changed and that we’re still friends, and my heart does this little leap.

“I was driving by Hart’s old place late last night on my way home,” he says.

“Except that’s out of your way no matter where you’re coming from.”

With a shrug, George tilts his chair back, balancing it on two legs. He’s got the leftover gray shadow of a black eye. “It’s a habit, okay?” he says.

I don’t know why but I feel a strange relief, knowing that George hasn’t forgotten Hart either. That in his own way, he’s keeping watch over the memories. “Anyways,” he goes on, “I saw Jameson parked there. Like, what the fuck, Slay? Don’t you think that’s weird?”

Yeah. It’s weird.

“Did he see you?” I ask, trying to hide the surprise I know is all over my face.

“Nah. You know I’ve got stealth skills on par with Hawkeye.” George smiles and for a beat I think he looks like the old playful, fun-loving guy who fills most of my childhood memories. He leans forward, setting his elbows on the table. I spot the end or beginning of a tattoo on his forearm, but it vanishes under his sleeve, making it impossible to see the whole thing. “Anyhow,” George continues, “he was just staring at the house all trippy. I was going to tell him to get lost but he already looked lost, you know?”

I don’t even know how to begin to process what George is telling me. Why would Jameson be hanging at Hart’s old place? How does that factor into all of this? Did Hart tell him to go there or something?

“What do you think it means?” I feel like I’m hanging from a ledge, my fingers are slipping, and no matter what I do, I can’t get a good enough hold to pull myself to safety.

George flags the server and we both order burgers and sodas. “How the hell should I know?” he says. “I thought you could tell me since you and Jameson are so *buddy-buddy* now.”

“Enough with the sarcasm, George. I have my reasons.” I chew my bottom lip, thinking.

“Like what? Give me one, and I’ll back off.”

I deadpan, “I’ll give you more than one. He’s acting like the nicest guy in the world, and he’s funny, and . . .” I take a breath and go all in. “Gabi did a

reading.” I’m not about to tell him that the cards told her that I’m going to surrender my heart, so I go with “And let’s just say that they confirmed that something is up.”

George stares at me for so long my cheeks start to warm. Finally, he says, “Nice. Funny. Sounds like . . . you’re into him.”

I gasp so big I think I might have sucked all the air out of the room. “Jorgé. You can’t be serious.”

“No wonder the guy’s into you. You’re leading him on.”

I’m hyper-pissed now. And not because George is calling me out, but because there’s a thread of truth in his words. I feel better when I’m around Jameson, and something about that fills me with guilt. It’s time to get back to business. “Did you ever text him back? To ask him why he wants to talk about me?”

George dances his fingers across his phone’s screen. “Just did.”

I grab his phone and read George’s reply to Jameson’s request to talk.

What’s up

Three blinking dots tell me that Jameson is already texting back.

A few seconds later I stare at the message, which is simply Tomorrow. After practice.

Twenty-eight
HART/JAMESON

I'm noticing some gaps in my memory.

Not just hours, but whole days. Like, I remember going fishing with my dad recently, but not the trip there, or what we ate, or where we slept. And I remember playing volleyball with Ruby and some friends at the beach, but I can't remember when or what she was wearing or what we did afterward. It's like reading a book and coming to a blank page, and then another, and when you finally get back to the story, you aren't sure what you've missed, only that something has been lost.

And it makes me wonder.

On the way to school, I ask Lourdes, "I know I'm going to lose my memories, but does that mean I'm going to gain Jameson's? Like, how does it work?"

"It's a tricky business," she says, braiding her hair over her shoulder. "Your spirit is the *real* you. Not the memories you keep. Does that make sense?"

"Not even in the ballpark."

She swivels her body to face me. "You will eventually have many of Jameson's memories, but they will sort of melt into your—*Hart's*—life experiences. So while you won't have *your* specific memories, you'll still be you. Your spirit won't change at all."

I'm trying to follow. "So, the stuff that's part of my spirit I'll remember."

"In theory. But it's not in the remembering," she says. "It's a *feeling* deep down that can't be explained."

“You mean like an instinct?”

“Not exactly.”

I shoot her a look of total confusion. “I need some human terms here, Lourdes.”

“It’s like this,” she says, sounding on the edge of exasperated. “You play music.”

“Right.”

“You won’t remember *how* you’re able to play instruments, only that you do. Because that’s part of your spirit.”

I think I’m beginning to understand. Sort of. “But Ruby is part of my spirit, too, so the logical conclusion would mean that—”

“That doesn’t mean you will remember your times with her,” she says. “Sometimes . . . I mean, it’s rare, but sometimes the spirit can hold on to a deeper connection and you won’t be able to explain why you feel it, you’ll just know something is buried deep inside of you, but . . .” Her voice trails off and she stares out the window.

My pulse picks up its pace. “But what?”

“It’s a rare thing, Hart,” she says with a hint of anger. “Nearly impossible to keep that kind of connection.”

I hold on to the *nearly*. It’s enough. For now.

. . .

The afternoon sun is relentless, beating down on the practice field like the fires of hell.

That part wouldn’t be the end of the world, unless you add a five-pound helmet and four pounds of pads, and dozens of eyes staring at you, waiting to see what you’re made of, or what you’re not made of. And all I can think is two things:

1. I’m going to be sidelined all season.
2. Shit!

A few days ago, I would have wished for number one, but that changed the second I realized that not winning this game, not showing off my skills to Stanford, lands me in Colorado and away from Ruby. And honestly? Jameson's life was cut off too early and I don't want him to go down as the QB who bombed on the field. I want him to go out as a champion.

Coach Feldman has been running practice with me on the sidelines for the last thirty minutes. "Want me to warm up?" I ask, feeling the need to burn off these nerves.

He simply shakes his head.

I'm not sure what his angle is, but as I watch the guys cut up and down the field like little gods, I begin to see the formation of the plays; I understand the meaning of the cryptic calls. Slow at first, then full force. It all comes back to this body the way a song would, lyrical and poetic and with a driving force that makes me *want* to play some ball.

Martin jogs over and chugs some Gatorade before turning to me and speaking in low tones so Coach Hell-man doesn't hear. "You sure you're good?"

I nod.

"Don't go all apeshit out there, got it? You take care of you."

I smile. Martin is a stand-up guy who never should have given up the trombone.

There are a few stragglers in the bleachers watching practice. Lourdes is one of them. She's sitting alone with a book in her lap. But every once in a while, she looks up and offers me a scowl or a shrug that says, *I'm bored. Entertain me, human.*

With Coach's arms folded across his chest, and a shiny whistle hanging from his neck, he turns to me. "You ready, Crash?"

"Now?"

"When else?"

I nod and put on my helmet like it's an old habit. I hate to admit it, but it feels awesome to run onto the field. The guys cheer as the offensive and defensive coordinators steer them into a big huddle near the fifty-yard line.

Coach is right behind me. Everyone takes a knee, looking up into the glaring sun shimmering on Feldman's bald head.

"All right, boys," he says. "It's been a tough time but Jameson is back. And if he can throw like he did the other day, I think we might have ourselves a championship in our future."

"Do we go easy on him, Coach?" someone asks.

I expect Feldman to say, "Yeah, you know he just woke up." But I guess football-speak is more like, "Am I running a daycare here?"

Wait! What happened to taking it slow?

A few of the guys cover their smiles behind their fists. Tristan scowls at them and says, "Grow the fuck up."

I nudge my chin toward Tristan to say, *Thanks for having my back*. Coach tells me, "Start at the twenty and drive that defense into the end zone."

Right. "All the way to the end zone?" I was hoping for a few short passes. You know, get myself warmed up before I'm asked to go for gold.

Feldman doesn't smile, doesn't answer, doesn't even frown. He just walks away.

As my offensive line gets into a huddle, I think I might puke. "Just give me a second," I say.

With my guts churning, I turn and walk a few paces out of everyone's earshot. "Okay, Jameson's body," I whisper. "No phoning shit in right now, got it? I really need you to remember how to play this game, throw like a champion, keep the ball away from the bad guys, not get sacked or killed. That kind of stuff. Because I am absolutely not going to Colorado."

Someone behind me says, "What's he doing?"

Tristan comes over. "Hey, man. You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

I jog back to my team on shaky legs. I scan their faces.

"Well?" a linebacker says.

"You gonna tell us the formation?" another player asks. "Blocking scheme?"

Someone else asks about the snap count and my head is spinning. I steal a glance up to Lourdes, who is shielding her eyes with her hand, watching my

every move.

“Let’s get a move on,” Coach yells.

With a knowing smile, Tristan hands me the ball. “Let’s do it like the old days.”

I squeeze the football. And then something happens.

The words come out of my mouth before I can even consider how bizarre they sound. “Nevada 414.”

Wide eyes take me in like I’m a deranged man. “Seriously?” some guy says. “Isn’t that a little ambitious?”

“Can you handle it?” I ask, already seeing the play form in my mind.

He snorts. “Can your arm?”

“Don’t worry about my arm. Just get open and catch the ball, yeah?”

Nevada 414 is the long ball. The fifty-yard bomb to open up the field and put the defense on their heels. Coach wants the end zone? I’ll give it to him.

We get into formation. And I see I called the right play. The defense isn’t lined up for it.

I’ve got my hands poised to take the snap from the center. I hard count like I’ve been doing this my whole life. He releases the ball to me. I step back, wait, scramble because I’ve got a two-hundred-pound linebacker coming at me full steam ahead.

I scan the field. My eyes are on Tristan, the target.

He’s almost in position. I dodge a beefy arm.

Another. I cut across the field.

Step. Breathe. Dodge. Step. Breathe.

Tristan’s booking it, cutting left, getting open.

One more step.

And then I let the ball sail.

I swear I hear a swish as it spirals right into Tristan’s waiting hands and he takes it into the end zone.

Everyone’s going wild. Blood pounds in my ears. Hands smack my helmet. I’m flying. On shoulders. Toward the end zone. And then I see her.

Ruby stands at the back end of the uprights where we just made the TD. Sweat drips into my eyes, obscuring the detail of her. Is she smiling?

The blow of a sharp whistle ends the celebration as quickly as it began.

By the time I get back to center field and turn, Ruby's gone.

We run out the next two hours of practice, and as much as I wanted to hate it, I love it. I love the drive and thrill and push of every play, and I can see now that this body was built for this game and it knows it.

After practice, Tristan stops me as we head to the locker rooms. "How'd it feel to be back on the field, old man?"

I feel a twist below my ribs. "Amazing." And it's true.

Tristan claps my shoulder. "Felt like old times."

I nod, still high on the adrenaline of it all. "You made some awesome catches. And I'm counting on that for homecoming in two weeks."

"Listen," Tristan says, looking off into the distance. "The Tigers were undefeated against every team but us last year, and this year?" He looks at me now. "They're taking everyone out by double digits."

"You don't think we can beat them."

"Never said that; it's just . . ." Tristan pauses, clenches his jaw. "If we bomb against them, then adiós, Stanford for us both and . . . hello, Colorado for you."

So he knows about Richard's threat to send me to Colorado.

"Your dad still riding your ass?" he asks.

With a nod, I say, "Hey, listen—even if Stanford doesn't work out—there are plenty of other good schools that might recruit, right?"

Tristan scowls. "Not for me. And if you think your dad is going to take sloppy seconds . . ." He doesn't finish his sentence. He doesn't have to.

"Right."

"And you knew, Jameson, you *know* . . ." His voice takes on a pleading tone. "To get Stanford's attention, we need to put up nothing but sevens. This is our shot, dude. Our only shot."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I'm all in, and if you played like you did today, we can do this thing. We can get to the big leagues like we always planned. Dynamic duo."

I get it. He wants to know if my heart is still in it. Because if it's not, Tristan likely won't step foot on Stanford's campus either. He needs me just

as much as I need him. I stare at him with a determined gaze. “I’m all in.” And a part of me believes it. Like maybe I could like the idea of Stanford. Or doing this football thing longer.

A smile fans out. “Hell yeah, man. Hell yeah.”

After I get cleaned up, I head to my car. Half dazed by the football memories that swarmed my mind earlier, I stare out the windshield. The sun is setting, changing the sky from light blue to orangish pink. Is this what it will be like to live in this body for the rest of my life? Amped up on a joy that isn’t even mine? Or is it?

I call Richard. He answers on the second ring. “Jameson.”

“Hey, uh . . . I wanted to see if . . .” My mouth is dry, my tongue thick. “If I don’t seal the deal at homecoming, is there any way I could come to Colorado *after* I graduate? You know, so I can finish senior year here?”

His pause gives me a second of hope.

“Jameson, I’ve made this deal with you too many times to count. And every single time, you blew it. Look, we both know a failure like this would send you spiraling. And when you spiral, you drink.”

I swallow hard. “Things are different now.”

“I’ve heard it all before. Listen.” His tone changes instantly and I know a load of BS is getting ready to be served up steaming hot. “You’ve got this, Jameson. This is your moment.” If this is supposed to be a pep talk, the guy’s failing on all levels. Richard goes on, “You didn’t come back from the dead to let the Tigers walk all over you.”

I didn’t come back from the dead at all, Richard.

We hang up and I’m looking at the time when I get a text from George.

Change of plans. Meet me at the Jab.

Why would he want to meet there? It’s a well-known boxing gym where the goal is to pretty much eat your opponent, and since that’s already been done to me today, I’d rather not.

But I really need a friend right now. One that’s Hart’s.

I head to the Jab.

Twenty-nine

RUBY

*M*y therapist's office is small with pale yellow walls. Half a dozen succulents sit on the deep windowsill, and one bookcase shelf is dedicated to a collection of hourglasses in every size and color.

Patchouli incense burns in the corner.

Today, Aera is wearing a light blue sundress with a white blazer. Her dark hair sits neatly on her shoulders.

"It's been a few weeks," she says, sitting across from me.

Nodding, my eyes dart around the room looking for an anchor to rest my attention on. I watch skinny ribbons of incense smoke rise.

"And how have those weeks been?" Aera asks in a near whispery voice that has the startling capacity to make me feel at ease. Safe.

"Terrible," I admit. "I . . ." I take a breath and decide to cut to the chase, to the real reason I'm here. An objective opinion. "How much do you believe in the afterlife?"

She looks taken aback by the question. I feel a sense of pride that I surprised her. Recovering quickly, she says, "Does it matter what I believe?"

"Well, yeah. For you to understand what I am about to tell you, you kind of have to believe."

"Then I guess it's your lucky day."

So I tell her. I tell her about Jameson waking up, looking for me, maybe standing on the cliff in the fog, disappearing like a ghost. I tell her about the tarot reading with the cards that are never wrong, about the message Jameson

supposedly has for me that may or not be in the music he now miraculously knows how to play.

I tell her he's different, changed. That I even went to his practice, to see him on the field, and I have no idea why. It was like I was drawn there. That there's a strange and confusing thread tying us together. And when I'm done with the telling, I expect her to say that I have created a scenario to avoid my pain, that lots of people do it and there is no shame in it.

But she doesn't say that. Aera's brown-gray eyes drink me in. Then, to my surprise, she says, "How does all of this make you feel?"

Feel? Did I miss a point somewhere?

"No, I want to know what you think. Professionally? Have you ever heard anything like this?"

"Ruby."

My name carries a message. A whole sentence, telling me, *It doesn't matter what I think; it matters how you feel.*

I twist my fingers together, staring down at them as the late-afternoon sunlight trickles into the office. The silence is so thick between us that all I can hear is the ticking clock.

I look back at her now. "At the park . . . I mean, in the car, once we escaped, I . . . I laughed. Like, really laughed."

Her expression is unchanged, just as calm and pleasant as it was before. "Tell me more about that."

"Like how it sounded or . . ."

"How did you feel?"

There's that word again. *Feel*. "I felt awful . . . Not at first. At first it felt really good, but after? I felt like I was doing something bad to Hart or his memory."

"Do you think Hart would want you to laugh?"

I'm impressed at how quickly she pulls these questions out of the air. This one forces me to almost smile. Of course he would. That's what made him Hart. If he were here, sitting next to me, he'd rub his chin thoughtfully, point to Aera, and tell me, "What she said."

But I don't want to laugh. Not if he isn't in this world. "Yeah, I guess, but he's not here to want anything." *So why does it matter?*

Aera studies me, and then she says, "Are you still having the dream?"

"Every night."

She makes a note on the small pad of paper on her lap. "And this message. What are you hoping it is?"

Tears prick my eyes. I feel a hot welling of emotion in my chest. "I want to know Hart's okay. That he's not alone." *That he misses me too. God, does that make me selfish?*

Aera hands me a tissue. "And the tarot reading. Does it frighten you to think you could love again?"

Instantly, an ice wall rises up. "No one said that. It was about surrendering my heart, and that could mean a thousand things, like letting go or . . ." I sniff. "So why would I be scared?"

"Then what's the issue?"

"How should I know?" *Isn't that your job?*

"Take a moment and let the emotion, whatever it is, settle into your body. Where do you feel it?"

I grip the edge of my seat, staring down at the floral-patterned rug. There's a coffee or tea stain near the edge that looks like it's been scrubbed too hard. "All over," I finally say. "Down to my bones. But that isn't why I came here."

She waits for me to say more.

"I just want an answer, a second opinion. Like, do you think it's all connected? Do you think I'm just bonkers? Making something out of nothing?"

I think she might lob my question back to me, but she doesn't. She says, "I don't know about the connection. Only you can discern that, but I do not think you are making something out of nothing. I think your higher self is guiding you and if you can be still, quiet, and really listen, the answers are already inside of you. And before that can happen, you have to be willing to go inside, to be honest about what you feel."

I imagine her in therapy school looking for every possible combo to use that word. *Feel. Feel. Feel.*

Honest about how I feel? Does she mean the ball of guilt in my chest for a thought that keeps creeping up on me, one I don't want to acknowledge? One that isn't made of words but of an image, an image of me living. Really living. Laughing and smiling and sailing and swimming and sleeping without bad dreams. I never thought I could feel like this, but I miss being in the water so much. I miss feeling it wrap around me like a cocoon of safety. I miss who I was . . . when the water was my friend. "I guess . . . I *am* kind of scared."

"Can you tell me what's *under* the fear?"

I look up, wipe a tear, ball up the tissue. I'm terrified to say the words. Once they're out, I know there's no taking them back.

"Ruby?" she prods gently.

"I feel hope."

. . .

The palms outside Aera's office sway in the light breeze coming off the ocean a few blocks away. It's such a nice day, I decide to head on foot toward the coffee shop where I'm supposed to meet Serena because I think I can't keep all this from her anymore.

The answers are already inside of you.

What does that mean? If I had the answers, I wouldn't need Aera. I'm lost in my thoughts, staring up at the cloudless blue sky, when *slam!*

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say before I see that it's Lourdes.

"I wasn't looking either," she says, laughing lightly.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. We're in the business district, not the place most people take a stroll.

"I was getting lost."

I'm not sure what she means, and she must see the confusion on my face, because she clarifies, "I like to walk, turn down unknown streets, see where I end up. Plus, walking is a good way to get to know any town."

I totally get her craving to get lost, to wander down streets with no destination in mind. I don't know if my mouth is all warmed up from therapy, but I blurt, "I want to travel the world." All the hidden corners that aren't on some Forbes Best list.

Lourdes inclines her head and offers a small smile. "That sounds amazing." Her eyes scan the building behind me with the big fat plaque that reads HELPING HANDS THERAPY.

I'm about to lie, but there's something about Lourdes I can't name. She's like that person you meet on vacation that you feel like you've known forever and can tell things to because you'll never see them again.

"This is my therapist's office," I say, answering a question she didn't ask.

"That's cool. Does it help?"

"Sometimes, sometimes not," I say.

"I've thought about seeing someone for so long, but there aren't any where I'm from."

"In all of London?"

"All the good ones are taken," she says, laughing it off.

"Well, Aera's really cool. She's helped me with some stuff and she might have a slot if you want . . . I mean, while you're here."

Lourdes's eyes flick back to the sign. "Okay. I might do that. Thanks."

I remember her request to show her around and I'm feeling generous, plus I like her. She has what my mom calls good energy, so I say, "Hey, I'm heading for some coffee with a friend." I point down the road. "Want to come?"

Lourdes smiles. "Sure."

A few minutes later we've walked the three blocks to a small coffee shop that sits in the back of a local bookstore. The place smells like paper and coffee and sun-soaked earth. Big shocker that Serena isn't here yet. Not. She is the world's worst timekeeper.

After we place our orders, we take a small table in the corner where a stack of books has been left behind.

"So how do you like it here?" I ask, pushing the books to the side. "Must be so different from London."

“I think it’s really pretty, and calm. I’ll be sad to leave.”

“But not until graduation, right?”

“I’m only here this semester, but I actually might have to leave sooner.”

“How come?”

“My work here will be done,” she says wistfully. Her eyes slide back to mine. “What I mean is, my mom might need me to come home early. It’s a long story.”

My coffee and her tea arrive. As she stirs the brew, she says, “I know it’s none of my business and I probably shouldn’t get involved, but . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Jameson isn’t himself.”

I feel a sharp stab in my chest. “I noticed.”

Lourdes’s gaze turns to the hazy window in desperate need of a cleaning. She taps her fingers on the book stack. “Do you believe people can change?”

Is she going to launch into the Jameson-is-a-great-guy speech again?

“Sometimes,” I tell her. “I guess it depends.”

Turning back to me, she asks, “Do you believe love can change people?”

I pour some creamer into my coffee and watch the white swirls blend. “Yeah, do you?”

“Sometimes.” She smiles. Blinks. Takes a breath. Sits back. “If you don’t want to talk about it, I get it, but Jameson . . . he told me about Hart.”

For the first time I don’t go rigid at the mention of Hart’s name. Is it because Lourdes didn’t know him? And that makes it easier? I feel like a small door is opening inside of me and I want to tell her about him, about how much I love him and miss him. “He was amazing.”

“Tell me about him.”

Those four words open the door a little more, and before I know it, I’m talking and telling and remembering. Lourdes listens without once getting that look of pity so many other people get. “He was hopeless,” I say, laughing lightly. “Had this thing about germs like they were out to get him. And he didn’t even like Thai food. Who doesn’t like Thai food?” I realize suddenly I’ve been going on and on for too long, but Lourdes? She sits there, her eyes

zeroed in on me like she's hanging on my every word. "He was really special," I say.

Lourdes cups her mug. "Love like that is rare. You know that, right?"

I've got a lump in my throat the size of Alaska. "Yeah, I know."

"I'm really sorry."

I manage a tight smile. "Thanks, but it's not your fault that he isn't here anymore."

She takes another sip of tea, tilts her head. "Jameson was in love once."

Now I go rigid.

"He met her last year," she continues. "Her name was Elle. He told me it was instant. And she changed him. I had never seen him like that."

So Jameson hadn't been lying earlier. It wasn't a ploy to pull at my heartstrings. Why is my pulse racing? Is it hot in here? "Are they still . . . together?"

"She died in a rock-climbing accident."

The café shrinks down to a tiny fraction of itself and it's like I'm looking through nothing but smoke and shadows. "Jesus, I'm so sorry. That's awful." The other words I want to say get lost inside of me: *What are the chances that this happened to both of us?*

My mind begins to click the pieces together. Is this why he started drinking so much? And then a heavy dread grips me by the throat. He obviously never told anyone at school about Elle or I would have heard about her. Even the best-kept secrets on our small campus are more like *best kept for only a day*. Imagine loving and losing someone and not being able to share the utter grief of that.

Lourdes lowers her voice. "You two have more in common than you think."

I never could have imagined I'd ever have anything in common with Jameson Romanelli other than our mutual annoyance with each other. Well, my annoyance at his very presence and his annoyance that I wouldn't hail the king like so many others at school.

I don't realize I'm asking the question out loud until it's in the space between us. "Do you think death has some kind of vibration or, like, a

magnetic pull that attracts people to each other?” That has to be it. It has to be the reason I feel bizarrely connected to Jameson. We both lost something bigger than love. We lost the futures that love promised.

“Vibration,” she echoes, considering my word choice.

“I know it sounds weird.”

“Not at all. It sounds . . . almost right.”

“Almost?”

She takes a sip of tea and a moment later, she says, “But what if it’s something else?”

Something else?

I don’t get the chance to ask because in the same moment Serena rushes in, smiling. “Ruby, I’ve got the best news!”

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty

LOURDES

*T*here are rules to every element of the universe, both seen and unseen. There is a law that dictates that the scales must be balanced. That for every action there is a reaction. But sometimes, briefly, the scales are askew. A breath. A blink. A heartbeat.

In the end they must always be made right.

But my agreement to help Hart in order to help myself surely throws that balance off, although not for long. My assistance won't change the inevitable outcome, but perhaps I can draw him and Ruby closer, which will give him hope. That will make his transition easier. And maybe if I make his last moments easier, that will be enough to earn me a position in the angel ranks again. Or not.

This human form has me feeling emotions, like guilt. Guilt that I promised to tell him the truth from now on and yet I haven't. I can never tell him that I'm the one taking his memories every night. That it's my duty, no matter how awful it feels.

And soon he will forget himself. He will forget the pain. He will forget the *why* of it all. On and on the memories will fade like dreams until he's clinging to the very last one. He *will* forget Ruby.

And then he will have no choice but to finally let her go.

Thirty-one
HART/JAMESON

The second I walk into the Jab, I can no longer breathe.

The air in here is hot and thick, and smells like really bad foot fungus. The windows are covered with tinfoil, blocking out the world. Fluorescent lights swing on broken hooks above the fighters grunting, pivoting, pounding away at the bags and each other.

This place is like some underground fight club.

I glance around for George, but he's nowhere to be seen.

A few people get distracted long enough to throw me glares, silent messages that remind me I'm not in the club.

A custodian walks my way, carrying a pail of foamy water that turns my stomach.

"Hey, I'm looking for George," I say. "Do you know where he is?"

The guy motions toward the other end of the gym. "Through that door."

I head to the door that leads to a warehouse space filled with shelves of gear and equipment. Dwindling sunlight slips through the small windows near the ceiling. I hear voices before George appears from behind one of the shelves, followed by his older brothers: Raul and Naldo.

Both are taller and way more intimidating than George. They've got tats running up the length of their arms and necks, buzzed hair, and hardened expressions.

But they are also the coolest, most loyal guys I've ever met. They always told George he could never fight, but that didn't stop them from teaching us some good moves to get away from someone who wanted to pound us into

the ground. Of course, no one ever did because no one was crazy enough to piss off George's legendary hermanos.

"Hey," I say, playing it cool.

"Hey," George says. "These are my hermanos, Naldo and Raul." He stops there, choosing not to introduce *me*.

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to shake their hands but decide not to when they only give me chin nudges. Naldo says, "So you're the back-from-the-dead guy."

I rub the knot in my neck and just go with it. "That's me."

"Trippy," Raul says, shaking his head. "Did you see white light like they say?"

"Nah." I figure the less I say, the better.

"I got knocked out so hard once, I saw white light," Naldo admits.

Raul busts up, jabs his brother in the chest. "The only thing you saw was a knockout!"

George chuckles at this too. And I can't help but laugh along with him.

Raul says to George, "Make sure to lock up," before he and Naldo take off.

"Lock up?" I ask George. "You work here?"

"We bought the place a month ago." George folds his arms across his chest. "Look, I'm going to be straight with you."

"Okay."

"I'm glad you didn't bite the dust, but I'm not going to talk about Ruby with you. She's way off-limits, got it?"

I fight the smile that's trying to break my face. Man, I love George and how protective he is of her. "Then why did you want to meet me here?" My text had made it clear I wanted to talk about Ruby, not that it matters anymore. I found my in with her, I think.

"To tell you that in person so it's crystal clear. Got it?"

"Got it." I glance around the space, trying to make sense of why George did such a one-eighty with fighting. He always hated violence, said it flew in the face of his moral compass and "poetic" soul.

"What if someone really deserved a fight?" I asked him once.

He only laughed and said, “Then I’d tell them to punch low, because look at this face.”

But now his face isn’t laughing or smiling; it looks more like a granite wall that has clearly taken some punches recently. The curiosity is burning a hole in my chest so I say, “I thought you didn’t fight.”

George ignores the words and takes a step closer. His expression tightens. “Want to tell me why you were hanging outside of Hart’s old place?”

Shit.

I thought I’d been careful. How can I explain myself to him without breaking the cosmic rules and straining myself so hard my eyeballs pop out of my head? I launch into my tried-and-true script. “It’s hard to explain, but when I was in the coma, I knew I was going to die.”

George looks unimpressed.

Just then I hear a click followed by a growl. In a blink, a Rottweiler comes tearing through the door.

“Josie!” George shouts, grabbing hold of the dog’s collar before she can eat me alive. Her dark eyes are fixed on me. She sniffs the air, whines. Then, in an impressive show of strength and willpower, she breaks free of George’s grip.

I turn to bolt, but Josie’s already on me. Pawing me. Licking me, wagging her tail. Wait! I suddenly remember the way she growled at Jameson at Martin’s party.

Holy shit! Josie knows me. She knows I’m Hart! I always knew dogs were more insightful than humans. My mind races through the possibilities of this revelation until I realize Josie can’t talk; she can’t tell Ruby or George or anyone else that she senses me if that’s even what this is.

“What the . . . ?” George’s voice is shallow. Stunned.

“Hey, girl,” I say, rubbing between Josie’s ears just the way she likes it. I drop to my knees in front of her, looking her straight in those big, beautiful brown eyes. “You know me,” I whisper in her ear. It feels so good to be known by someone, I want to tell her.

Her response is a soft whimper.

George watches us suspiciously. “She hates you. What’s up?”

“Maybe she can see I’ve changed.”

George doesn’t look convinced.

Josie collapses into a contented heap at my feet, rolling over so I can scratch her belly. There’s a small scar near her hind leg from her previous owners, a pain that makes me want to put them six feet under.

I stand up straight while Josie exhales deeply and closes her eyes like her lids weigh a hundred pounds.

“You were saying something about your coma,” George says, his eyes darting from Josie to me.

How can I frame the truth without breaking cosmic law? I take it slow. “Yeah, uh . . . it was weird and when I woke up, I could play the guitar and piano.”

“Congratulations.”

“You don’t get it. It’s new. I mean, I couldn’t play any instruments before.”

“Oh, so you’re like one of those freaks who gets hit by lightning or has some near-death experience, and then can do cool stuff they couldn’t do before, like memorize whole books and shit?” He puts on his guarded expression, the same one he used to use when he wanted to seem tough even though he was scared inside. “Why are you telling *me* all this and what does this have to do with you stalking Hart’s place?”

I just wanted to feel like I was driving home for real, like my dad was still inside those walls, waiting for me. It’s funny how you take for granted the everyday things you think are so mundane until you don’t have them anymore. Things like grilling some dogs at sunset, or hearing someone’s footsteps as they come through the door, or arguing over who lost the remote.

I tell George, “I saw . . . a spirit.”

“A spirit.”

I try to get my name out but it won’t come. I want to tell him that I saw Hart’s ghost and that Hart wants me to do something. Originally, I was going to try this with Ruby, but I thought it would be too cruel if things went south, so I’m testing it out on George. It’s not flawless, but I want my best friend to

see a connection between me and Jameson. That I'm not dead. *Come on, George! Put the pieces together.*

Ideally, my little scheme won't get the angel agents' attention. I figure it's worth the risk. At this point the clock is going to strike midnight anyways and if I'm stuck at the ball, then so be it. What's the worst they can do? Shove a bunch of lies into my mouth?

"Have you been drinking?" George asks with narrowed eyes.

"Nah, man. I'm done with all that."

"Yeah, Ruby told me you're supposedly different, but she didn't tell me about no ghost. So, who was it? Some NFL dude? Your grandma?"

"None of those." I hold a breath a beat too long, waiting for a slew of angels to swoop down on me and dagger me through the heart for attempt number too-many for trying to get around their gag rules. Slowly, I add, "You knew him too."

His face goes sheet white. I see the understanding slowly begin to unfold before he can muster a tiny whisper. "Hart?"

I let out a short, dry sound of disbelief. I start to smile, but then he lunges, shoves me against the wall, gripping me by the shirt. "What kind of fucking game are you playing? You seriously expect me to believe you saw Hart?"

Saw Hart? No! Backspace, delete. Start over. I am Hart!

But as usual the words won't come. Josie is on her feet now. Howling, barking, dancing around us in a circle.

"You listen real careful," George growls, pinning me in place. "You go near Ruby again, you talk shit about Hart again, and I'll rip your tongue out." A thick vein pops out of his forehead and he shoves me harder. "Do you have any idea what she's fucking been through?"

Something in me snaps. Impulsively I drive my hands up between his arms and duck, spin free. It's one of the moves his brothers taught us when we were kids.

Josie sniffs the air between us and begins to whimper as George falls back, looking freaked.

"Listen," I say, catching my breath. "I know Ruby's been through a lot and I'd never, ever hurt her. I just thought you should know . . ."

“Where did you learn that move?”

Do you see it now, George? Do you see it's me?

The truth catches fire in my throat. “I . . . I . . .”

“Get out!”

“George.”

“Now!”

I glance at Josie as I leave, grateful someone recognizes me but sick to my stomach that my plan just blew up in my face. Josie starts to follow me before George reaches down and holds her in place.

Driving home, all I can think about is how much worse I just made things. George is probably on the phone with Ruby right now spinning this whole thing so she keeps her distance from me. Which means I've got to do damage control.

But what?

She looked so upset when she got out of my car earlier. I know what that look means. *Stay away from me.*

I feel so much emptiness as I watch the last of the day's light melt into the ocean, wondering how many memories I'm going to lose tonight. And wishing night would never come again.

Thirty-two

RUBY

Serena's "big news" is getting me a job at Pepe's Pizza Palace.

She waited until Lourdes left to tell me, mostly because she's not a fan of strangers and doesn't like to share "news" with anyone outside our little circle.

We leave the café and head to my house. By the time we get there, I'm out of excuses for not accepting the job.

"Look," Serena says as we make our way through the kitchen toward my room. "You said you wanted to stay busy. You can make your own schedule. And the bonus is you get to work with me!"

I sigh. And then she hits me where it counts. "Think of all the money you can save to travel next year after graduation."

A couple of weeks ago, this wouldn't have been the carrot dangling at the end of a stick that it is now.

"I told you I'm not doing that anymore." I hear the words coming from my mouth, but even *I* don't believe them. Not anymore.

"Ruby, ever since we were kids you said you were going to see the world. Remember when you thought you'd be a flight attendant? And then you decided you'd be a pilot?" She rolls her eyes and laughs. "You even researched joining a circus."

I'm not going to bite on her big slice of nostalgia.

"Look," she says, growing more serious, "I know the plan was to go with Hart, but just because the dream has changed doesn't mean it can't come true."

I know she's right. It's one of the pieces of guilt I've been carrying, telling me to live, to dream, to do all the things even if they look different from how they did before.

For my sixteenth birthday Hart bought me a globe, but it wasn't like a normal hard-surface one; this one was soft like a ball, and it came with colored pins so that I could mark the places I/we would go. I broke it within two months, and when I told him, he said, "I'll get you another one."

Typical Hart.

"I'd break that one too."

"Maybe you put too many pins in it," he teased.

"Maybe I just want to go to too many places."

With one arm, Hart pulled me into a hug and kissed the top of my head. "You should go everywhere, Ruby. Even if it breaks the globe."

Now I imagine him sitting on my bed, listening to me and Serena as he strums his guitar. "How would you feel if I gave up my music, Rubes?"

I'd hate it. It's who you are.

And here I've given up what I love: the water, my dreams to travel—even myself. I guess a part of me is terrified that if I let myself *want* again, it'll just be one more thing to be ripped away. But how is a life without desire worth living?

"Right, okay," I tell Serena. "What's the job? And don't tell me I have to wear one of those mouse jester costumes because that is so not happening."

"They aren't all jesters. And mouse jesters are so cute," Serena says, plopping onto my bed.

"If there is a costume involved, count me out."

"No costumes," Serena promises. "You'll be an event coordinator."

I sit in the chair at my desk and prop my feet up. "So, basically snot, vomit, and general grossness cleanup crew for kid birthday parties."

Serena scoffs. "And don't forget the coordinator part. You get to select the decorations, hand out tokens, and take pictures of all those happy, dirty little faces."

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I consider telling her about my day at the park with Jameson. A part of me wants so badly to invite her in, but the

other part has put up a massive wall of protection against her logic, which I just don't want to wrestle with right now.

• • •

That night I wake up from the same Hart dream. As usual, he vanished into the fog before I could reach him.

I sit up in the dark and look at my phone. Finally, George has answered one of my dozen text messages. I expect a load of details but all I get is two lines: That dude is playing some twisted head games. I told him not to come near you again.

I feel sick. And pissed. Where does George get off trying to control who I talk to? And yet, he's speaking my worst fear: that Jameson is a flame that's going to burn me if I'm careless enough to get too close. I imagine all sorts of scenarios that would have led George to react like this. What happened between them? Or is this just George wanting to be right?

I shoot off a response: What does that even mean? We need to talk.

Wide awake now, I head out back to the gazebo, where I wrap a blanket around my shoulders and climb the wall ladder that leads to the roof. From here, I can only see slices of the dark sky. The sycamore's thick leafy branches hang over me protectively. Mom wanted to cut down the tree forever ago, but I couldn't stand the thought of killing it.

She protested, "But the view."

And I begged, "But the tree."

Gripping my phone, I sit down. My head is whirling round and round, and despite George's warning, I haven't been able to stop thinking about Elle, about Jameson being in love and losing her forever, and it does something to me—an impossible weight in my chest that makes me feel even worse that I jumped out of his car.

If Aera were here, she'd ask me to explore the feelings of guilt. She'd tell me to face the situation head-on once I know the answer, so I go looking and soon realize that my guilt isn't just about laughing; my real guilt is that

Jameson went through something awful and he deserves a second chance and he isn't anything I thought he would be and . . .

I tug a leaf off of a branch and twist it in my fingers.

My real guilt is that I *want* to be his friend. I want to find out why I feel this weird, unexplainable connection between us, but I'm scared I'm not going to like the answer.

With a deep breath of resolve, I open the text app and start to type out my apology to Jameson, except I can't find the words and my hands are trembling. I always think better out loud, so I use the microphone.

"Hey, I'm sorry about yesterday. I didn't know you were telling the truth."

Totally makes him sound like a liar. I erase the message and try again.

"Hey, it's me. Um, I was just wondering if I left an earring in your car."

Totally makes *me* sound like a liar. I groan.

This time I say, "Hey, Jameson. I'm sorry I got all weird yesterday, but . . . everything feels so messed up and I'm really sorry about Elle. Lourdes told me and I know how you feel. I mean, not exactly, but losing Hart . . ." I pause, grip a skinny branch. "I guess life doesn't always work out how you think sometimes and you're left wondering what to do next because the *next* wasn't in your original plan. Like . . . you." I rub my forehead and sigh. "Why are you driving me crazy?"

I go to delete the stream of consciousness but accidentally press the evil little arrow that sends my text instead.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

A whole minute of me staring at the message goes by. Maybe if I look at it long enough, I can delete it with my mind. Except that I am currently *losing* my mind.

I scramble down the ladder and run into Gabi's room. I don't bother waking her gently. I go all in with two hard nudges and an "I just ended the whole world!"

Gabi stirs. Moans. Tugs a pillow over her head. "That's nice."

"Gabi!" I whisper-shout.

"Tell me in the morning," she mutters sleepily.

I look at the clock. It's two a.m. "It *is* morning!"

No response.

I shake my sister an inch short of violently. “Wake. Up! We have to go to Jameson’s and break into his house and steal his phone!”

“En serio?” Gabi growls, turns over, and clicks on her bedside lamp. Her curly hair is sticking up in all directions, and even then she manages to be adorable. “I was in the middle of a really good dream and you ruined it!”

“Are you even listening?” I spit out. “I just ruined my life.”

“I doubt that.”

Barely breathing, I show my sister the text. I watch her dark eyes scan the message, growing wider by the second, clearly validating that the world has in fact ended.

“Oh, man,” she says. “Why the hell would you send that?”

“I didn’t! My dumb finger did. That Send arrow is really tiny and . . . I couldn’t sleep, okay? I wanted to tell Jameson sorry, you know, for thinking he was lying, and I guess I was feeling bad about Elle because I know how —”

“Ruby.” My sister takes my hands in hers and forces me to look her in the eye. “You need to breathe and cálmate.”

“How can you be so chill?” It’s the thing I hate and love the most about Gabi. She goes with the flow. She surrenders so much more easily than I do. She knows when to give up. Not me. I’ll die on every single hill.

“Because you can’t change it,” she says.

“Gabi! He’s going to think I’m deranged when he reads that.”

“He probably already thinks that.”

I’m frowning so hard I get a shooting pain in my forehead. “This is so not funny.”

“Dude, nothing is funny at two a.m.” She lets out a slow yawn. “Just tell him what happened.”

“The truth?”

“Yeah, it works sometimes.”

I throw myself onto her bed and groan.

“Listen, this wasn’t an accident,” Gabi says, pushing a curl out of her face. “Don’t you see? The—”

“If you tell me the universe sent this message, I’m going to lose it.”

Gabi rereads the message. “Okay, it’s not that bad. I mean, the last part about not expecting *him* and him driving you crazy . . .”

“I was half asleep,” I lie. “And I meant that this whole situation is crazy, and now he’s going to think . . .”

“Yeah, for sure mixed signals.”

“You’re not helping.”

Her eyes find mine. She holds my gaze. And then she asks the question I was hoping she wouldn’t. “What did you *really* mean when you said those words?”

See? That’s the thing about sisters. They see right through your BS.

“Nothing,” I reply so fast, I know she isn’t going to believe me.

A cricket chirps outside. The clock ticks. And I wait for Gabi to say something, to argue another point, to play therapist. But she does none of that. Instead, she says so quietly I barely hear the words: “Do you have feelings for Jameson?”

That’s it. I explode. “You can’t be serious!” I intend to go off on my sister and lay out all the reasons I could never feel a crumb of anything for Jameson Romanelli, to show her how preposterous the idea is. But once I get talking, I take a right turn somewhere and I can’t seem to redirect, and all these truths come pouring out of the barely open door inside of me, pushing it farther and farther open. “I can’t stand him. I mean, couldn’t stand him and then he woke up from a coma and I felt this weird connection and then I hung out with him and to be honest he wasn’t that bad; he was nice and then I found out he had been in love and lost someone too and it broke something inside of me and I felt like we were”—I take a shaky breath—“like we’re connected by something bigger, and maybe that’s why Hart picked him.”

There’s a gasp and I’m not sure if it’s mine or Gabi’s.

Gabi’s eyes bug out and her mouth forms a little O. “I think you’re onto something about Hart picking him.”

Tears swell, and I’m too tired to hold them back. One rolls down my cheek. My sister’s eyes fill up too. She’s always been a sympathetic crier.

My chest feels warm and buzzy. “What if your guess is accurate?” I whisper, starting to let myself believe what felt impossible. After all, Gabi had only heard one word: *message*. And she had leapt to the conclusion that Hart was trying to talk to me. I admit, I wanted to join the Gabi premonition patrol, but it felt too dangerous, like if she was wrong, the letdown would be too painful, and then Jameson never came out and told me anything about Hart or a message, so I thought for once my sister was wrong, but now . . .

“What if Hart really is trying to communicate from the other side?” I ask. “That means he’s alive somewhere. Right?” The hope of it all feels both fragile and powerful.

Just then my phone pings. My sister and I stare, startled, at the text from Jameson.

Who is this?

My whole body clenches. “He’s being funny, right?” I say, cringing inside. “Like, he’s not serious?”

“Maybe he’s a sleep texter and not all there, ya know?”

I jab away at my response violently and before I can send, Are you joking me rn

a smiley face appears. Why are you up so late?

I look over at my sister, who has invaded every inch of my space. “Can you back up?”

“And miss this? No way.” She scratches her chin, keeping her gaze on the screen, which I turn away from her peering eyes.

I had a bad dream, I reply.

Same.

What was yours about?

I’m holding my breath, wondering if he has reoccurring dreams about Elle. I was being attacked by turtles with fangs. I’m pretty sure they were vampire turtles.

I laugh. Gabi leans closer. “What’s so funny?”

“Vampire turtles,” I mutter before I text back, Sounds violent.

It was. What was your dream about?

I go cold inside, unsure how to answer the question. So I deflect and decide it's time to clear the air. We should talk about my text.

"Good, just grab the situation by the throat," Gabi says. I shoot her a puzzled look when Jameson texts, I know what you mean . . .

He's still typing, saving me from having to ask, *About what?* Meanwhile, my heart is hammering so hard, I'm sure it's trying to kill me.

That all of this is crazy.

I nod as if he can see me. "See? He didn't take it wrong," I say to Gabi, whose eyes haven't left the screen. "What do I say next?"

"Go all in. Ask the big question: 'What's the message from Hart?'"

"No way. That's so in your face, and shouldn't we talk about that in person?"

My sister shrugs. "I guess. I dunno."

"Gabi!"

"Send him a thumbs-up?"

I scowl and stare at the screen. "Thumbs are so cliché."

"They are?"

I chew on my bottom lip while Gabi throws in, "Tell him you want to hear the music."

"Oh! That's good." I type out, So about that guitar and piano . . .

Like lightning he replies, How about 8. My place.

I like that he doesn't use question marks. Still, I can't give him the whole upper hand. I write back, 8:30.

He sends a thumbs-up. I accidentally smile.

Thirty-three
HART/JAMESON

Racing home from practice, I jam out to some tunes, smiling so big my cheeks hurt, because Ruby is coming over.

And maybe because I feel like I've broken through her steel exterior, just a little bit. The fact that she couldn't sleep last night and thought to text Jameson and then for her to say what she said? *Why are you driving me crazy?*

Am I her *next*? I admit, the green-eyed monster has reared its head and shown a few fangs because she's saying all this to Jameson. Not me. But maybe at some deeper level she knows it's me? Or at least that's what I tell myself. Like, she has to feel the surge of energy between us, right?

And the second I play one of my songs for her, she'll know it's me. She has to. I mean, no way would Jameson even have access to those songs. So logically she'll put two and two together.

"Stop pacing," Lourdes groans as she marches back and forth.

"Do you think it'll work?" I ask for the hundredth time.

She rolls her eyes and sighs. "Just be as natural as possible. Like, don't tense up or overthink things. You always overthink things."

"You haven't known me long enough to make that call. And please don't tell me it was in my folder."

"Your entire soul map is in that folder," she says, then freezes like she just told me something she wasn't supposed to.

Soul map? I'm about to ask when she says, "Do you know which song you're going to play?"

“You said not to overthink. Can you please stop pacing?”

“Which is not the same thing as having a plan, Hart!”

My stomach is caving in. “Maybe I should practice for you first.”

Lourdes shakes her head. “Like I said, this has to be natural. Just, you know . . .” She swirls her hands out in front of her awkwardly. “Just sit down and play and let it come out.”

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans. “And what about you? Will you be here, sending good angel vibes or something?”

“I told you, I need to create a distraction for the angel agents.”

“How will you do that?”

Lourdes huffs, “My angel friend told me that the powers that be are curious to see the outcome of my dilemma. Which means they’re watching me, so I’m going to have a little meltdown, which will definitely draw their attention. They love drama.”

“What kind of meltdown?”

“Does it matter? But it won’t buy you much time, so hustle, okay?”

. . .

After a shower, I throw on some sweats and a T-shirt. I open the journal by my bed where I still write down memories each night that are already gone when I wake up. This morning, I could tell more memories had left me. I can’t say which ones exactly, but when I reach for my dad or a music lesson or the first time I drove a car, I only find shadows.

But hey, it’s okay. I’m good as long as I remember Ruby and her ladybugs.

I head down to the music room.

It’s 8:05. I pace.

It’s 8:10. I check my phone. Two new drinking invites that I delete unanswered.

It’s 8:15. I might throw up.

The doorbell rings. I fly to the door, taking a deep breath to calm myself before I open it, and when I do, there she is. She stands at the threshold

casually with her hand in her pocket, her loose sweater falling off her left shoulder, and her hair swept to the right.

She's beautiful.

I realize I'm staring when she says, "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Oh, sorry. Yeah. Come in. Want something to drink?"

"I'm good." Ruby's gaze swings from left to right as she takes in the foyer and its huge arches. I lead her to the music room. The sea has swallowed most of the sun, casting a gloomy darkness over the sky. "Wow," Ruby says, walking over to the window. "That's a great view."

I nod, suddenly unsure what to do with my arms. Should I cross them? Put my hands in my pockets? Let them hang at my sides uselessly? I clasp my hands behind my head and inhale. Exhale. "Yeah, I thought the same thing when I first saw it."

Ruby spins to face me and her eyes catch sight of the piano. I see the emotion cross her face but I can't tell if she's sad or nervous or something else. "How come it's covered?"

Earlier, I realized she might notice the piano, or at least the telltale cigarette burn, which could throw this whole thing into a tailspin of excuses that will just sound like BS to her ears. So I threw a sheet over its body.

"Oh, uh . . . keeping it protected from the sun," I say.

Fortunately, she buys the excuse and nods. "So."

"So."

She hesitates, tugs on her sweater sleeves. "So Lourdes told me about Elle and I want to say I'm really sorry. And if you ever want to talk about her . . . I mean, I'm here."

"She was everything," I say. These three words send my pulse skyrocketing and I'm not sure if it's a result of how I feel about Ruby or how Jameson's body remembers Elle. Either way, it's wild.

"I know what you mean," Ruby says. "Some days I think I'll never get over Hart."

A sudden searing pain in my chest threatens to break open my heart. "I get it." My voice is on the verge of a tremble. I glance out the window, then back to Ruby. "I know it's been really terrible for you too. I'm sorry."

Ruby studies me with an intensity that makes me feel like I'm naked. "I got the note you left me after Hart."

Note? I have no idea what she's talking about.

"How come you never just told me yourself?" she asks.

I shrug, trying to look engaged, realizing I have to pull the post-coma memory card. "I don't really remember that."

"Your note said that it's never going to get easier, but it's going to get okay enough that I'll breathe again."

I have newfound respect for Jameson. The guy had lost the love of his life and was still able to offer Ruby a sliver of support. If only he'd felt like he could talk to her, maybe things would have worked out differently for him.

"I didn't believe you," Ruby said. "God, I was so filled with rage and shock and all these feelings I didn't know where to put. I couldn't imagine a world where I'd ever breathe again."

I feel like I'm in freefall and I'm never going to hit ground. I'm just going to keep falling and falling forever.

Ruby folds her arms gently across her chest. "But now I think I can. I mean, breathe again. Like maybe things can be okay, you know?"

I nod, fighting the tears that want to come. I want this for her, to feel like she can heal and move on. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I also don't want her to forget or to stop loving me. "You guys knew each other forever, like, grew up together. That's a hard thing to lose."

Ruby looks like she might offer a tiny smile, but instead she takes a breath and says, "Tell me about her."

I'm lost in the moment, in the orbit that's Ruby, wondering when cosmic law is going to come down on me like a hammer. So I form my words carefully. "She had this laugh that made everything better. I liked who I was when I was with her, like I was better in every way." I tap the piano, avoiding Ruby's gaze because of what I might see there, and I'm terrified I might do something stupid, like try to kiss her. "It was like we were born for each other."

Ruby wraps her arms around herself. "Want to hear something twisted?"

I nod.

“Hart would rather have been the one taken, thinking it was better that way, but he could never have seen how awful it is for the one left behind.” She presses her lips together. “We’re the ones left behind.”

My feet inch closer to her, but I fight the urge to go to her. To offer her a hug. Ruby smiles, and shakes her head like she’s done with that part of the conversation. “Did you know he was freaked out over germs?”

I throw out an appreciative chuckle. “Yeah, I think I heard that.” Then, thinking I need to defend myself, I add, “But he was a great guy. Super cool. Talented. Everyone liked him.”

Ruby raises a doubtful eyebrow. She studies me. “You didn’t really know him.”

“I mean, it’s just stuff I heard.”

“Yeah, well, he was all those things, but he had plenty of flaws too, Jameson.”

Ouch. I really want to demand, *Like what?* But that might ruin the free-flowing convo we’ve got going right now.

“So did Elle,” I say. “She had a deviated septum and snored like a bear.” The Jameson memory rises to the surface effortlessly. And before I know it, Ruby and I are exchanging funny stories that paint us as human with plenty of faults, like my stubbornness and her one-track mind. She of course thinks I’m talking about Elle but really, it’s all Ruby. Her need to fly by the seat of her pants and my need to plan. My obsession with being on time and her laissez-faire attitude that time doesn’t exist. Pretty soon an hour passes and we’re on the sofa, each trying to outdo the other one.

I feel alive and free and like nothing can touch us.

Ruby’s smiling, tucking a hair behind her ear when she says, “I think I would have liked Elle. We have a lot in common.”

I nod, picking at a loose thread on the sofa’s pillow. “She’s . . . was . . . amazing.”

Too soon a dreaded silence falls across the space. The sky is black outside with only a slice of moon hanging low. I’m fighting the extreme need to kiss Ruby right now, to hold her close and breathe her in, and fight over which movie we’re going to watch. I just want to feel her touch.

She glances at her phone. “Oh, wow. I can’t believe we’ve been talking so long.”

“It’s easy to talk to you.”

Her eyes find mine. “Same.”

An unexpected thread of jealousy tugs at me. But I push it away the second Ruby says, “So about that piano.”

I clap my hands and head over. Suddenly, I’m shaking so bad I’m worried she can see it. Sitting on the bench, I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. “Like I said, I’d never played before and then . . .” I don’t finish the sentence because my fingers have taken over and are pressing the keys, playing the haunting “Moonlight Sonata.”

My brain is misfiring. No! Stop! This isn’t the right song. It’s like I’m possessed and the harder I try to stop, the more I play. Halfway through I manage to lift my hands.

I look up at Ruby.

Her dark eyes are fixed on me, filled with a surprise and wonder I’m not sure I deserve. “Wow,” she whispers, “that was . . . incredible. You’re really good.”

I rub the back of my neck and grimace, super confused and wondering what just happened. Maybe this body just needed a warm-up? Fine. But now I’m ready to play one of my original songs. Like I did so easily for Lourdes.

“Listen,” I say, trying to regroup, “this might be weird, okay?”

Ruby’s expression softens as she stands and comes over. “Weird?”

“You’ll see.”

I position my hands. Begin to play.

But what happens next isn’t at all what I expected.

Thirty-four

RUBY

Jameson's fingers press one key, then two, three. The notes are almost familiar and yet I can't be sure because he's playing so painfully slow, like he can't remember which key to play next.

Then suddenly his hands pick up the pace and everything goes wrong, terribly wrong. I stifle a wave of disappointment and dread.

This song can't be a message from Hart. I've never even heard it, and I'm sure if he wanted to communicate through his music, he wouldn't make it super cryptic.

Plus, Jameson is playing lousy. He's lost his way from where he was just a minute ago when he was killing it (and me) with "Moonlight Sonata." I don't want to believe Gabi read the signs wrong. That maybe Jameson has no message from Hart. Aera says that denial is powerful. Is that what this is? Or some wish fulfillment crap playing tricks on my mind?

Jameson jerks his arms up as if the keys have caught fire. His chest is rising and falling, falling and rising like he's out of breath. And I have this unexplainable urge to go to him, to wrap my arms around him. Just the thought of it makes my stomach flip.

"Are you okay?" I ask softly, afraid to push him over the edge because the guy looks like he's having a panic attack.

"I . . . I don't get it," he says, looking baffled.

I decide this is it. This is the moment I'm going to go for it. I've got nothing to lose except the thread of hope that's given me new life, but

clinging to a thread isn't really a life. I take a breath and say, "Is this about Hart?"

His eyes dart to mine, and his mouth starts to move but then stops.

I turn away, unable to face him when I say, "I know this sounds wild but my sister, she reads tarot, and, well, she thinks you have a message from Hart, which I know is bizarre, but I thought maybe the music was his way of communicating . . . with me."

Jameson says nothing so I go on.

"And the fact that you now play both of his instruments and George said you were at Hart's house, so of course I think there must be some connection between you and Hart, like maybe when you were in your coma, and that's what you've been trying to tell me." I chew my bottom lip. My voice comes out small this time. "You have been trying to tell me something, right?"

Jameson nods.

My heart just grew a thousand wings. Beat-beat-beating wildly inside of me. This. Is. It. I turn to him, closing the gap between us. "So, you do have a message?"

Jameson is silent. He stands so that we're toe to toe. Chest to chest. Face to face.

"Ruby," he finally says.

Our eyes are locked on one another. And for an instant I think I see something there, a flicker of something familiar I can't name. Something that draws me to him. Before I know it, I've taken his hand loosely in mine. A tiny current of energy pulses across my skin. "Tell me."

Jameson squeezes my hand. "He wants you to be happy."

Thirty-five
HART/JAMESON

I feel an ache all over, like a cancer consuming every piece of me. I was so close to playing the right notes, but then . . .

This is the moment that's too late to rewind even an inch before I realized with painful awareness that this was always how it was supposed to be. I didn't come back to win Ruby's heart again. I didn't come back to reunite with Ruby. I came back so I could learn . . . I nearly choke on the pain. So I could learn how to let her go.

Waves of misery wash over me until I feel like I can't stand on my own two legs.

"So . . . did you really . . ." Ruby's bottom lip is trembling. "Talk to him?" The words come out uneven, shaky. Sad.

"Not exactly talking," I manage. "It's hard to explain, but you should know that . . ." I pause, thinking some angel is going to steal my words. Surprisingly, they don't. "He loves you." *Forever*. "He's okay." *Even if they take every memory of you, I'll find a way to hold on to you*. "And he wants you to be happy." *You have to let me go now*.

My heart shatters.

Tears roll down her cheeks now.

All I want to do is make it all go away, take away her pain. I reach for her. "Ruby."

She recoils. "So that's it? Some generic message to be happy?" She wipes her tears with both hands. "No way. That's not Hart. He'd have more to say. I

mean, the guy couldn't be quiet to save his life." A pathetic laugh stutters out of her. "Why didn't you tell me this at the park?"

"My memory is . . . and I . . . I didn't know if I could or should or . . ." I feed the truth with a lie: "If you'd believe me."

She looks up at me now. I want to get lost in the liquid darkness of those eyes that once held my future. I want to hold her, to take her in my arms and never let go. But it would only make me a selfish bastard.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," I say, wishing it were enough.

She goes to the window and stares out at the blackness. Her reflection makes her look like a sad, defeated ghost. "The other day," she finally says, "after you had woken up from the coma, when we shook hands. Did you feel it too?"

Feel what? I have no idea what she's talking about. She must see the confusion on my face because she steps back, clears her throat. Her foot catches on the sheet that is now falling off the piano.

I think maybe she won't notice, but she does a double take. I see the exact moment the knowledge registers. She freezes. Her eyes fix on the cigarette burn. Everything in me goes cold.

"This is Hart's piano . . ." She shakes her head, seems to curl into herself. "What . . . how . . ." Her expression contorts from pain to anger in less than point two seconds. "His dad donated this. How did you . . ." Her voice is rising. "Did you . . . know it was his?"

It's no use to lie. "Yeah, I knew." I suck in a lungful of air and manage, "But it's not what you think."

Ruby's struggling, she's making decisions. Decisions I'm not going to like. "What do I think?" she asks, challenging me.

But it's no challenge at all. I know her better than anyone. "You think that this is all impossibly possible," I tell her. "That you're feeling things you don't think you should be feeling."

"You don't know me!"

I should stop there but I keep going, keep hurling the truth at her. "You think you want to be happy, but you feel too much guilt."

"STOP!"

“And you don’t want to accept the message, because if you let go of the pain . . . then you let go of Hart.”

She’s backing up, holding her hand out to resist my advance. Her eyes are cold and distant. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“I need you to stay away from me.” She turns, grabs her shoes, and runs out of the house.

For once, I don’t bother following her.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-six

RUBY

I gun the engine, driving full force with no direction in mind until five minutes later I see where I've ended up.

At Hart's place. The lights are on and my heart sinks. The shop's still under construction, but the house looks the same: red-tile roof, neatly trimmed lawn.

I wipe the tears as Jameson's words echo in my head. *I feel a connection to you.*

But that's not what I wanted, what I expected. I had gone to Jameson's house with all this misguided hope, only to be told what I already know. Hart wants me to be happy. But Hart doesn't get to decide how I grieve, how I rebuild a life without him.

And then Jameson started saying all those things that turned me cold: *You're feeling things you don't think you should be feeling. You think you want to be happy, but you feel too much guilt. And you don't want to accept the message, because if you let go of the pain, then you let go of Hart.* It was like he was staring into my soul. How could he know those things? Things I haven't even wanted to admit to myself.

A car pulls up to Hart's house. Pizza delivery for the Airbnb tenants. I feel nauseated. Gripping my stomach, I let my vision go fuzzy and imagine that it's Hart and me in the house, eating pizza, watching a horror flick. He's got his shoes kicked off and is lying on the sofa with one arm tucked behind his head. I'm lying next to him, tossing popcorn into his mouth and mine while he tells me how bad the movie is and how he's going to have nightmares.

He kisses me softly. Repeatedly. He tastes like butter and salt. I want to stay here forever, but the fantasy fades like always and I'm left in my car with the A/C blasted so high my skin has goose bumps. I don't care. I don't care about anything except getting away from Jameson and all these feelings forever.

The mermaid's message from my tarot pops into my mind.

Be more than the limitations of your heart.

That's when I see it. The real reason for my anger. I'm furious that I care about Jameson, that I feel connected to him too, and not because I think he has a message from Hart, but because of who he is, who he's become, and how he makes me feel.

I choke back another sob. And for just an instant I imagine Hart sitting in the passenger seat, turned so he's facing me. *You can let go of me now.*

I shake my head, covering my face. "Never."

Don't be so stubborn.

"I'll never let you go."

Your heart is the biggest and best place on the planet. You've got room in there for more than me. It's time to surrender.

"You don't get to decide!"

My phone rings. It's Gabi.

I clear my throat and answer. "Hey."

"Jameson just called me."

I can feel my face puffing up from all the crying. "So you know."

Gabi goes quiet. Then, "I know he cares about you. And I know you didn't really want to hear the message at all, did you?"

"Of course I did!"

"No, Ruby," she says tenderly. "You just wanted Hart."

The truth of her words sends me spinning into a dark oblivion I realize I've created.

"Did he tell you about Hart's goddamn piano?" I ask indignantly.

"Come home."

Home. Why do I feel like I'll never be home again?

I twist my mouth to the side, thinking, gazing at Hart's house. Do the renters know that there are hundreds of memories in those walls? A numbness begins at my feet and spreads up my legs and across my chest. I let it come. "Why in the hell does he have Hart's piano?"

Gabi sighs. "You don't want me to answer that."

I have no doubt my sister thinks this is all part of some universal plan, which is easy for her to say; it isn't her heart being ripped from her chest a second time.

"Ruby, just come home. We can talk this all out."

"Talk it out? What's there to say? Nothing! Hart's not coming back and you're right, his message did nothing to make me feel better, which makes me think this is all so twisted and cruel. Why send me a message at all? Why not just let me be?" *Why not just let me go?*

Gabi says nothing. I let the numbness take over, I let it seep into my bones and heart, so deep I can't feel the last tears drying on my face.

"I have to go." I hang up before my sister can say another word.

The porch light flicks off and I decide.

I call Miriam and leave a message. "I want to sell *Ladybug*."

Thirty-seven
HART/JAMESON

A week has passed.

Ruby won't talk to me.

She won't answer my calls or texts. She won't even look at me at school. Even Gabi told me to let things cool off. To give Ruby time, but here's the thing: I don't have time. According to Lourdes I've still got about a week, maybe a few days more, but something deep down tells me I don't even have that long. And all I want to do is spend those days with Ruby. Even if I know I can never make her see the truth. Even if it's just to say goodbye.

My memories seem to be peeling away faster now. This morning I couldn't remember the first time I kissed Ruby. Only that there was a boat. Man, it gutted me.

So I've let myself get distracted with practice, getting ready for the big homecoming game next week, hanging with Tristan and Martin, and holding solo jam sessions. Like now, I'm sitting on the beach, gripping my guitar like it's a lifeline as I strum away at a song that I wrote a couple of years ago about time and the seasons and a cowboy named Hoss.

The sun slips behind a cloud, bringing an instant chill.

Mid strum, I stop. I stare at the guitar in my hands, lost, unsure of the next note. I try to hum my way through the song. There's nothing there but an empty void. I feel all the air rush out of me in a single breath of defeat, and it feels like the cold shadow from my old life is crawling over me.

I set the guitar down and shove my hands into my pockets. In spite of my anger and disappointment, panic blooms in my stomach.

I backtrack to the notes I remember, always sticking on the forgotten one. And then I drop my head, press my thumbs into my eyes, and think about Ruby. I hold on to how much I love her even if the memories are fading. Is that what love is? A collection of memories? Or is it something more?

I hear her before I see her. Lourdes sits next to me on the frayed blanket and digs her bare toes into the cool sand. “You looked lonely down here.”

I turn to her, empty. Tears sting my eyes. “I’m forgetting the music. The . . . songs I wrote.”

Her expression is a weird blend of coldness and compassion. “I’m sorry.” But what she really means is *You knew this was going to happen*. Maybe. I just didn’t know it would hurt so bad.

I let out an exasperated grunt that doesn’t go nearly far enough to show her how pissed I am or how much I’m controlling all that rage. I want to ram my fist into something. I’ve never wanted to punch anything in my life, so I know that this is how Jameson’s body reacts to anger. Maybe Jameson knew something I didn’t. Maybe it would feel incredible to punch a wall right now.

“Sorry,” I echo, clenching and unclenching my fist. “Yeah, well, *sorry* doesn’t give me my life back.” I hate the way my words make me feel, and I hate even more that we keep coming back to this raw point of contention as if revisiting it over and over is somehow going to change anything.

Waves form slowly, folding in on themselves before crashing down.

“You’ll still have your music,” she says.

“Music, I’ll have *music*,” I emphasize, “but not mine, Lourdes. Never mine.” It’s like telling a writer they’ll still be able to write but they’ll never be able to return to the stories they’ve created, the ones that gave them their start, that formed their world. And doesn’t that beginning matter? Doesn’t every story or song shape the next?

Lourdes is silent. I don’t even blame her. What can she possibly say? We’ve been over this a million times. I steal a side glance at the angel. She’s watching the waves. Her eyes fixed on them hypnotically.

This feels as good a time as any to tell her the decision I’ve made about Ruby. I haven’t wanted to tell the angel the truth because I haven’t wanted to

say it out loud, like if I do, it'll be set in stone forever. "I think I've made things worse for Ruby," I manage.

"What do you mean?"

"I've forced her to keep thinking about me, not allowing her to . . ." I take a deep breath. "I think . . . I know now that I have to let her go." The pain in those words sends me reeling.

Lourdes traces a finger through the sand. "You're just going to give up on her?"

"No, I'm going to give her back her freedom, Lourdes. If I really love her, I need to help her let me go. That's my only goal now."

I stare at the ocean, its vastness, the horizon that only reminds me of Ruby. I can feel the angel staring at me like she isn't sure what to say next, but I hope it's not a plan to talk me out of this. I've made up my mind. All this time I've only been thinking about myself when I should have been thinking about what was best for the only girl I'll ever love.

Then, to my surprise, Lourdes says, "I understand."

"You do?"

"Maybe that's what all of this was about, Hart. Helping you learn how to let go."

I feel broken and numb at the same time, a strange sort of surrender.

We sit like that in silence for a bit until I say, "What about you? Is there anything I can do to help you?" I know she doesn't want to come back to Earth and do the whole human thing again. I don't even blame her.

"I don't think my good deeds are making a single dent," she says. "At first I thought it was because I wasn't being entirely genuine with my intentions, but then I got into it and I liked helping people, sharing kindness, trying to make the world a better place. But it's all wrong; it's like I can't find the right track."

"How do you know?"

Touching her hand to her chest, she says, "I can feel it here. Nothing is shifting, everything feels too small, too insignificant. And I'm so sorry my attempts to help you with Ruby have been such failures. It all makes me feel so useless. I began this by thinking that what you wanted—to be with Ruby

—was impossible, and then I saw the depth of your love and it changed me, or at least my belief in the power of love.”

“So maybe that’s what you were supposed to learn?”

Just then I hear a cacophony of shrieks behind me.

It’s Victoria, followed by five other girls, hopping down the last of the stairs, each in a pink sweatsuit with a silver star embroidered on the chest. I recognize it as the dance studio emblem and realize these must be her dance school friends.

“Jameson!” she shouts, waving ecstatically.

Giggles follow.

Lourdes and I are on our feet now.

Victoria arrives breathless, smiling, exuberant in that way only kids can be. “This is my brother,” she beams to her friends.

A dark-haired, big-eyed girl says, “You’re the football player?”

“That’s me,” I say, trying to match their enormously good moods but failing miserably. “Hey, kiddo,” I say, “are you allowed to be down here alone?”

Her smile turns to a scowl. “Mommy’s up there,” she says, pointing to the deck where Whitney is waving from the edge. “And I’m big enough to be here as long as I don’t go past my ankles in the water.”

“Yeah,” one of the girls says. “We’re for sure big enough.”

“Do you play guitar?” another asks, hiding her mouth behind her hand, pointing at my instrument with the other.

I nod, offering her a smile.

More giggles.

“I’m the cousin from across the pond,” Lourdes says with an insistent tone that I hear as *I’m way cooler than he’ll ever be*.

“Play us a song,” Victoria says.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I manage, “I’m kinda spent.”

The members of the ballet troupe give me a simultaneous pout. And it’s like someone let the air out of their excitement balloon.

“You said he would,” a tall girl in the back says, frowning at Victoria.

Victoria gives me a pleading look. No way can I let her down.

“Okay, one,” I say, retrieving the guitar from the blanket. I begin an old Maroon 5 tune, mostly because it’s only got a few chords and is an easy song of repetition. The girls are dancing, spinning, leaping across the sand.

I’m only three-quarters of the way through the song when the ballet troupe loses interest and rushes to the shore, splashing their feet in the shallow waves and running from each new breaker that comes after them with gleeful howls.

“I really don’t want to be one of those again,” Lourdes says, gesturing to the kids.

I try to lighten things up with, “I dunno. Being a kid has its perks.”

She holds up her hand. “Hart, please.”

“Why did you call him Hart?” Victoria asks. I hadn’t seen her approach, but now she stands in front of us, studying us with narrowed eyes.

My mouth goes dry and my throat closes up. “What did you just say?” I ask.

“Lourdes called you Hart.”

I could kiss this kid right now.

“But you’re Jameson,” she says, wiping her nose with the back of her sleeve.

Lourdes leans closer. “Victoria, can you do me a favor?”

“Like what?”

“I want you to go over there.” Lourdes points to the shed a good ten feet away. “And pretend you don’t hear me and Jameson talking.”

“How am I supposed to do that? You guys are really loud.”

“Just pretend you’re on stage,” Lourdes tells Victoria. “Like you’re in a play.”

“I dance, not act. Want me to dance while you talk?”

“Fine, yes,” Lourdes says as Victoria skips to the shed, telling us she only has a minute because her friends are waiting for the buckets and shovels she’s supposed to be getting.

Lourdes turns to me. “Tell me what you wish you could tell Ruby.”

Victoria twirls in circles. The angel and I stare at each other while the sun melts into the ocean, leaving behind sparkling trails of light on its surface.

“That I love her,” I say loudly. “That I’m . . . Hart.”

“Did you hear that?” Lourdes asks Victoria.

Victoria stops spinning, comes over. Her small face morphs into a look of confusion. “Who’s Hart, anyway?”

I squat so that I’m eye level with Jameson’s little sister and I say simply, “Me.” I take a glance at the sky, half expecting a bolt of lightning to strike me down, but nothing happens.

Victoria frowns. “You’re Jameson.”

“I’m him too.”

“Is that why you’re nice now?”

My heart is knocking against my ribs.

“Is this like *Freaky Friday*?” she asks. “You and Jameson switched?”

Lourdes, surprisingly, says nothing—just stares like she’s in shock.

“Sort of,” I say, “but I’m still your brother.”

Victoria squints at me. “Are you going to switch back?”

I nod. Swallow. “Eventually.”

Jameson’s little sister stares at me with those blue eyes. She leans closer. “Who’s Ruby?”

“A girl . . .”

“A *girlfriend*?” she says, grinning.

I return the smile. “A girl I love. A lot.”

One of the girls calls for Victoria. She ignores them, tilting her head, studying me. “Where’s Jameson right now if you’re here?” she asks me.

“Playing football,” I say, trying to keep it light for her. “He’s living his best life.”

“Okay,” she says with a definitive nod. She whirls to return to her friends, but then she spins back. “When Jameson comes back . . . I hope he’s like you.”

That’s when I feel it. The love Jameson had for this kid. Victoria runs back to the sea before I can say another word. As soon as she’s out of earshot, I lose it. “Lourdes, how is this possible?”

Lourdes frowns, stomping across the sand.

“I tried to tell her directly that I’m Hart but the words . . . wouldn’t come,” I say, my pulse speeding away. “But then I could answer her questions about Hart—I mean, me.”

“Mmm,” Lourdes hums.

“I’m ready to blow a gasket and that’s all you’ve got?”

“I’m not a clairvoyant!” Lourdes argues.

“But this is your world! Shouldn’t you know the rules?”

“Do *you* know every law of this land?”

She’s got me there. “How about a wild angel guess?”

“I *guess* Victoria glimpsed the truth because she’s so young and innocent. Babies and children can sometimes see angels and spirits because they haven’t yet become consumed by this material world.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that Victoria still believes in all the good in the world and doesn’t have the layers of trauma and guilt and self-loathing and—”

“That’s depressing.”

“It’s true.”

“Do you think the same thing would work on Ruby?”

“She has too many layers of trauma and guilt and self-loathing,” she repeats as if it wasn’t bad enough the first time. “All of that will prevent her from seeing the absolute truth. Her more mature mind will absolutely reject this kind of phenomenon.”

“But she totally believes in all this supernatural stuff!”

Lourdes shoots me a dubious look.

“Fine, but what if Victoria can tell Ruby the truth?”

“Why would Ruby believe a seven-year-old?” Lourdes shakes her head doubtfully. “She’ll only think it’s a cruel ploy and it’ll make things worse.”

The truth of her words gnaws at my insides. I hate that she’s right.

“Will Victoria remember any of this?” I ask.

“Unlikely.”

“How much time?”

“A day, a week . . . Everyone is different. But the memory erasure always happens during sleep.”

“That’s really warped.”

“I don’t make the rules.”

• • •

*T*hat night, I fight to stay awake as always. It sucks big-time to know pieces of me are peeled away every time I snooze and I don’t even feel it. And pretty soon, those pieces are going to matter in ways I can’t define yet. As I’m drifting off, an idea comes to me, so true and perfect I bolt upright.

Without overthinking it, I shoot Gabi a text: Can you give me a tarot reading?

I wait, staring at the screen in the darkness.

Please text back. Please.

She does with one word. *When?*

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-eight

RUBY

*I*t's seven p.m. and I know the swim team will have just finished their practice, so I head over to the indoor pool on campus. Using the key that I never returned, I let myself in and flick on the lights, dimming them to the lowest setting. I haven't been here in months and the smell of chlorine is like a rush to my brain, a torrent of memories.

The natatorium is silent with the exception of a low hum coming from behind one of the walls. I strip down to my suit and stand at the water's edge, catching a blurry reflection of myself, maybe another version I haven't become yet.

I don't know why but my heart is hammering, and I'm not sure if it's excitement or nerves or pure terror.

I'm faced with the choice to wade into the pool slowly or just dive in.

Hart would tell me to take it slow.

With a deep breath, I leap into the pool. It's a messy haphazard splash, cool and invigorating. I swim to the bottom of the nine-foot end before bursting upward.

I expect the anxiety to bloom, but it doesn't. Instead, an intoxicating calm settles over me as I slice through the water in even freestyle strokes.

Each measured breath feels like a victory, a sign of life. I swim to the edge and kick off the wall to begin again, and by the time I reach the other side of the pool, my lungs are burning. My muscles remember this. *I* remember this.

After a few laps, I take a deep breath and sink to the bottom of the pool, where I sit near the drain. Everything is silent, peaceful. Here, I feel

untouchable. All the emotional turbulence of my life is erased. And I want this. This sense of a future where I can choose, where grief and sadness don't hold me prisoner. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting. It just means goodbye for now.

The need for air comes calling too soon, and as the pressure builds in my lungs, tears spring to my eyes. I look up through the water and imagine Hart sitting on the edge like he did so many times before. His image is bleary but I know he's smiling, giving me a thumbs-up. Telling me, "It's okay. It's all going to be okay."

That's when my mom's words surface.

I'd rather let love break me open than never know its depths.

As I pull myself from this liquid world, I realize that even if love always ends in goodbye, we have a choice, a choice whether to allow it in, to change us, to drive us toward a better part of ourselves . . . even if it means breaking open.

Even if it means letting go.

OceanofPDF.com

Thirty-nine
HART/JAMESON

Gabi and I decide to meet the next night at Tito's Tacos, a dive taco bar on the beach with private tables spread across the courtyard that butts up against the boardwalk.

I've had a shit day. I stunk up the practice field, forgot to turn in a history essay on the value of democracy, and got the mal de ojo from George between classes. So, yeah, I've been looking forward to Gabi and her killer supernatural talents all day.

I spy her in the far corner. She's hiding under a baseball hat, leaning back casually in an orange plastic chair beneath a table umbrella, tapping away at her phone with her shades tugged down on the bridge of her nose. She's so unlike Ruby in every physical way except that look of determination that they both get when you tell them they can't do something.

"Hey," I say, pulling up a chair. There's a half-eaten burrito in front of Gabi, reminding me of the absolute tragedy that this body hates tortillas.

"You look like hell," she says.

"That's better than I feel."

"Yeah," she says sympathetically. "Ruby's shut down. She'll come out of it."

I nod. "Thanks for doing this. I've heard you're really good."

"If you're looking to use the cards to get into Ruby's head, it won't work."

I don't need cards to get into her head. Or her heart. I know her nearly as well as I know myself.

"I'm not trying to get into her head," I assure Gabi.

She tugs the deck from her canvas bag and sets it in front of me. “What do you want then?”

“I need to know she’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t need a reading to tell you that.”

I meet her gaze and offer an unsure grin. “Please?”

“You really care about her.”

“I do.” *More than you know.*

Gabi studies me like she’s not sure what to make of me or maybe the request. “That’s not how this works and even if it was, Ruby would kill me. The reading has to be about you.”

I feel defeated before we’ve even started. I’ve never had a reading from Gabi. I had never wanted to know my future, always choosing to shape it on my own terms. Now I squirm in my seat, thinking maybe this was a mistake.

“I think maybe no.”

“No?”

“I don’t want to catch up to my future too soon, ya know?”

Gabi studies me with those dark, wise-beyond-her-years eyes. “I think you called me for a reason. Let’s just do a three-card spread, see if there’s anything your guides or the universe want to tell you.”

Psh. I’ve had enough of the universe. But maybe she’s right. What could three little cards hurt? “Well, how does it work? Like, do I ask a question or . . .”

“Here,” she says, pushing the deck toward me. “Start shuffling, so the cards can get to know you.”

I do as she says. The back of each card looks like a painted image of a calm blue ocean with golden swirls around the card’s perimeter.

Gabi sits back, crosses her arms. “Why do you have Hart’s piano anyways?”

“There was an ad at Bright’s,” I say matter-of-factly as a seagull pecks away at a stray bit of tortilla chip near my shoe. “They didn’t have any inventory on the floor.”

Gabi seems to buy this. “That really messed with Ruby’s head.”

“I know,” I say, still shuffling, “and I was stupid not to think about that.”

“Yeah, you were,” she says, but it isn’t mean. It’s just the truth. “You ready?”

I nod, setting the cards on the table in front of me. A crisp ocean breeze sweeps across the scene as gray clouds amass in the distance. For a split second I think the universe is sending a storm to kill me, but then I realize how ridiculous I’m being. Still, I don’t let my gaze stray too far or for too long from the ominous sky.

“It’s cool that you can do this,” I say. “Like, see to the other side.”

“I don’t really *see*—more like get a message. Go ahead and shuffle and turn over the cards.”

I turn over the Hanged Man, the Five of Swords, and the Queen of Swords, also known as the Snow Queen.

Gabi sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, studies the cards, then begins: “The Hanged Man is about letting go, surrendering. Stop trying to control the outcome, because you can’t, no matter what.”

I already know that, I think as I stare at the Hanged Man card with its brutal image of a tormented-looking merman caught in a net.

Gabi says, “Hmm . . . this is weird.”

“What?”

“See this Five of Swords? It’s basically saying that everything comes with a price and it’s asking if you’re willing to pay it, which . . . sort of contradicts the Hanged Man telling you to surrender.”

Haven’t I already paid the price?

Her eyes swivel to the last card: “And this . . .” She studies the card, the image of a woman gripping a sword as snow dances all around her. “The Snow Queen is formidable. She governs the harshest lands in awful conditions. A real badass, if you know what I mean. This card means you are walking in her footsteps.” Her eyes flick to mine. “No, it doesn’t mean you’re a badass.”

“Agree.”

With a tentative smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, she goes on, “It may seem as if everything is against you but you have to keep going.” Gabi hesitates, stares at the three cards. “It’s like there are two outcomes for you.

The one outside of your control and another . . . if you're willing to pay the price."

My heart is punching against my ribs, and everything I thought I knew a few minutes ago has flown out the window. Two outcomes? Does that mean I can still turn this thing around? But how?

"Uh, can the cards be more specific about these two outcomes?"

"Only the ancestors can do that. That's the next step." She pops some AirPods into her ears, likely to drown out the ambient noise, lifts the cards, holds them to her chest, and closes her eyes.

A bolt of lightning rips across the sky just as I hear a bark. I turn to find George's dog, Josie, barking at me from a good fifteen feet away, heaving against her leash.

With his eyes trained on me, George kneels slowly and sets her free.

She races across the courtyard, between the tables. A few patrons recoil. Seagulls take flight.

The first thought I have is this: *Is he seriously siccing his dog on me now?*

At the same moment, Gabi's eyes fly open and a gasp escapes her mouth.

Josie throws herself against me, lifts her two front legs into my lap, and begins to lick my face. I laugh, pushing her back as I scratch her neck. "Hey, girl."

George is making his way over when I turn to Gabi, still petting Josie.

"What did the ancestors say?" I ask.

Gabi frowns and shakes her head vehemently. "Nothing."

Just then, it starts to rain. Large drops pelt the umbrella, coming in at a slant like they're looking for us. George ducks underneath, grabbing hold of Josie; he catches sight of the cards as Gabi shoves them back into her bag. "What the hell are you guys up to?" he asks.

Ignoring him, I say to Gabi, "What do you mean nothing?"

"I need to talk to you," George says to me.

"Later," I tell him, trying to squeeze in under the umbrella even tighter. "Gabi, what did the ancestors say?" I ask again, sensing she isn't too happy about whatever they told her.

The rain is coming faster, hitting my face, neck, arms. Gabi hides under her hat, grimacing. People make way to their cars. “We should get out of here.”

George says, “Not later. Right now.”

Wind gusts across the courtyard; wrappers and other debris blow across the ground. Thunder booms.

I hold my hand up to George. “Gabi, please.”

George growls. “Who gives a shit about the ancestors when I have to talk to you. NOW.”

“Stop being rude,” Gabi says to George. The guy looks like he’s going to explode.

Gabi’s eyes meet mine. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes!”

With a deep breath, she tells me, “They said, ‘Hearts will burn before they break.’ ”

Part Three

OceanofPDF.com

Forty
RUBY

Serena picks me up for work.

Her car smells like bacon and coffee, and by the look of the food wrappers on the floor I can tell she's still in pondering-my-life mode. She does this every time she has to make a big decision. First, she has to be in constant motion, which means she likes to be in the car driving to nowhere in particular. Second, she needs sustenance to keep that brilliant mind of hers turning, and junk food is basically her self-soothing device. And finally, she makes heavy metal playlists that she jams out to so she can "release" all that tension.

I turn down the stereo's volume and look her in the eye.

"That was a really good song," she says, recoiling a few inches like I'm going to attack her.

A steady rainfall begins to tap against the windshield.

"Are you okay?" I ask her. An overdue question that's been begging to be asked.

"Define okay."

"Have you taken a shower in the last day and gotten some sleep?"

"Wow," she says, shaking her head, "that's a really low bar."

"Seriously."

"I'm fine," she insists as she turns on the windshield wipers. "It's just college. It's not like I'm making some forever decision like getting married, right?" She holds up a mini bag of Doritos. "Want one?"

"I'm good."

“Yeah right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I can tell something is up with you,” she says.

A part of me longs to tell her but the other part doesn’t want to be met with her disbelief, which always feels a whole lot like disapproval. But if I refuse, she’ll drag it out of me anyways, and in some strange way I feel like this is part of the letting go. So as we drive to Pepe’s, I begin the telling, sharing everything from my feelings for Jameson (at least what I know of them) to getting back in the water and how totally amazing it felt and how I’m in a tug-of-war with my own heart, pushing and pulling in opposite directions, not knowing which way is the right direction except to move on even if it’s in the dark.

Serena never once interrupts, never once interjects a question, never once rolls her eyes or sighs. She keeps her eyes on the road, occasionally nodding.

“So that’s it,” I conclude, waiting for her response, which right now is merely running her fingers through her hair.

I refuse to do any follow-up questions like, *Did you hear me? What do you think? Am I bonkers?*

The rain is coming faster now, pounding the earth.

“So was the water warm?” Serena finally says.

I chuckle and toss a McDonald’s wrapper at the side of her head. “That’s all you’ve got?”

“Oh,” she says, feigning surprise. “Did you want me to say something specific?”

I love her for trying to lighten the tension that I’ve brought into the car like an overstuffed suitcase.

“Thanks for being a sounding board,” I tell her.

“So, Jameson, huh?”

I lean my head against the window and watch a row of trees pass in quick succession, letting my eyes go out of focus so they become a blur of nothing but grays and greens. “Yeah,” I admit because I’m tired of keeping it all locked up inside. “But also, not really, if that makes sense. I mean, it’s more like a feeling I get when I’m with him. I can’t put my finger on it but he’s

more than he seems.” *And every time I’m with him, my solar plexus is firing at max capacity, making me dizzy. But also, when I’m with him, things make sense even though I know they shouldn’t, and I feel like I’m finally stepping into my life again.*

“You think it’s because he told you about that message from Hart?”

I turn to her. “You don’t believe any of this, do you?”

Serena hesitates, presses her lips together, then admits, “Actually . . . I do.”

I gasp. “Wait . . . what?! Where’s the I-have-to-see-it-to-believe-it Serena?”

She stops at a light and gazes in the rearview mirror. “I have seen it.”

“I’m so lost right now.”

“I’ve seen it in you. You’re better, easier, more like you, and that feels sort of like magic.”

We pull into Pepe’s parking lot as the rain slows to a steady trickle. My mind is still stumbling over all of this when she kills the engine and turns to look at me. “I believe you about the message and Hart and this unexplainable connection to Jameson and . . . all of it.”

“Why now?”

“Because no way would you put yourself through all this unless you really trust in it, and since I trust you . . .” She lifts one shoulder. “I guess I’m going with it.”

I didn’t know it would feel this good to have Serena’s support, her wholehearted belief in me. “Wow—that means a lot.”

“So what are you going to do?” she asks.

“I’m going to live my life.”

Forty-one
HART/JAMESON

“What do you think that means, *Hearts will burn before they break?*” I ask as the storm drifts on, leaving behind a light rain that feels more like mist than anything else. Doesn’t sound good. Not even close. Sounds more like the end of the world.

George is the last guy I’d ever ask about something like this, but Gabi took off so fast I didn’t get a chance to press for an interpretation. I didn’t even try to stop her because I know she’s on her way to see Ruby and spill the fam’s message, which can only be a good thing, a second chance, another open door.

George doesn’t answer. Just gives me more stink eye. “You need to come with me.”

I force out a sarcastic laugh. “Are you arresting me?”

Just then Naldo and Raul are walking across the courtyard like cloned Agent Smiths from the Matrix, all calm and slow and leisurely like the rain doesn’t even exist.

“What the hell,” I say, realizing he probs called his hermanos.

“The hell is this,” George says casually. “You come with me, or we carry you out of here.”

Jameson’s body reacts with a fight response, but I shove down the desire to come out swinging because one, I’d get my face kicked in, and two, well, I’d get my face kicked in.

A minute later we’re in the car. Josie curls up next to me, snoozing like I’m not about to get murdered. No one speaks and I half expect them to throw

a hood over my face and take me to some unknown location, but they don't.

We pull up to the Jab.

"What are we doing here?" I ask.

"You'll see," George says as we all make our way inside.

The place is empty but it still smells like sweat and fear. Or maybe that's me? Look, I'm not a total fraidy-cat, but Naldo and Raul are what I'd call fist kings. No one goes up against them. And I mean no one. So yeah, I'm a little nervous to be here alone with them and their not-so-nice scowls.

Josie turns in a circle and settles on the cool floor, her eyes pinned to me, like, *Sorry, wish I could help but no one here speaks bark.*

George grabs a pair of gloves from a shelf, and hands me a pair too.

"Dude, I'm not fighting you," I say.

George is already lacing up a glove when Naldo says, "You can either fight him or us."

"Look," I say, "if this is about the other day . . ."

"It's not," George says. "Stop talking and get in the ring."

When did he become such a hard-ass? I mean, I always knew that underneath it all George was a lot tougher than he acted, but this is like he's been turned inside out.

After Naldo laces up my gloves, I step into the ring. George tells his hermanos, "I got this." They both nod and take off to the back office.

"If we're going to fight," I say, "then I at least deserve to know the rules."

"No rules."

Oh. Perfect.

George starts dancing around on his toes like some kind of resurrected Apollo Creed. This is such BS! I can take sparring, but I hate real-life fighting and he knows it. He comes at me swinging. I duck, manage to dodge his advance. Good thing Jameson's body is a highly trained machine for getting away from attackers. But I can't avoid George all night.

Eventually I'm going to have to hit him or he's going to have to hit me. This is what I get for wishing I had something to punch yesterday.

I put my gloves up to protect myself, trying to remember everything Naldo and Raul taught us.

George throws a right hook, followed by a jab to my chin. Dizzily, I slump to my knees. Anger consumes every inch of this body. I spit out some blood and laugh, getting to my feet.

And then he comes at me, using a move his brothers taught us in a drill last summer. One we practiced over and over. All of a sudden, it's like I'm outside of myself looking down, seeing it all play out in slo-mo. The way he's advancing, the way his torso is twisting, the way he's holding his right hand up to protect his chin, I know a cross jab is coming.

Like clockwork, his left hand thrusts out; I parry the first punch, and then the cross. Instinctively, I start bobbing and weaving. I learned it from watching old videos of one of the greatest boxers of all time, Jack Dempsey. Naldo and Raul were so into the movement; I even tried to teach them but they never got it down with quite the same rhythm or speed. Neither did George, so they called it the signature Hart move.

I lower my head and shoulders, move side to side in a figure-eight pattern, and am ready to rise up and blast George with a series of haymakers, except that he's backing up. Staring at me wide-eyed.

"I knew it," he says so quietly I barely hear him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I spit, still pumped up on adrenaline.

He backs up to the ropes, shaking his head. "You're him. You're . . . Hart."

I stare at George, unblinking.

I'm pretty sure he's about to hyperventilate.

I open my mouth, close it again. I want to scream, YES! I want to hug George so tight I bust his ribs. But I can feel the ruthless lies forming, thanks to the universe. So I cover my mouth with a glove, and grunt them into the space unintelligibly.

George touches the cross hanging from a chain around his throat, and mumbles something to Santa Maria. "Am I right?"

I nod. Waiting for a universal guillotine to chop off my head. With painful slowness and deliberation, I say, "How . . ." pause, "did . . ." pause, "you" pause, "know?"

George's eyes never return to normal—they're in permanent wide *holy shit* mode. "I need to sit down. I need a drink. Christ . . ."

"George, you need to calm down."

He's hunched over with his gloves planted on his knees. "Calm. Right. Because dead people . . . come back . . . all the time." He looks up at me, winded. "How can you be so calm?"

"I've had more time to . . ."

"Oh, shit—did you kill Jameson?"

"No!" I want to explain the takeover but I don't want to tempt the universe.

George is sitting now, trying to untie his glove with his teeth. "You asked how I knew. First, your obsession with Ruby. And let's not forget not drinking, not partying, not hanging with the usual folks, being really decent. Jesus—winning Ruby to your side? And she told me—about the guitar and the piano, and I'm still, like, no way, man. But then I find out you're hanging out at your old place?" He shakes his head. "Josie was the kicker, though. So all of that? Made me want to test it, and I thought the best way would be to see if you did the signature move, and you did, and . . . no one else does that bob-and-weave shit like you do." He gives me a suspicious glare. "One more test. What was the last thing we talked about? I mean, when you were yourself."

I sit next to him and smile. "The chickenshit part or Marina's hotness part?"

George lets out something between a grumble and a yip as he throws his arms around me. I awkwardly hug him back, and maybe I want to cry because someone knows me. My best friend *knows* me, and I'm torn between jumping into the air like a little kid and letting myself go there. I'm too scared to celebrate what George knows because what will it matter in a week or so when all my own memories are swept away and George's even sooner than that. So I tread cautiously.

Pulling back, he thumps the side of my head. "You bastard! Leaving like that! So messed up, man. Consider that right hook payback." He gives me a once-over, then mutters, "That was brave, saving that little kid."

I shrug wordlessly and am relieved when George lightens the moment with a deep laugh. “At least now you’re better looking.”

“Hardy har har.”

“So . . . how did it happen?”

“I wish I could tell you. Really. But . . . I can’t.”

“Okay, fine. You do you.” His eyes are scanning the floor wildly. Then he jumps to his feet in a single acrobatic motion and hollers, “We gotta tell Ruby!”

“You don’t think I’ve tried?” I stand up. “I don’t know how this works, George, but trust me, you won’t be able to tell her. I . . . I can’t believe I’m even able to talk to you about this. Usually my tongue is twisted or if I really push my luck, the truth is made into lies that fly out of my mouth.”

“This is like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or some shit like that.”

“Uh, not an alien.”

“You know what I mean. Jameson was in a coma, and bam, you took him over like reincarnation.”

“Reincarnation is being reborn.”

He waves a glove in my direction. “Same thing. What matters is I figured it out because hey, I’m a goddamn genius.”

Josie sits up, stretching her thick neck and releasing a giant yawn before settling back down with a grunt.

We laugh for all of ten seconds like old times before I go on to tell George in the simplest terms I can what happened, what being in this body has been like, and what the rules are, or at least the ones I know. “So maybe we can talk about it because I figured it out on my own?” he says.

Lourdes did tell me that the universe rewards ingenuity or something like that. Is that what this is? And as high as I am right now, my heart feels contorted into a pretzel, because it won’t last. This is all short-lived and will soon be gone and what will have been the point?

“Or you have the innocent mind of a five-year-old,” I tease.

George sneers, then breaks into a smile. “Shit, I’d be a toddler if it meant getting you back.”

He rips off his gloves and fishes his phone from his pocket.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

“Testing your theory,” he says, tapping the screen. “Maybe I’m like the magic outlier who can break this whole thing open.”

I hear a phone ringing on the other end and then Ruby’s annoyed voice. “Not a good time, George.”

Before I can rip the phone from him so we can consider best next steps, he’s telling Ruby, “You won’t believe it but I . . .” He pauses. I see the strain in his face. He squeezes his eyes shut and doubles down with a growl. “I just . . . found a key I’d lost.”

Ruby says, “Congrats. Gotta go.” Then she hangs up.

George turns to me, looking dejected. “I wanted to tell her *Hart is here*, but it was like I couldn’t say the words and all that came out was that made-up BS about a lost key.”

“Welcome to my world.”

We throw open the front door of the Jab to get some fresh air. A chilly draft floats in, carrying bits of rain with it.

“So I can’t help you with Ruby,” George says, leaning against the doorjamb, “and you’re running out of time before your memory is gone and mine could go kaboom too and your angel friend Lourdes . . .” He pauses, glares at me. “I always knew there was something up with that chick. Totally bad accent.”

I chuckle. “You can’t help me out of this one, George.”

“My abuelo always told me to believe in milagros and say my novenas and all that, but he never told me the heavens were so cold, man. Memory stripping. Psh. What a joke.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, all I can offer is “Yeah.”

We stand in the stillness, in the truth of a future neither of us wants.

“Well, you can’t give up,” he insists. “I can tell Ruby what an upstanding guy you are. You know, join the Jameson fan club.”

“You could. But you know Ruby . . .”

“Is hard as nails,” George says. He drops his head, picks at a hangnail. “She isn’t over you.”

I feel an ache in my chest. “I know. But . . . I need her to move on.”

There's a sudden silence, heavy and thick, between us. George shakes his head like he's doing a double take and says, "How can you say that?"

"Because I love her and I don't want to cause her any more pain."

George nods. "I guess losing you twice would be . . ." He doesn't finish his sentence because there isn't a word that could define that kind of suffering, and no way am I putting her through that.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-two

RUBY

The rain is coming down in sheets outside, but the kids at Rainbow's sixth birthday party don't seem to notice or care. They're only interested in the arcade games and the slimy bacteria-infested ball pit.

I'm setting the long table for the obnoxious three-layer ice cream cake shaped like a crown while Serena's handing out tokens to a few of the six-year-olds who keep "losing" theirs, but as long as the grandparents are willing to keep signing the bill, we keep doling out the silver.

Bells and alarms and annoying high-pitched carnival-like chimes bounce off the four walls of Pepe's Pizza Palace and my skull. So I have to keep reminding myself what this is all for. Wanderlust.

I notice Rainbow shoving a smaller girl away from the corkscrew slide entrance, and am about to go over when a sopping wet Gabi comes running through the entrance with a look of panic that stops me dead in my tracks.

I close the gap between us. "What's wrong?"

"It's . . . Jameson."

Ice fills my veins. I'm not sure if I'm responding to fear or dread or something else. "I don't want to talk about him." But what I really want to say is *Is he okay?*

"Hey," Ray, our boss shouts at me. "The cake?"

I nod and hold up a finger, signaling *Just a second*. "Look, Gabi . . ." I need to tell her that I've left all that behind, all the wishing and hoping, that I've decided I want to get on with my life. That Hart would want me to.

But she's already pulling me away from the fiesta and toward the entrance where we'll have more privacy. "I gave him a reading."

"You WHAT!" I force myself to breathe.

"He didn't ask for one," she says. "I mean, not for himself."

"Then for who?"

She squirms, bites her bottom lip, grimaces before she says, "He wanted to know that you were going to be okay."

I can feel emotions unspooling inside of me, but then I freeze up and am about to ask *why* when I decide I have to keep my word, I have to let this all go. "I can't do this."

As I turn to walk away, Gabi grabs my arm, stopping me in my tracks. "Ruby, please!"

I spin to face my sister. "If you love me, you'll let all this Jameson/Hart stuff go, because I already have."

Gabi glowers. "Stop being a stubborn chickenshit! I know this sucks. Bad. But just because you say it's over doesn't mean it is. Just hear me out. The ancestors spoke. They said . . ."

She doesn't finish because we're plunged into darkness.

Kids are screaming. Parents are turning on their phone flashlights. Serena is shouting for everyone to remain calm. Ray is cussing something about a piece-of-shit generator.

I jump into action, collecting kids and steering them to the center of the giant space. "Isn't this a fun adventure?" I say.

"No," a few cry, followed by, "I hate the dark," followed by, "My party is ruined, lady!"

And I guess it sort of is, because twenty minutes later when the backup generator doesn't come back online, we have to evacuate and send everyone home. Rainbow's grandparents demand a refund. Ray looks like he's going to be sick. And then there are the kids who are all tears and sniffles and groans. But none as loud or insistent as Rainbow's crying, "I want my cake!"

"It's already melting," her grandmother tells her. "It'll get all over the leather seats!"

Her grandfather is nodding somberly as he and his wife begin to gather up the rest of the kids.

“I want my cake!” Rainbow cries again, balling her hands into fists while her face looks like it could be turning blue.

I lean into her spoiled little ear and whisper, “This place is haunted and that cake is going to be eaten by a ghost.”

She squeaks, shudders, and runs outside, and I can’t help but feel a little bit satisfied.

George, with the worst timing in the universe, calls. “Not a good time.” Then the weirdo goes on to tell me he found a lost key.

After Serena and I pack Rainbow’s gifts into the grandparents’ car while they watch from dry seats, I load the last one and close the door. They speed off into the rain that is coming down in sheets.

Gabi has been trying to shelter us with an umbrella, but it’s useless. We’re all soaked.

Once we’re back inside, I turn to Serena and Gabi. “I’m a witch.”

Serena wrings out her hair while Gabi helps herself to the melting cake. “Why?” they ask simultaneously.

“I wanted that party to be over so bad, I wished for something like this.”

Serena says, “Well, can you wish me a Lamborghini?” She takes off to help Ray with the generator.

“This cake is divine,” Gabi says, licking the chocolate off a spoon. “It’s got these little gold flecks in it.” She shines her phone flashlight to show me.

“Hey,” I say, thinking maybe I blew up too quickly earlier. I know she’s only trying to help. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s your life,” she says grouchy, spooning another piece of royal cake into her mouth.

“It is.”

She looks up at me. “I guess you weren’t meant to know what the ancestors said.”

Is this some kind of reverse psychology? “Why do you say that?”

“The lights went out right when I was going to tell you, Ruby.”

“Coincidence.”

“Maybe.”

My resolve has melted or maybe my curiosity has grown, but either way, I have to know. “Fine—if it makes you feel better, you can tell me now.”

She hesitates, takes another bite of cake.

“Don’t be a jerk, Gabi.”

A slow smile spreads across her mouth. “I already texted the message to you when you were telling that kid that ghosts were going to get her.”

“I never said ghosts were going to get her,” I argue. “And she’s a bully. She one hundred percent deserved it. Now, are you going to tell me or not?” I’d check my phone but I can’t remember what table I left it on.

Gabi sets down her spoon, inhales theatrically, and says, “They told me that ‘Hearts will burn before they break.’ ”

My sister’s message hits me somewhere between my heart and my actual soul. I explode. “Except that my heart already broke!” I don’t even know how to process the burn part.

“I don’t think this is about *your* heart . . . maybe?”

Way to sound confident, sis! “Then whose . . .”

Gabi tugs me into a hug. “I think Jameson is the one who will have to pay a price.”

. . .

I sit in my car outside of Miriam’s manor. That’s what Hart and I used to call it, because it’s so huge and eccentric, built to look like a mini-castle with a moat and everything.

When I called earlier, this seemed like a good idea, like finally pulling the plug on all my grief and sadness. And now I’m second-guessing myself.

The rain has turned into a cold mist. I stare down at Hart’s half-sneeze photo. He looks hilarious, caught in an instant between one breath and the next.

Breath—it feels so fragile now.

A minute later, I head through the stone courtyard where Miriam greets me at the door.

She's wearing an elegant silk jogging suit that makes her look like she's a 1980s soap star. She totally pulls it off too.

"Looks like you got caught in the rain," she says.

"It's a long story."

A minute later we're in her living room stuffed with tartan sofas and chairs. Oil landscape paintings line the hunter-green walls, and I feel like I've time traveled to an English hunting lodge.

Miriam sits across from me, hands folded elegantly in her lap. "You can sit down, Ruby."

I'm afraid of ruining her furniture with my wet clothes, especially the Pepe's Pizza Palace polo that is humiliatingly hanging off of me like it once belonged to a giant.

I plant myself at the edge of a chair and get right to the point. "So, I want to know if you want to buy back the *Ladybug* or maybe you can help me sell it."

Miriam studies me with cool eyes. She picks up a martini I hadn't seen until now, and sips quietly. "I am happy to buy her back, but is that really what you want?"

I nod, trying to look the part of a controlled-not-sopping-wet-mess lady boss.

"Can I ask why?"

"She isn't meant to be locked up," I say. "She needs to be on the water." I'm fidgeting and I can't help myself. Miriam has always been cool with me, super generous and always polite. So why is this so hard?

I think she might argue but instead she nods, downs her martini in a single swig that she manages to make look graceful, and says, "I agree. She should be on the water. How much do you want for her?"

I suddenly feel like a back-alley dealer. "Um . . . I haven't thought about it too much."

"You should always know the price." Miriam rises, goes over to an antique desk drawer, and removes a pad of paper. She scribbles across it, and hands it to me. My eyes practically pop out of my head at the number I see there. Even with all of Hart's repairs, is *Ladybug* really worth this much? I

don't realize I said that last part out loud until Miriam says, "She's worth more than that."

I look up. Our eyes meet. A part of me collapses inside.

"How about this," she says, saving me from becoming a puddle on the floor. "I'll put out some feelers for buyers, and if anyone bites, you can decide then."

I curl my hand around the edges of the paper and nod.

"And one more thing," she says, inhaling tightly. "That night . . ."

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"You need to know this," she says. "I asked Hart why he named the boat *Ladybug*, and he told me a story about the first time he saw you."

Hot tears burn my eyes.

"I loved someone once," she says. "And like you, I lost him, not to death, but to a terrible illness that robbed him of his mind."

"I . . . I didn't know. I'm so sorry."

"How could you know? It isn't something I tell many people," Miriam says. "Don't you see, we're the lucky ones? We got to experience the depth of something few people ever know or feel, and you may not want to hear this, but Ruby, it was borrowed, a gift."

I take a breath, two, three.

My one regret is how I took Hart's love for granted. "I thought it would always be there," I say. That there would always be that spectacular future in front of us, waiting for us to catch up to it.

Miriam offers a hopeful sympathetic expression.

I stand to go and when we get to the door, Miriam says, "When I asked Hart how someone so young could love so much, he laughed and said that love doesn't care about age or gender or race or anything else. I mentioned that sometimes love isn't requited. And then he told me something remarkable."

"What's that?"

"He told me love doesn't need more than one heart."

. . .

When I get home, Mom's asleep on the sofa in front of the TV, and Gabi's hogging the shower. And all I want is a hot bath and a long night's sleep. In my room, there's a legal-sized envelope on my desk. It's postmarked from Mexico City. Heart racing, I rip it open. Inside is a note:

Mi querida, it's taken me some time to have the courage to go through Hart's things, but I did last week. I found this. I know it is meant for you.

*Con amor,
Mr. Augusto*

I pull out a small velvet box. Inside is a delicate gold bracelet. The light catches two gold charms dangling from the center.

A ladybug and a boat.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-three
HART/JAMESON

I wake to a yipping dog.

My first thought is Josie, except Josie's vocals are too grande for a yip.

The sun is barely making an appearance, but, curious, I get out of bed and make my way outside to the deck. The yips are coming from a tiny black dog, wearing a checkered sweater, a dog that happens to be playing fetch with Lourdes on the beach.

As I watch, wondering where the dog came from and who dressed it in that old-man sweater, I check my memory for the one that matters. Ruby. She's still there, freeing the ladybugs, but she's buffering, like a ghost fading in and out. Pretty soon she'll fade out for good.

I throw on a T-shirt and jog down the stairs to talk to Lourdes.

"Where'd the dog come from?" I ask, startling the angel. A first.

"Hart," she says with a cool gaze.

"Lourdes."

She smiles. In the last few weeks, I've decided she only has three types of grins: (1) *Do not challenge me. I'm right*, (2) *I'm not interested in anything you're saying right now*, and (3) *This is a mask to hide a truth I really don't want you to know about*.

This morning it's number three.

"Nice pup," I say, squatting to pet the little fur ball that is licking my hands and wagging its tail so hard I'm afraid it's going to break its tiny spine.

"His name is Dante," Lourdes says flatly. "For the inferno. Because he is like the third circle of hell."

“Remind me which one that is again?”

“Gluttony. He’s a needy, never-enough scoundrel.”

“Yeah, I can totally see that,” I say, rubbing Dante’s belly. “Where’d you get him?”

“He followed me home,” Lourdes says with a sneer I know is actually a smile.

“So you got suckered at the dog shelter.”

“This is what I get for trying to be a good citizen.”

I toss the miniature ball down the shore and Dante takes off after it.

“How come you’re up so early?” I ask.

Lourdes keeps her eyes on the breakers. “I forgot what it felt like to want more time.”

I don’t respond right away. It’s like her words need to marinate a little longer. A few moments later, I say, “Yeah, it’s pretty much the human condition. Like Dante. Never enough.” Lourdes turns to me. Her eyes are filled with sympathy. I suddenly regret my use of the word *human*. It’s only a reminder for her of what her future might look like.

“Hey, listen,” I say. “It doesn’t help either one of us to gripe about the past. And besides, I have some really incredible news.”

Dante comes tearing up the beach so fast I can barely see his little legs turning.

“How incredible?” Lourdes asks. “You’re not overselling it, are you?”

“George knows me,” I say, thinking maybe I should have led with that, but deep down I was scared that admitting it might alert the universal authorities and they’d take it away, until I realized they’re going to anyway. “He knows I’m Hart.”

Turning her gaze to meet mine, Lourdes says in a near whisper, “He figured it out?”

“How is it possible? I mean, how come the universe didn’t crash down on him?”

Dante drops the ball at my feet, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as he waits. I scrub the top of his mangy head and throw the ball farther this time. He goes after it.

“Maybe because he put the pieces together himself.” A brief hesitation, a catch in her voice. “He won’t keep the memory.”

I was expecting as much, but it doesn’t make the blow any easier. “How long does he have?”

“Usually two sleeps or three, depending on how much feeling is there, how much history.”

I’m hoping for three but betting on two.

• • •

*P*ractice is grueling.

But it’s a necessary pain if I’m going to be ready for the homecoming game. Parts of me hurt that I didn’t even know existed. But I played my guts out. It felt amazing, getting out on the field, calling plays, threading a few needles, running a couple of TDs. It’s the only time I’m not thinking about my problems.

On my way out of the locker rooms, I give a few of the guys high fives and throw out a no or two to the invites to get some grub. Seems like people are getting the hint, because my phone isn’t blowing up anymore.

Just then my phone rings. There’s a hitch in my throat as I dig in my bag for it, because deep down I hope it’s Ruby.

It’s not her. I answer the phone with “Hey.”

“Jameson,” Richard says like he was expecting someone else.

“What’s up?” I don’t even know if he can hear the chill in my voice—probably not, considering he’s such a distant dad who doesn’t even know his kid.

“I wanted to let you know I’m coming in for the big game,” he says. “Isn’t that great?”

Uh, I can think of about a million adjectives other than *great*. I’m so stunned I don’t even know what to say: *Stay home, don’t bother, I don’t want you here*, all of the above?

“Sure,” I mutter. “Okay.” I stop at the edge of the gym and lean against the wall as the last of the sun disappears. I realize that even if Richard wasn’t a

prick, I don't want anything to do with him. I already have a dad, a dad I'm still torn up about having to let go. For some reason this aha moment hits me in the gut, this reality of being locked in Jameson's body, his life with no chance of parole.

"I've got a whole celebration planned," Richard goes on, grating on my nerves with every syllable that comes out of his mouth.

"What if we don't win?"

I hear his sharp intake of air. Okay, wrong thing to say.

"If?" he says flatly, coldly. "You're a champion, Jameson. A Romanelli. We don't lose."

Oh, right. I forgot, Dick!

After we hang up, I turn the corner to the parking lot and see her on the hood of my car. Even in the dim light I'd know her silhouette anywhere.

My heart does a backflip as I hurry over. Ruby looks up. Her expression is pleasant but there isn't a hint of a smile. She has always had an enviable poker face. "Hi," she says like it's totally normal to be chilling on the hood of my car.

"Hi." I'm doing my best to act calm, but she looks incredible and I have to fight the urge to throw my arms around her and never let her go.

"Gabi told me about your reading," she says.

I'm not sure what her angle is, so I go with it. "Okay?"

"She said at first you wanted to know if I would be okay. Okay with what?"

I choose my words carefully, and it's like stepping through a land mine. I don't want to say the wrong thing, or anything that would hurt her. "Like I said, I care about you."

I rock from heel to toe, wishing she wasn't looking at me like that, with all that intensity that only makes my pulse skyrocket.

She presses her lips together. Her voice is soft, controlled, as she looks down at her hands. "If Hart chose you, then that means he trusted you."

My heart breaks open, and nothing but longing spills out. A longing to touch her, to hold her, to kiss her, to tell her . . . *It'll always be you.*

Then with a deep breath she glances up. “How about we start over?” She reaches out her hand. “I’m Ruby.”

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-four

RUBY

*T*here it is again. That jolt of warmth when we shake hands.

Jameson gives zero indication that he feels anything out of the ordinary.

I slip off the hood slowly and stand in front of him. His wet hair is tucked messily behind his ears. And his eyes are unblinking, drinking me in. I don't fight what I haven't wanted to admit, but he's so attractive, my heart nearly swells.

With a trembling hand, I reach out and touch his forearm. What am I doing? But my fingers are already tracing the lean muscle there. The strange heat flows beneath my touch. I've never felt anything like it. It's both terrifying and exhilarating.

Jameson inhales.

I look up.

He shuts his eyes, takes my hand, closes his fingers around it. I feel like we're opposing magnets being drawn together. Closer and closer. I want to wrap my arms around him. I want to . . .

A shudder runs through me and I step back, breaking the connection, trying to calm my racing heart. I didn't come here for this. I came here because I realized I don't want his heart to break or burn or whatever Gabi said. I came here because letting go of Hart doesn't mean running away from Jameson.

Jameson says, "I'm glad you're here." And at that moment, in the dim gray light, I see something in his eyes, a flicker, a trace of emotion, a familiar glint, there and gone too soon.

I'm swimming in a sea of confusion when Jameson asks, "So what's your favorite color?"

"What?" I pull a face, trying to regain some composure. "You're seriously going to ask me that right now?"

"You said you wanted to start over and that means we're strangers, so shouldn't we have getting-to-know-you convos?" He's smiling like a little kid who just got a new bike. A soft breeze floats across the parking lot.

I catch a whiff of his scent, a woody pine soap smell, and all it does is make me want to get closer. Close enough to feel his breath on my skin.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-five
HART/JAMESON

Ruby wrinkles her nose and for the second time in a span of thirty-two seconds I want to kiss her. And I almost did when she touched me a second ago. I nearly lost my mind, being this close to her, looking into those dark, stormy eyes, feeling the warmth of her bare skin on mine. Then I remembered she was looking at Jameson, and a sharp stab of jealousy broke the spell.

“Is that what strangers actually ask?” she says.

“This stranger is asking,” I say playfully. Even though I know her favorite color is blue like the ocean.

“Green,” she says, surprising me. “Like the Black Forest in Germany.”

“Why is a forest called black if it’s green?”

With a light laugh, she says, “What’s yours?”

I drop my bag and lean my head back like I’m studying the sky. I’ve never really had a favorite color, but in this moment, I’ve got an idea of what it might be. “Hmm . . . something between gray and black.”

“That’s not a color.”

I point to the sky. “Yeah it is.”

“Fine,” she says. She flashes an electric smile that could probably light an entire city grid. “Favorite food.”

“I plead the fifth.”

She scowls and I rush to answer the question forming in her mind. “I haven’t discovered it yet.”

“Fair,” she says. “Favorite tree.”

“Wait, what’s your favorite food?”

She smirks. “I haven’t discovered it yet.” Then, “Now come on, favorite tree.”

“Tree?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

Sycamore like the one in your backyard. Where you told me you loved me for the first time.

“Uh . . . I haven’t met enough to know,” I say. “You?”

“Sycamore.”

My heart soars.

“Favorite thing to do on a Saturday morning.”

“That’s easy,” I say, leaning against the car, so close our shoulders nearly touch. Sparks of heat erupt all over my body. This has to be enough, I tell myself. To spend any moment, any ounce of time I can with Ruby before my memory is gone for good. And maybe deep down I want her to fall for Jameson because even if I don’t remember her, at least she’ll be happy and I’ll still have her in my life, in my heart. “I’d take a jog on the beach, listening to some good tunes when no one else is around and it’s covered in thick mist so you have no idea where you’re going and it doesn’t even matter because it’s like you’re the last person on the planet.”

Ruby turns her chin up and looks at me. The golden light of sunset has faded and the sky has gotten darker and now I can only make out the contour of her features, not enough to read her eyes. She says through a chuckle, “That’s really detailed.”

There’s a question there she doesn’t ask. “What about you?” I say.

“To wake up in a new place and have the whole day in front of me for discovery.”

“Discovery of what?”

“I guess I’ll know when I get there.”

I can tell she’s smiling when she says it.

“Favorite movie,” she asks.

“*Ghostbusters*,” I blurt out of nowhere. And then realize it might oddly be Jameson’s, which earns him another inch of respect.

“New or old.”

I snort. “Original, Ruby. Always. You?”

“It’s between *Psycho* and *The Shining*.”

I feel a sudden emptiness. A gap in my memory before she answered. I couldn’t remember her favorite movie. “Seems violent.”

“So is football.”

Unexpected laughter erupts from my chest. “Not really. Have you not seen all the helmets and padding?” I take a few steps and turn so we’re facing each other. “Speaking of, are you coming to the game?”

“Hmmm . . . I’m not a huge football fan, but I’ll consider it.”

“It might get violent, even bloody,” I tease.

She quirks her brows playfully. “Well, in *that* case I may have to reconsider.”

I nod appreciatively, filled with a hope that she’ll be there.

“I heard some scouts are coming to scope you out,” she says.

“Yeah, I don’t know too much about all that.”

“Stanford, huh?”

“Welp, seems you may know more about it than I do.”

“It’s a small town, small school . . .”

“Odd we just met then, isn’t it?”

This earns me a genuine Ruby laugh. “Seriously,” she says. “That’s really cool that a school like that is going to watch you play.”

“Yeah, it’s Richard’s thing, really.”

She gives me a look of confusion so I tell her, “Dick, my dad.”

Another laugh. “Oh, got it.” She inclines her head, tugging her hair over her right shoulder. “But you love football.”

“Yeah, but not if the price is not getting to be myself.”

“How so?”

I shrug. “I just . . . Sometimes I wonder what I’m really playing for. Because I love it? Or because Dick expects me to?”

“I mean, but if you love it, then who cares, right? Like, you should just do what makes you happy.”

“Well, why don’t you convince Dick of that at the game?”

“You’re really selling it now, Jameson.”

I look up. “What about you? What do you love to do?”

“I want to travel . . .” She hesitates, searches for the right words. “To kind of find out who I am, I guess. I know everyone says that . . . so I hate *also* saying it.”

“Well, maybe everyone says it because it’s the truth.”

She lets out a sigh. “I’ll send postcards to Stanford.”

“Oh yeah?”

She lifts her pinkie and encircles it with mine. That’s when I see the charm bracelet. It’s so familiar, but I can’t place it. I only know I feel a connection to it. I’m searching my memory when she says, “I better go.”

“Want a ride?” I practically stammer.

“I’ve got my car.”

I don’t want her to go. But she’s already walking away. “Ruby?”

She glances over her shoulder. A lock of dark hair falls across her face that’s lost to the shadows.

“I’m glad he chose me.”

I don’t have to say *Hart*.

She already knows.

Forty-six
RUBY

I dream of Hart again.

As always, I stumble through the dense fog toward his voice calling me. A shape takes form. I run toward him.

He's so close.

And then . . . he begins to fade.

Desperation grips my heart. I lunge. My hand reaches through the mist, grabs hold of his. His skin is warm and smooth. I turn to spin him around, to see his face.

It's Jameson.

I wake up and check the time on my phone. It's five-thirty a.m. I know I'm not going to be able to go back to sleep. Plus, I smell coffee brewing. My mom's always been a rise-at-dawn girl, and for once I'm thankful.

After I hunt down my own brew, I find her on the back deck. She's got a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, sipping coffee, reading a book.

"You're up early," she says in a raspy morning voice.

I curl my hands around my own coffee and sit in the chair next to her, staring out across the colorful garden that slopes toward a wooden fence.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asks.

"Same dream," I tell her, keeping my eyes on the flowers. Hart helped us plant the climbing rosebushes years ago. I was grounded for something I don't even remember now. Hart being Hart, he showed up with a shovel and gloves. Mom could never resist him or his damn charm. He pretended he knew what he was doing with the roses, but then I caught him checking

Google on his phone every few minutes. I didn't care. He was here and being grounded had never felt so good.

Mom rests her hand over mine. "You're cold." She removes her blanket and places it around me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I shake my head and play with the charm bracelet.

"Okay," she says. That's one of the things I love about her. She never pries and always knows when to let something go. So unlike me.

I take a warm drink of coffee and glance up at the last traces of the paper-thin moon.

She says, "I saw Miriam at the gym yesterday."

Something unravels inside my stomach. I know Miriam told her about my selling *Ladybug* or my mom would never have brought it up. "Please don't try to talk me out of it," I say.

"I wasn't going to."

"Good."

My mom offers me a small smile, but I know she's unsure if it's safe to approach. When I first lost Hart, she held me for hours, putting aside her own grief while I sobbed in her arms. I slept with her for the first two weeks, barely able to doze, and most nights I woke up crying. She never once told me how to feel; she never once told me it would pass. She just held me and stroked my hair and let me weep my guts out.

And not once has she (like everyone else) ever told me that Hart would want me to be happy. I really love her for that.

"I know it feels like you're never going to be you again, that you're never going to feel anything good ever again . . ."

"Mom . . ." I don't want to be a reminder of her own lost love grief. "I know . . . I mean, I think I see some light at the end of the tunnel. Not that I'll ever forget, or get over it completely, but maybe my heart can heal, and maybe the scar will never fade, but I can always carry Hart with me, right?"

Love doesn't need more than one heart.

Mom merely nods, giving me her best smile not meant to be sad, but it is.

"I talked to Tía Lydia last night," she says, changing the subject. "I guess she's been talking to your sister about a picture of Jameson Romanelli?"

I stiffen. Crap. How much did Gabi tell Tía? My brain runs through the mental calculations until I realize what likely happened. Lydia probably needed more information for her “digging,” like a name, a backstory, or something else, and my sister, wanting to help, gave it all to her.

I shake my head casually. “It’s a long story.”

“Mmm.”

Mom’s not buying it.

“It’s just a sister thing, Mom,” I tell her, because she’ll respect that.

Lifting her brows, she sighs. “Okay, but just be careful. I don’t like the idea that he’s lying to you.”

Lying?

Someone has just poured hot oil down my throat. It takes me a second before I can ask, “What do you mean?”

Mom blinks at me innocently, each flutter a message: *I thought you knew. Am I stepping in it? Ask your tía.* “Lydia said she finally got a message that he isn’t who he says he is. And that he’s a mentiroso.”

No way. I don’t buy it. Tía’s wrong about Jameson. She has to be. Except the possibility of that is close to nil. Which means there’s some other reasonable explanation that he’s been branded a liar. “Hmph.”

“Hmph what?”

Acting casual, swallowing the anger that’s practically engulfing me, so as not to stir up her mama bear instincts, I shrug. “I just think it’s weird she would tell you and not Gabi.”

Every inch of me is revolting against what I know is coming next.

“She did tell Gabi.”

My skin is buzzing from head to toe. Tiny black dots steal my vision. Jameson isn’t who he says he is. George’s words fly across my mind: *He’s playing twisted head games.* And my sister, the traitor, didn’t tell me about any of it.

I’m trembling, on the verge of breaking, but I mask it behind a causal sigh. Mom has zero idea Jameson means anything to me. That I care about him. That . . .

I can’t think about that right now.

All I can think about is what I'm going to do to my sister the second I see her traitorous face.

OceanofPDF.com

Forty-seven

RUBY

I wait until Gabi and I are on our way to school to have it out with her. If Mom were to hear us, she'd only play referee and start to lean into her already piqued curiosity, and as good as she is about not asking too many questions, she has her limit.

The second I pull out of the driveway, I form the words in my head, but I can't manage to get any out. The anger and hurt is burning its way through me. So I take a few minutes to check myself while Gabi banters on about the worst bio test she's ever taken.

"Mom says you talked to Tía Lydia." I drop the sentence like a well-timed grenade ready to detonate if Gabi plays innocent.

To her credit, and my surprise, she says, "Pull over."

I park alongside a curb in the neighborhood. A fine mist hangs in the morning air. A man is out for a jog. A woman pushes a stroller. A group of kids wait at a school bus stop. Life unfolds all around us while we're in a four-foot space of hot emotion. I turn off the ignition and face my sister. "How could you not tell me?" To be honest, I'm stunned (and impressed) by how controlled my voice is.

Gabi gets out of the car and I follow. She heads down the street. "Are you seriously walking away from me right now?" I say, trailing her every step.

"I'm not walking away," she says, picking up her pace. "I'm thinking. Besides, if you're going to murder me, I have a better chance of escape out here."

"Thinking?" I echo. "About how to weasel out of this one?"

She doesn't say anything for a solid thirty seconds, then stops near the neighborhood basketball courts. Some kids are playing a game of HORSE. Lunch boxes and backpacks are scattered at the edge of the court.

"Well?" I demand, unable to maintain even a drop more of patience.

She comes to an abrupt halt and faces me. "I'm thinking about how you're about to come undone, Ruby. And if I told you, you'd just insist you want nothing to do with Jameson and you guys are, like, real friends now and he's made things better for you and I didn't want to ruin that."

"But he's lying, Gabi." I'm so flustered I don't even know what to do with my hands, my body, my entire being.

"People lie for all sorts of reasons, Ruby." Why does she keep punctuating every sentence with my name like I'm too unaware to understand her mighty Yoda consciousness? "We all do it every day," she says. "For all sorts of reasons and I think Jameson has his reasons and so what that Tía said he isn't who he says he is? That doesn't mean it's literal."

Heat rushes up my spine. "Why are you protecting him?"

In my peripheral vision, I see a ball spinning through the air toward Gabi. I shoot my arm out to block it.

"Sorry," a girl says as I toss the ball back.

Gabi narrows her eyes. "You wanted to let it hit me, didn't you?"

"I wouldn't have minded," I say, matching her frown as the school bus pulls up.

The kids scatter, retrieving their belongings as they get on the bus. Gabi and I are never going to make it to school on time and I don't even care.

"What if he's hiding behind a mask because he's afraid?" Gabi asks. "Or what if he's pretending to be something he's not just to belong? Like every other person at Seaside High."

Jameson's words from yesterday crash into my brain.

Not if the price is not getting to be myself.

A ball rolls to my feet. Someone must have left it behind. I grab it and spin toward the bus, but it's already driving away. So I go for a free throw. There's no sweet swish sound. Only empty air that screams, *You missed.*

Gabi snatches the ball before I can get to it and lobs it effortlessly into the basket.

“This isn’t about Jameson,” I say, taking another missed shot. “This is about you. Us. You kept this huge thing from me.”

Gabi dribbles the ball, stands at the three-point line like a show-off, and with the careful exactitude of a pro, takes aim and sails the ball in for another score. But in my defense, she’s played on these courts since she was three. I used to tell her to join a team, and her excuse was always the same: “That’ll take all the fun out of it.”

She turns to me. “Yeah, I didn’t tell you. And I’d do it again.”

I’m stunned silent. She hands me the ball. “Your shot.”

Gripping the ball, with zero intention of shooting it, I fume, “WHY?”

“Because it’s your turn.”

“Why would you do it again? We’re sisters!”

“Because you overreact and I don’t want you to miss something important with Jameson because you’re too busy looking for reasons to be offended or pissed or whatever.”

“I do NOT OVERREACT!” I toss the ball toward the basket, and this time it circles the rim like it’s not sure if it’s going to go in or not. It does. Saving me from humiliation.

Gabi’s nostrils flare wide as she inhales slowly. “I’m sorry. I love you. You know that. I didn’t do it to hurt you. And if you forgive me, I’ll let you beat me in a round.”

I can’t help it. All my anger and frustration melt away just looking at my way-too-wise little sister and her good intentions. She’s right that I’m an overreactor, but she’s wrong about what I think about Jameson. About how he makes me feel less alone, more filled up, and nothing Tía says or predicts is going to change that. “I forgive you,” I say, “but you have to walk to school.”

I take off, sprinting back to the car. My sister might be a hot rod at basketball compared with me, but my legs are longer and I can outrun her any day of the week.

“Ruby!” she yells, trying to catch me.

I'm smiling. She's laughing. I'm so going to win this race.

• • •

School dragged. My mind was everywhere but on the topics being thrown at me. Well, it was mostly on Jameson. I wrote the same sentence over and over and over in my notebook: *He's not who he says he is. He's not who he says he is.*

I felt like Jack from *The Shining*, sitting in the big old room at the Overlook, typing the same sentence repeatedly because my grip on reality feels like it's dangerously slipping away.

And then to add to all the weirdness, Jameson was hanging with George at lunch. When I went over to find out why, they acted all chill like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I texted George a thousand times all equaling the same message: *Why are you hanging with Jameson?*

He didn't answer until a second ago. I fall onto my bed and look at his text: J is a cool guy. You should give him a chance.

Did I just fall down the rabbit hole? Who ARE you?

George doesn't respond. Of course he doesn't. Why *not* drop a bomb like that on me and then go radio silent?

I stare at my closet door. If I were in a horror flick, there would be something lingering in there, watching me, waiting for me to open the door. But the reality is that the only thing lingering in there that scares me more than an unknown darkness is Hart's songbook. I haven't had the strength to open it, to find out if he ever put down the words of the song he was writing, the one he was so excited about the night before he died. For as long as I live, I'll never forget the sparkle in his eyes. The thrill in his voice.

I take a deep breath. Hold. Hold. I exhale. If I'm going to really move forward, then I have to do this. I open the door, reach into the box, and pull out the worn brown journal. On the first page there's a handwritten message to anyone who finds the book. Seeing Hart's scrawl, his address, and phone number carves an ache in me so deep I'm not sure I can turn the page.

My charm bracelet hovers over the book, the boat and ladybug barely touching the edges.

“I can do this,” I say just as the doorbell rings. I hear Mom answer it, and then comes the sound of footsteps before my door opens and Mom pokes her head in. “A Lourdes is here?”

Lourdes? How did she know where I live? A second later she’s standing in my room, looking around like she’s never seen a mess before. “I hope you don’t mind that I popped in on you like this.”

“It’s cool . . . Is everything okay?”

She nods. “Just wanted to get out of the house and do some wandering. Jameson told me where you live. I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d just say hey.”

I’m actually glad for the distraction. “Want something to drink?”

Her eyes alight on the songbook. “No thanks.” Then, as if she’s drawn to it, she goes over and sits right next to the open pages. “You write poetry?”

I shake my head, thinking this is a test of my resolve to move on, to be able to talk about Hart without breaking down into a puddle of grief. “It was Hart’s songbook,” I tell her.

She doesn’t touch the book, just keeps her gaze on the page, and I can tell she’s reading the words. Strangely, I’m glad to share his music with someone.

Tapping her foot on the floor she says, “I can hear this song in my head.”

“You read music?”

She nods. “Wow—this is really good.”

“He was super talented,” I say with an almost smile.

“Do you have any pictures of him?”

“Only one . . . I mean, I have thousands, but the others . . . they were too hard to look at so they’re in the cloud, saved.” I tug my phone from my back pocket and scroll to find the photo I took of Hart’s sneeze image and I show it to Lourdes.

Her gaze fixes on his face like she knows him.

“It’s not the best pic,” I say, “but I like it.”

Lourdes offers a genuine smile that somehow warms me to my toes. “Not a face anyone could forget,” she says kindly.

I release a chuckle. “That is so true.”

“Can I read more?” she asks, gesturing to the book.

“Sure.”

I don’t know why, but this feels right. It feels good to share Hart with someone who didn’t know him but might get a glimpse of him through his music.

I watch as Lourdes flips through the pages, nodding, tapping her foot, smiling, tugging on a hoop earring mindlessly like she’s swept up in the music.

“Wow . . . this is better than good. This is . . . I know this sounds weird,” she says, then hesitates like she’s waiting for permission or maybe to see if I’m okay with “weird.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s like looking into his soul,” she tells me. “And it’s not the lyrics or the notes, but maybe the way they go together, like there is no other way for them to be composed but exactly as they are?” She snorts and stands. “I sound like a weirdo.”

I feel so unbelievably happy that someone else understands that I can only say, “You are exactly right. Hart always told me that music was . . . some key that unlocked the mysteries of the universe.”

Lourdes’s smile fades slowly like I’ve said the wrong thing. “Well, I just came to say hey,” she says. “I’d better get back to my wandering.”

After she leaves, I feel more emboldened and I flip through the book’s pages, through the songs I know so well. Hoping, wanting, longing for the last one to be there. Needing it to be there. I don’t want to think that Hart died with it still inside of him.

My eyes land on a verse. A beginning.

*The ocean rushes by so fast
Moonlight splinters through the mast.
Our hands stretch tall toward the stars.*

Oh, yes. Yes, the future is ours.

Tears spill before I realize they've formed. I read the verse repeatedly as the understanding unfolds. This song is about us. And next to the lyrics, I see the words that were his muse.

*It's always been Ruby,
From the first time I saw her.
With her, everything is "open your eyes."
She is goodbyes and hellos and maybes spilling all over me.
She is the story I'll follow to the end.
That's it. That's Ruby. And it always will be.*

I trace my hand over every single word, remembering that night. The way we lay on our backs, arms stretched toward one another, fingertips nearly grazing.

I remember the heavy feeling in my gut that something was coming, that nothing was going to be the same. I remember begging him to not go out to sea, to stay with me. But he was so determined to make that extra cash, to make *Ladybug* ours.

Salty tears roll down my cheeks and into my mouth as I touch the charms, wondering if I made the wrong choice about selling the boat.

Looking back at the song, I realize he never finished it. He never got down the words that sprang to his mind that night. They're at the bottom of the ocean.

I grab a pen from my desk. It hovers over the page.

I want more words. I want the rest of the song. I want Hart.

With a shaky hand, I write, *Please help me let you go.*

Forty-eight

RUBY

I decide not to go to the game.

I'm too nervous. Don't ask me why. I've never cared about football before, but this game matters to Jameson, from the scouts to his dad, and if I were there, I know I'd be even edgier than I am now. Sure, it's been a rocky road with Jameson. But even in light of Tía's message, I trust him, sorta. I trust my gut. And my gut's telling me he's a good guy who's been through some really awful stuff and he understands my pain and grief better than anyone else.

I'm making myself busy studying for a chem test when Gabi waltzes into my room, followed by Serena and Inez.

They're all wearing blue-and-gold garb so they can fan out at the game. "I already told you I'm not going," I say.

Gabi tosses me a Sharks T-shirt. "No way," I tell her.

"Look," Serena butts in, "it's cool if you don't want to go to the game but that doesn't mean we can't bring the game to you."

"It's live-streaming," Gabi says cheerily as if that solves all the issues related to my manic nervous system.

I close my chem book and stand. "You guys shouldn't miss the game. It's homecoming."

"We aren't going to miss it," Inez says, smiling.

Just then George walks in, carrying a bag of wings. "Did I miss the fiesta?" he shouts.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

“Dude, I’m here to watch our boy play.”

“Our boy?” I’m so stunned my eyes won’t even blink. “Are you unwell?”

“Like you said, he’s changed, okay?”

Within fifteen minutes, the fan group has me in the living room with the TV on, sitting in front of a spread of nachos, guac, mini-burritos, and barbecue chicken wings.

Mom passes by, rolling a suitcase. She got another trip up the coast for work. I help her with her luggage, and when she hugs me goodbye, she says, “Keep your phone close by and be good, and may the blessings of the angels be upon you.” Then she crosses me like always and is gone.

Back inside, I watch the team run onto the field under an arc of balloons as the crowd goes wild. Jameson is at the front, waving his right hand, carrying his helmet in his left.

He looks like a titan, confident and strong. Not at all nervous that this game matters so much to his future.

My stomach churns. And the smell of the food is only making my nausea worse. I really want Jameson to win, to get recruited by Stanford. But that means he has to play the game of his life.

The Sharks win the toss.

It’s game time.

Forty-nine
HART/JAMESON

Who knew so many people could fit into this stadium? It's a wave of blue and gold, and the crowd is stomping their feet, chanting something I can't make out.

And then I hear it. "Crash. Crash. Crash."

"They love you, man." Martin pats me on the back.

"Or they think I'm going to crash into that wall that's the Tigers' defense."

Martin laughs. "Nah. This is a homecoming for you, too, you get me?"

I bounce on my toes. There's a rock or something in my shoe. I tug off my cleat. A tiny pink Barbie shoe falls out.

Martin howls with laughter.

And then I remember. Victoria had told me to look for a surprise good luck charm. I glance over my shoulder. She and Whitney are in the stands at the fifty, waving a homemade sign that reads WE LOVE YOU, JAMESON.

"Uh, you should probably put on the helmet," Martin says. "We're up."

"Martin!" I shout, tugging him back. "If I forget to tell you later, you played a great game."

He gives me a quizzical look. "You are one weird-ass dude."

"That's me."

With a punch to my shoulder, he laughs and says, "It's a good change."

In the huddle, I give the guys a small pep talk that goes something like this: "Listen, this is our house. And no one walks into our house and shows us up. Now, let's win this thing."

Martin growls, “What he means is let’s shove this ball up their asses so far they can’t walk to the buses.”

Yeah, that.

We line up. First play is a run, to loosen things up. We make it eleven yards. The crowd goes bananas. My nerves have been replaced by a force of adrenaline that makes me want to launch the hell out of this ball.

Tristan gives me a look as he steps up to my right. He’s supposed to get the ball on a screen pass, but the defense is lined up for that. So I change the play in my hard count. The offensive line scrambles. The ball is snapped.

I step back, eyes scanning the field. Tight end Sean Mathison hustles down right field. Tristan is bobbing and weaving away from this defender, racing to the forty, fifty . . .

I have to admit, the guy is talented. He’s so good, Mathison’s defender cuts him loose to pursue Tristan. Exactly what I wanted him to do.

I step out of the pocket, narrowly make a defender miss. I launch the ball to Mathison down the right sideline. He catches. Out of bounds.

Shit!

I look over at the sidelines to Coach Feldman. Richard, who I recognize from photos, is standing right behind him, eyes fixed on me like he can will me to be a champion with a single glare. I’d love to throw this game just to make the bastard squirm, but I’ve got too much respect for Jameson to do that.

Next play, the ball is snapped. I grab hold. It’s going to be a fake. I toss it to the running back, who falls back and hauls the ball thirty yards downfield to a waiting Tristan, who takes it into the end zone.

The crowd goes wild, feet pounding, echoes thundering. Richard claps slowly like he’s not yet impressed.

Our defense holds the Tigers to three points. But in the rest of the quarter and the next we rack up seventeen hard-won unanswered points. And at the beginning of the third quarter, after Feldman screams at us not to yield an inch, our defense buckles and the Tigers take it all the way to the end zone on a single run. A seven-point spread is too close. Their coach must think so, too, because the ballsy dude goes for a two-point conversion to make it a six-

point game, and that means that if they hold us and score one more TD, it won't be a tie but a win. His decision is enough to bring the stands to a stony silence.

I hold my breath. The QB drops back, looks left, right. Has to throw the ball higher than I know he wants to in order to give his five-ten receiver a chance against our six-foot-two safety. The receiver leaps, snatches the ball out of the air, comes down.

I'm not breathing. And then . . . the ball pops out before the receiver lands. Our entire sideline is pumping their fists, shouting, jumping like we've already won. Me? I hold myself together. This isn't over yet.

We need a big play.

But damn, the Tigers' defense is operating on all cylinders, and they hold us until the last five minutes of the fourth quarter. After fighting to get to the Tigers' thirty-five-yard line, we line up again. I see the defense is ready for us. Which only creates a ball of dread in my gut. I'm sure this body's cells and nerves and muscles have been here before. Or at least I'm relying on it.

I call a time-out, confer with Coach, who wants to play it safe on this one, but something tells me that's what the defense is expecting.

Back on the field, the defense repositions itself as if they overheard the entire sideline convo I just had with Coach. I go long on the hard count, questioning my own sanity as I change the play to a risky one.

The ball's snapped. My line goes all in, protecting me as I cut right and haul ass down the right side of the field. The end zone is in sight and everything slows in that moment. I swear I hear Jameson's voice in my head whisper, *Don't waste it.*

Someone is coming in hard to my right. I ignore him. I'm so close.

Yards. Feet. Inches.

And just as I launch myself into the air, stretching my arms, the ball, and all my hope toward the end zone, I'm hit helmet to helmet.

Pain shoots down my spine.

And everything goes black.

Fifty RUBY

*H*e's not getting up.

He. Is. Not. Getting. Up.

The nightmarish impact is being replayed. And every time I watch it, it gets more brutal: Jameson's body flying through the air, the smashing of helmets, knocking Jameson's off, the way he dropped to the ground, the way the defender fell on top of him.

"Get up!" I yell. A swell of emotion is rising through my chest and into my throat as the coach and medical staff surround him. All the players have taken a knee. Waiting.

Gabi's arm is around me. George is pacing and cussing, yelling, "THROW THE DAMN FLAG" in between curses. Serena is outmatching him and Inez is practically chanting the Hail Mary.

It's going to be okay becomes my mantra.

He's being loaded onto a stretcher.

Is he awake? Unconscious? Breathing?

And then . . . and then he gives a thumbs-up and the crowd erupts with some kind of relief I feel from here. Something breaks loose inside of me.

Gabi, George, and Inez are hooting and celebrating, but all of that fades into the background because a tiny voice is rising, telling me to go see him.

. . .

*B*v the time I get to the locker room. I've had every catastrophic thought a

human can have and then some. And my hope that he didn't break anything or really injure himself is so deep I think it might crush me.

I don't stop long enough to digest my feelings—that I care about Jameson way more than I thought. That the thread tying us together is stronger than I thought. That his accident reminded me how everything can change in just an instant.

I enter from the south side. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the long dark corridor. And then I see the outline of a figure.

Jameson?

I don't know if it's a trick of the shadows and light, or the fact that my heart is not okay, but for a split second I see Hart walking toward me. Until he isn't.

There is no one here.

I blink, rush away from the shadows and toward the light of the locker room.

Jameson is sitting on an examination table. The trainer's with him.

He looks up like he senses my presence. "Ruby?"

"Are you okay?" I ask, sticking close to the door.

He laughs humorously. "A bump."

The trainer says something about resting for a few minutes before heading back out to the sidelines, then leaves.

Sidelines? So Jameson isn't going back in? I hold in the gasp that's climbing up my throat. This game holds his future. Ugh! I really wish I could fix this for him.

"Well, you did promise me violence," I manage, trying to make light of it, unsure what the *right* thing to say is as I walk toward him.

He lets out a small grunt laugh in response, presses the bridge of his nose with scratched-up fingers.

"Hey," I say. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just the meds, maybe. Makes me loopy."

I'm so close now, his knees are nearly touching my legs. "I'm so sorry," I say. "But it really was pretty epic."

"Oh yeah?" He begins to stand, then falls against me woozily. I barely

keep him upright before pushing him back toward the table, where he lies down. “I knew I shouldn’t have taken that pill,” he says. His words are heading into slurred territory.

“Want me to get the trainer?” I ask.

He looks up at me and gives me a goofy semi-drunk-looking smile. “Nah. It’ll be good. Just glad you’re here.”

And then he closes his eyes. I watch as his chest rises and falls. The wall clock ticks. The distant echoes of the game find their way into the locker room. He drifts in and out.

I sit with him for a few minutes, figuring it’s a good thing he’s resting. Every once in a while he mumbles incoherent things.

I don’t know when it happens but my hand is on his arm. My thumb makes slow circles.

He says something. I lean closer to hear the utterance falling from his lips: “Always.”

I wait.

“Isn’t for . . .” His whisper falls short but I know the rest of that sentence. My heart drops to my stomach like a heavy stone.

And then Jameson frowns, and his words come out with a melody like he’s almost singing. “Our hands . . .” He’s humming now.

I hold my breath as more words form on his lips. Small mutters.

“Stretch tall toward the stars.”

I stumble back. The temperature in the room drops a hundred degrees. Why is Jameson speaking Hart’s lyrics to a song no one else even knows about? Confusion sweeps through me, suffocating all rational thought.

“Hart?” My voice is a shaky impossible whisper.

Jameson’s eyes flutter open. Blue like the ocean. His gaze finds mine. “Elle?”

Fifty-one
HART/JAMESON

The face I see swimming in front of me is one from a memory that isn't mine.

Elle.

And then my vision clears. "Ruby," I whisper.

She doesn't seem to care that I just called her another girl's name, or if she does, she doesn't show it. She taps a shaky finger on my forehead. "Still loopy?"

"Sorta." I go to sit up and the room spins.

"Whoa!" Ruby says, pressing me back down. "You need to rest."

"I'm fine," I say, struggling to an upright position. What the hell did that trainer give me?

"Want some water or something?" she asks, looking out of sorts. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Because you care if I get hurt."

She lets out a little grunt and rolls her eyes. "Of course I care if you get hurt. I'm not a heartless wench."

"You are definitely not a heartless wench."

She offers only a smirk, folds her arms across her chest, chews her bottom lip.

"Just say it," I tell her, because I can see that she's got something weighing on her and isn't sure how to get it out.

"Say what?"

"Whatever's on your mind."

After a quick glance around, she says, “This locker room reeks.”

I laugh, rake a hand through my hair.

She steps back, takes a deep breath, twists her fingers. “You . . . um . . . you said—actually, sang—some things when you were sleeping.”

“I did?”

“Things only Hart knew.” Her voice catches and my heart splits. She tells me about the song, about *always isn’t forever*, and my mind is spinning out.

“I think I get it,” she says.

I sit up taller. My throat closes tight. “You do?”

Dropping her gaze to the floor, she says, “*Lourdes* came to my house and saw Hart’s songbook. Did she tell you about it? Is that how you knew?”

I had no idea *Lourdes* had gone to Ruby’s or that she saw my songs. Why didn’t she tell me? But this is a leap even for Ruby. I can tell she’s spiraling, trying to make sense of all this.

Ruby’s expectant eyes are waiting, hoping. A few weeks ago, I would have begged the heavens to tell her the truth, but now? I won’t put her through losing me twice. So I force out the lie. “Yeah, she told me about them. Uh—is that okay?”

Ruby glances down, twisting her fingers. “Music is meant to be shared, right?”

I reach out, take her hand in mine, and squeeze. She lets me.

“He loved you,” I say, trying to find the right tempo here. “I . . . can feel it sometimes.”

Ruby goes still. Dark eyes drinking me in so intensely I think I might melt under her gaze. She says, so quietly I have to lean closer, “You were calling for *Elle*.”

Jameson’s memory was calling for Elle. Which tells me that the time of forgetting is getting closer. I stroke her hand gently, wishing I could tell her the truth.

“Ruby . . .”

She throws her arms around me. It’s distant at first, and then slowly our bodies come together like two magnets and there isn’t a breath of space

between us. I bury my face in her hair. It smells clean, citrusy, familiar. She hugs me tighter. Why does it feel like goodbye?

Please don't let go.

As we part slowly, she keeps her gaze on me. Her eyes are entrancing, out of focus, lost in the moment. She's so close I can nearly feel her breath on my face. If I lean only a few inches more, our lips will meet. Everything in me wants to give in. To kiss her, to taste her. She's tipping her mouth to mine. Her body trembles.

The door opens and Lourdes waltzes in with Whitney and Victoria.

Ruby jumps back and wipes her face, clearing her throat and putting on a smile that is almost believable. I make the introductions sloppily, but it's Victoria who opens her mouth wide enough to fit a fist inside of it. "You're Ruby?"

Ruby cuts a curious glance at me, then back to Victoria. "I am."

Victoria merely smiles just as Ruby takes off to give us "family time." I want to chase after her, to beg her not to go, to stay in my sights until the very last moment.

Whitney says, "You're a terrible son, freaking me out like that."

"Yeah, uh . . . had to get the TD."

Victoria squeals, twirling around the room. "Now that you're all better, you can come to my recital tomorrow!"

"We'll see," Whitney says gently.

"I'll be there, kiddo."

After Whitney and Victoria head out, Lourdes stays behind, straightening my blanket. "That was a careless move."

"Going to her recital?"

"Diving into the end zone."

"You were worried about me," I say, finally catching on to why she's so pissed.

"Psh."

I smile. "Lourdes the almighty angel was worried about me. Aww—Lourdy, I'm so touched."

She turns her fierce gaze on me. “Call me Lourdy again and I’ll disintegrate you.”

“Can angels do that?”

“We aren’t so far removed from demons, Hart.” She comes over, sits on the edge of the table. “Our time is almost up.”

I nod, wishing she hadn’t reminded me. And as I take her in, I realize how selfish I’ve been. “I’m such an ass.”

She quirks an eyebrow that says, *Tell me more.*

“I’m really sorry we’ve been so focused on me that . . . I’ve done nothing to help you.”

“Actually, you made me see that human love can be powerful; it can be enduring,” Lourdes says softly. “I’d say that’s a lot.”

I appreciate her words but I still feel mountains of guilt. After a few beats of silence, I say, “I dreamed of her.”

“Ruby?”

“Elle,” I say, and the name hurts.

Lourdes stares at me mutely, like she’s waiting for me to say something else. “It’s weird,” I tell her. “How I love Ruby, but this body also loves Elle and how it’s so different. Like there are so many versions of love, of how strong and real and deep it is, depending on the person, ya know?”

Lourdes nods. “I do know.”

“And I don’t remember my last birthday,” I tell her. “Or the one before that. Or Spanish, or last year’s homecoming. Or any of the songs I’ve ever written, only that I wrote them. And I can’t even remember my dad’s face.”

Lourdes’s voice is effortless, gentle. “That is the way of things.”

I’m too weak and tired to argue about *the way of things*.

. . .

Out on the sidelines, I see Richard in person for the first time. He’s taller up close, well built, undeniably intimidating. He gives me a small *atta boy* laugh and pulls me into a half hug. “Son, that was epic. I just talked to the scout. We’re old friends.”

Got it. That's why he wasn't in the locker room. He was conducting the business of my future.

"Stanford liked what they saw, despite your injury," he adds. "They want to talk to you. It's not an offer, but it's enough—for now."

"Yeah, sure," I say, but I'm not feeling it. Jameson's body isn't either.

"You really went for it. That was one hell of a reckless move."

"Well, it paid off."

"You can't be pulling stunts like that in the big leagues."

Big leagues. Do I even want to go to the big leagues? Did Jameson? I guess there will be plenty of time for me to figure that out, but for now, I'm just psyched I'm not leaving Ruby for Colorado. And once Richard confirms it, I watch my team's razor-thin victory.

It's a lot of hoopla, laughing, high-fiving. We just dethroned the Tigers fair and square. I'm surrounded by celebration and I'm happy for the team, but my heart isn't fully in it because all I can think of is how to spend my last days with Ruby.

Fifty-two

RUBY

~ Two days before the end ~

When I get home, George and Serena have left and I find my sister in the kitchen cleaning up the fiesta leftovers.

Before I can even get a word out, she's tugged me into a hug like she hasn't seen me in years. "It's going to be okay," she says, patting my back. "It's all over social. Everyone says he's fine."

"Then why do you look so worried?" I ask.

"Because I know something happened between you two."

"How do you know that?"

"The look on your face when you walked through the door." She plants herself at the table and takes in a dramatic breath, folding her hands neatly. "I'm ready. Tell me everything."

After I unravel the entire ordeal from the locker room, Gabi stares at me unblinking, like she's dissecting every single word. "You . . . almost kissed?"

I nod, heart racing. I want my sister to tell me something that makes sense. I want her to tell me why I wanted so badly to kiss Jameson. And I would have. I would have fallen into his arms, into the depth of his kiss, if his family hadn't walked in. But I guess I already know the answer.

"In those few seconds," I say, voice shuddering, "I swear it was like talking to Hart, Gabi. It's like he's in there somewhere and that's why I've felt connected to Jameson." That's why I wanted to kiss him. Why I *still* want to kiss him.

My sister's eyes are darting here and there and everywhere except toward me. She gets to her feet and begins to load the dishwasher. "Let's consult the cards."

"I don't need the cards. I feel it"—my hand goes to my solar plexus—"in here."

Her gaze locks with mine. "Does this mean you're surrendering your heart?"

I feel woozy. I sit down, rest my head on the table, and close my eyes, seeing only the blueness of Jameson's eyes. The way my body responded to him. The way he looked at me with so much longing it reminded me of Hart.

Hearts will burn before they break.

"Are you okay?" Gabi asks. "This isn't the time to freak out, Ruby."

"I'm not freaking out," I manage, pressing my forehead into the table. I'm just losing my mind.

Gabi sits next to me.

"I think . . . I mean I *feel* . . . I need to let Jameson in. I know it sounds so bizarre." The idea instantly slices me open, leaving a raw canyon of grief I don't want to see. I look up at her.

"Remember the ancestors' message, hearts will burn before they break?" she asks.

"Yeah and you thought they were talking about Jameson's heart."

She chews on a hangnail. "Maybe we're just not interpreting it right."

"Gabi," I say, cautious, "I have this awful feeling I'm running out of time."

"Yeah, me too."

"That's comforting."

"Would you rather I lie to you?"

I sit up and groan. "No. But you're my sister and it's your job to make me feel better."

She looks like she's considering a comeback, then surprises me with, "George knows something."

I think about his last text to me to give "J" a chance.

“When you left,” Gabi goes on, “he kept pacing like a damn caged lion, making me nervous, so I asked him what was up. I mean, he doesn’t even really like Jameson so why was he all freaked he got hurt, right?”

“Right.”

“He just looked at me with this wild expression and said, ‘People deserve second chances.’ When I asked him for more, he just muttered something I didn’t catch and took off. And then I remembered how he showed up the other day at the beach when I was giving Jameson a reading.”

“What?!” I jump up, nearly knocking the chair over. “You never told me he was there.”

“Oops. I totally forgot! I was so focused on the reading I didn’t even care that George showed up but he was so pissed, Ruby. And he just kept telling Jameson that they needed to talk. And Josie was going bonkers over Jameson like . . .” She stops abruptly midsentence. All the color drains from her face. Her mouth is moving like a fish out of water but nothing is coming out.

“Gabi, are you okay?” I fan her with a napkin.

“Is that even possible?” she whispers.

“Please speak in full comprehensive sentences that don’t make me want to gouge out my eyeballs.”

“Don’t you see? Dogs are all consciousness . . .”

“ENGLISH!”

“Dogs have no thought like humans and they can sense things, and she ran to Jameson like she *knew* him.”

“Wait!” I can’t process this fast enough and I feel like my brain is going into overdrive. “George told me Josie’s always hated Jameson, and then I saw Josie at Martin’s party months ago and she was growling at him like she was going to attack and now you’re telling me they’re all cozy?”

In a state of stunned silence, I begin to flip through my recent Jameson memories: the weird *déjà vu*, how he came looking for me, how he stalked Hart’s house, the first few notes he played that sounded like a Hart song before he crashed and burned, the way I thought I saw him on the bluff that night, his piano, Tía’s message about him not being what he seems. Jesus. It all adds up. And there’s those weird dreams and the fact that he’s changed,

and the warmth I feel when we touch, but most of all? The invisible thread that's tying us together. I could go on and on. A long shudder winds through me and the words are out before I can examine them. "Josie sensed Hart," I say. "Or maybe a piece of him. I'm not sure how this all works, but George must have figured it out, too, because no way would he be all Team Jameson if he hadn't. That's why he was hanging with Jameson at lunch. That's why he was asking me to give him a second chance. I'm going to murder him for not telling me!"

Gabi's nodding like she's got a rubber neck. "Holy Santos!"

"Am I making this all up?" I ask, seeking some semblance of logic as my throat closes up.

"What does your intuition tell you?"

I shake my head. "What it's been trying to tell me all along and I just didn't put the pieces together. A part of Hart is somehow inside of Jameson."

"You have to find a way to connect with him," Gabi cries, rubbing her forehead back and forth aggressively. "I mean, maybe he's been trying to reach you all along."

"Why? To tell me to be happy?"

"Or maybe something else, something bigger."

Tears of utter disbelief prick my eyes. "How do I get to him?"

"I dunno . . . Let your heart burn?"

I deadpan. Study the seriousness of my sister's expression. Half expect her to up and tell me she's kidding. But no, she just keeps on staring at me in earnest. "This isn't some spicy romance novel."

Gabi grips my arms, forces me to look her in the eyes. "This isn't the time to go all soft. This is Hart we're talking about here, Ruby. This is what the ancestors were saying. I thought they were saying you would fall in love again, but what if that wasn't it at all?" Gabi's talking faster with each breath. "What if they were saying that to get closer to Hart, you'd have to, like, open your heart to Jameson? Like maybe he's the key. Or the door to Hart or whatever. Frick! It makes total sense now."

"Sense? That went out the window a long time ago." I feel hot and buzzy all over. I know my sister is right, maybe not in the details but in the concept.

I feel it under my gut. I feel it in the heat still on my lips from our almost kiss. “The ancestors could have just told you all this,” I growl.

“They speak in riddles a lot,” Gabi says nonchalantly. “It’s annoying but maybe they’re bored or something.”

I begin to mindlessly rinse the dishes. “Okay, Gabi,” I finally say as I make peace with what I have to do. A flurry of butterflies explodes in my stomach. “I’ll let Jameson in.”

“The ancestors were clear. You have to . . .”

I glare at her as if she’s the one forcing me do this. When in reality no one is making me do anything. This is my choice. To surrender my heart means not holding back. It means giving in to the impulses. It means . . .

Letting my heart burn, knowing it’s going to break. But I’ll do that and a hell of a lot more if it means even a single additional moment with Hart.

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-three
HART/JAMESON

~ One day before the end ~

I wake up at dawn.

As usual the first thing I do is scan my memories. It's like looking at an empty field you know is supposed to be filled with trees, but the trees have all been burned down and all that's left is smoke and ash.

I can't remember my old house or my room or what classes I took last year. I can't remember my dad's voice or the kid I saved from drowning. I swallow the panic, reaching for the only memory that matters. Ruby.

There she is with all those ladybugs flying around her. But now there's an ache I can't describe. An ache that tells me that time is running out. I can feel it. And then there's the way she hugged me, the way she almost kissed me. Or Jameson. A spark of envy ignites in my chest. No, I think. At some level she *had to know* it was me.

A small voice rises up inside: *But what if she didn't?*

Am I okay with that? With her moving on? With her being happy? Isn't that what I've always wanted for her? Even if it means I'm not a part of it, at least not as me? The answer comes in like a wrecking ball: yes.

By the time I shower and throw on some sweats, I get a text from Ruby.

You up

I'm smiling as I type, Hi

We should talk

I hesitate, my finger hovers. And then I tease, About . . .

About the almost kiss? About the undeniable energy between us? About the fact that I've got mere days to say goodbye to you?

I know Ruby. She's not about to put anything in writing that means something, especially not to Jameson. And she doesn't. The phone rings an instant later.

"Hey," I say, still wearing that smile. "You're up early."

"Hi," she says softly. "Can I see you today?"

I feel a hitch in my chest. She sounds different. But I can't put my finger on what it is. I'm about to say *Hell yes* when I remember my promise to Victoria to go to her recital. "Uh, sure but I have to go to a ballet thing first."

Ruby lets out a small laugh. "Sounds fun."

"Want to come?" I ask, totally unable to get the image of Ruby's glassy eyes, her full mouth hovering inches above my own, out of my mind.

"I have to work," she says, dragging out each word.

When the clock is ticking on your life, you don't have time to dance around. "Cancel work."

A sigh. "I promised Serena I'd cover her shift."

"How about after work? We could grab dinner or something?"

"I get off at seven."

As soon as we hang up, I realize that we are going to lose an entire day. So I shoot off another text to her. Don't make plans tomorrow.

You mean after school?

I mean cancel school.

I watch as the little dots blink across my screen, and I wonder what she's going to write back. *No? I've got a big chem test? I'm going for a perfect attendance award?* Turns out it's none of those. Only a little black heart that tells me *yes*.

Fifty-four

RUBY

I've called George three times, four if you count the predawn call that went straight to his voice mail. When he finally does call me back, I'm running across Pepe's Pizza Palace parking lot.

"You have the worst timing," I say, breathless.

"I'm not the one with the *emergency*."

"Well, if it really had been an emergency, I would have been dead by now."

"You sound very much alive."

I stop, catch my breath, squeeze my eyes closed. "You didn't tell me."

"I don't tell you a lot of things."

"About Jameson. About Hart. About all of it, and don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. I totally know you do."

He pauses. If it weren't for the zooming cars and the squealing kids inside the building, I bet I'd be able to hear his breathing. "Hey, Ruby?" His voice is soft, concerned. "I'm really sorry. I miss him too, but I have no idea what you're talking about."

My heart squeezes tight. "I saw all the signs. Josie? Telling me to hang with Jameson, that he's a nice guy? Suddenly you're friends when you couldn't stand him before?"

A couple of kids run past me, carrying gifts. Their parents trail behind, tapping away on their phones.

"Want to meet up later?" he asks.

“No, I want you to tell me why you didn’t tell me,” I demand, my frustration growing.

“Ruby, I . . . I’m clueless here. I mean, yeah, Jameson is cool. He’s changed since the coma. But I swear on my life, on my brothers’ lives, that I’m not keeping anything from you.”

Something collapses inside of me. I guess Gabi was wrong about George.

Ray’s standing at the door, motioning for me to come inside. I want to tell him I’m dealing with cosmic forces he couldn’t possibly understand, but I need this job if I’m going to get out of here next summer.

I tell George I’ll call him later, then drag myself into neon-pink hell.

Pepe’s Pizza Palace is crawling with kids from toddlers to ten-year-olds. That’s the range, anything older and you’re too cool for this place.

I’m on duty for three birthday parties with no help except for Kal, who is so shy and awkward I feel like any directive sends him crawling into his shell. So I hustle, running to each party, reminding myself what this is all for. And if Serena didn’t have her grandparents’ big anniversary fiesta, I’d send out the National Guard to drag her in here.

There’s a loud commotion from what sounds like squealing girls, and when I look up, I see a swarm of pink leotards and tutus. And then I see him in the center of it all. Jameson. My heart expands.

He’s waving at me as he ushers the ballet troupe inside.

“Ruby!” Victoria shouts, running over to me like we’ve known each other forever.

“Hey, you,” I say, smiling, nearly exploding with happiness that Jameson is here. And then I remember the tragic oversized polo I’m wearing and I want to crawl into my own skin.

“Hi,” he says. I study every detail of his face, searching for Hart in the cut of his jawline, the fullness of his lips, the blue of his eyes. Could his smile get any more dazzling?

“Hi,” I say, sure he can see my heart pounding out of my chest.

“You should definitely wear pink more often,” he teases.

Heat rushes to my face.

Lourdes pushes her way through the girls. She's wearing a giant tote on her shoulder. A tiny dog's head pokes out from inside. "Ruby, this is *not* a palace and I'd like to submit a formal complaint."

I laugh—it feels good, melts away the nervousness of seeing Jameson. Of trying to *see* any traces of Hart inside of him. How does this all work?

Before Jameson reaches me, he's pulled away to the register by two girls who must want to buy their tokens and pizza. He gives me a big shrug and a smile that makes my heart soar.

"Who's the pup?" I ask Lourdes, giving her a half hug.

"This is Dante," Lourdes sighs theatrically.

"He's so cute."

"He's a scoundrel."

Dante wiggles and whines.

"You have terrible timing," Lourdes tells him, and then she says to me, "Do you have a scoundrel restroom here?"

"Ha. No, but there's a small dirt lot out back."

Lourdes sighs. "Come on, Dante," she says as she heads out the back door, leaving me with Victoria, who I realize is still standing next to me even though her friends have disappeared.

"How was the recital?" I ask.

"Fun! I didn't trip once." She twirls before plopping down at the long picnic table that is the only one not covered in heaps of glitter or paint.

"I bet you're really good."

"I'm teaching Jameson how to plié." She grabs a crayon from the bucket in the center of the table and begins to draw on the white paper that covers it.

I laugh at the image of six-plus-foot Jameson trying to do ballet moves.

"Do you like my brother?" she asks, tongue sticking out as she draws a few stick-looking figures.

"I do," I say without hesitation.

Victoria nods like that's the answer she wanted to hear. "He likes you too."

Ray calls for me to deal with a howling kid stuck on the twisty tube slide. God, this is so humiliating. I've had to play 911 before, which usually means

crawling up the bottom of the slide and talking the kid down.

The kid is screaming so loud you'd think Freddy Krueger was in there with him. There's a line of kids waiting at the top, telling the kid things like, *Just let go. It's fun. You're ruining everything.*

I start to make my way over when my eyes get snagged on Victoria's drawing, on the letters she's writing over the tall stick figure that must be Jameson.

HART

"Ruby!" Ray shouts.

But I'm underwater. I'm so far out of my body I have no idea which way is up or down. I'm not even sure I can speak. "Vic . . . who . . . how . . . ?"

Victoria's eyes follow mine, which are fixed on the name. With a gasp, she throws her hands over it. "It's supposed to be a secret. Don't tell!"

The stuck child is howling now. I hurry over, climb the ladder, and motion for the other kids to move aside to the bridge. I'm shaking all over and my lungs are constricting and every cell in my body is buzzing on high alert.

Jameson is now at the foot of the slide, staring up at me. "You're not actually going to go in *there*," he shouts, grinning like he's daring me.

A memory flashes across my mind. Hart was nine, standing at the foot of a slide, shielding his eyes from the sun, saying those exact words. And I realize everything, every moment, every clue has been leading to this.

Everything seems to fade away in that moment. The carnival sounds, the bright flashing lights, the screaming kid. And that's when I see him.

Hart.

Fifty-five
HART/JAMESON

Ruby is marching toward me.

She looks like she's going to punch me or attack me.

I start to back up, but she's already here, dragging me out of Pepe's Palace, ignoring the shouts from her boss, the screaming kid on the slide she never rescued. We're halfway across the parking lot when I finally say, "Ruby? What's going on?"

She spins. Her dark eyes are laser focused on me. Her chest is moving like she can't find oxygen. She drops my hand. Steps closer, presses her hands into my chest, and closes her eyes. I can barely breathe.

"Ruby?"

In the next instant she fists my shirt with both hands, looks up.

She holds my gaze for a beat. Two. Three.

"There's only one way for me to know for sure."

"What are you talking about?"

She rises onto her toes. And then she presses her lips against mine.

Her mouth is soft, unsure. I want to kiss her back, but I'm terrified and I don't even know what's happening.

She pulls me closer, opens my mouth with her own. Every nerve in my body is on fire. I let go. I deepen the kiss, feel its heat, its desire, all the questions it's asking. I answer yes yes yes with every inch where our bodies touch. Her hands are in my hair, our erratic breathing matches the rhythm of the kiss now, frantic, out of control. As if this is the last kiss we'll ever have.

I want more of her.

All of her.

She breaks away first, catching her breath.

Slowly, I lift her chin. The tears in her eyes tell me that kiss wasn't for Jameson; it was for me. She knows.

My heart swells with so much love, I'm not sure I can contain it. And maybe I can't confirm who I am with words, but . . .

Still holding her close, I brush my lips against hers. "Do you know how long I've wanted to do that?"

She offers an almost smile, gently twists my hair in her fingers. Her eyes dreamy and far away. "I'm sorry it took me so long to figure it out."

OceanofPDF.com

Fifty-six

RUBY

We drive.

Jameson (Hart) glances at me from the driver's seat every once in a while, like he wants to make sure I'm still here. Fortunately, Lourdes agreed to take care of the troupe so we could get free. Our freedom also cost me my job, but really? I don't care even a little.

"So how does this work?" I finally ask, breaking the spell of silence that for me is filled with the memory of that kiss. The kiss that told me beyond a shadow of a doubt that Hart is inside of Jameson somehow. Gabi was right. I let my heart burn. I surrendered, and I saw, I understood. But now what?

"I wish I could tell you," he says.

"Then tell me."

"It doesn't work that way and please don't ask, because there are cosmic rules. And they really suck."

Is that what this has been? He's been bound by some universal law that prevented him from telling me the truth? I want so badly to know everything: how, when, why, where? But I know there's no use. So I settle on what we have. This moment. I nod, suddenly unsure of what to say or how to say it. "I . . . I don't even know where to begin."

He reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "Me neither, but maybe we don't have to. Maybe we can start from here."

Start from here. I like the sound of that. Still floating, still out of my own body, still wrapped in the warmth of Hart's kiss, I say, "So, where are we going?"

He throws me a side smile. “Does it matter?”

I settle back against the headrest and take a deep breath. “Doesn’t matter at all.”

The whir of the engine is the only sound as we wind down a dark, silent road.

Hearts will burn before they break.

I don’t want to wait for the breaking. I want to stay here like this forever. But something tells me . . .

His jaw tightens. “We don’t have loads of time.”

“How much?”

His Adam’s apple slides up and down. “No idea.” His gaze meets mine.

I lean against his shoulder. I press my hand against his chest, feel his heart beating.

We drive like that in silence, me never taking my eyes off of him. And even though it’s Jameson’s face I see, everything is Hart. He’s everywhere, in the light of Jameson’s eyes, in the soft curve of Jameson’s smile, in the breath of Jameson’s lungs, in the beat of his heart.

We find ourselves back at his place, walking down the cliff steps to the shore below. The moon is full, its light shining on the glittering dark sea.

He opens a shed and pulls out a blanket, spreads it out on the sand. “Want something to drink?” he asks.

“Do you have a kitchen in there?” I tease.

“Pretty much.”

“I’m good.”

We sit on the blanket and stare at the waves rolling in, listen to the rhythmic *shhhh* of their movement.

I lean against him, gripping his hand tightly. “How is any of this possible?”

He shrugs. “I wish I knew.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I don’t need to know. I just need to be here with you.”

He looks down at me, kisses me softly. I hate the turning earth, the time it marks. I hate the not knowing when the heartbreak will come. I press myself

closer to him, our mouths fumbling for more, our hands searching for what will never be enough.

We cling to each other, him on his back, me on top of him. Each kiss more urgent than the second before, the longing growing growing growing.

He breaks free, gazes up at me. His hands are twisted in my hair. His voice comes out hoarse. “Ruby.”

“We don’t know how long this will last,” I say.

His eyes search my face.

“I want to,” I say.

He pulls farther back, stares at me wide-eyed. He knows what I’m asking. We had sworn we’d wait until college. But now . . . if this is my only chance. It was always going to be Hart. It was, is, and forever will be—Hart.

“Ruby,” he says again.

I kiss him, run my hands over his chest, down to his waist. He lets out a low groan, kisses me deeper. His hand is under my shirt, the warmth of his hands sending a tingle down my spine. If I could, I would climb inside of him, mold us into one heart.

And then he breaks contact, rolls out from beneath me, leaving me cold.

“No, not like this,” he says.

“Why?” I choke out. “You just said we don’t have a lot of time and I want it to be you, Hart.”

His jaw twitches in the glow of the moonlight.

“Are you mad?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I want you, Ruby. Believe me. But . . .”

“But what?”

“I think we both need cold showers.”

“Look at me.”

He drops his head and looks up at me sideways, a smirk playing on his mouth. There it is. That smile that’s all Hart.

A sudden shame or maybe anger explodes in my chest. But I have no idea what to say right now.

He sighs. Waits a beat. Two. Then, he strokes his thumb across my cheek. “I want it to be right, the timing and the place and . . .” He scrubs a hand over

his face, looking miserable. “You absolutely have no idea how much I want you.”

I do know. I can hear it in his voice, see it in his eyes, in the strain of his body to keep a distance from me. “Is there something you’re not telling me?” I ask.

It’s his hesitation that tells me he’s holding back for a bigger reason than he’s saying. And truthfully? I’m emotionally spent. The last thing I want is to spend our time fighting.

“Yeah,” he says with a wicked grin. “I love you, Ruby Armenta.”

I collapse into his arms again. “Yeah, well, you aren’t so bad yourself, Hart Augusto.”

Fifty-seven
LOURDES

I have taken so many of Hart's memories, he must feel like a shell of himself. He doesn't complain. I admire him for that. I've allowed him to keep the first memory of her. It will be the last one I take. Call me sentimental. I've become fond of Hart. Of his tenacity, his spirit, his good nature.

But it's Ruby who has surprised me the most. She has discovered the truth. Even when it meant opening her wounded heart. And I feel like that deserves something. But what?

The stirring in me is a tiny thing at first, so small I shouldn't even notice, but I do and soon it feels like ever-widening ripples expanding across a placid lake. That's when the idea takes root. An idea I want to dismiss at the outset, but the more it settles deep within me, the more right it feels.

I will break a sacred rule to give Hart the thing he longs for. As he fights sleep, as she awakens, I will use the only power I have that is great enough to give him the ability to tell her the entire truth.

The one thing that ensures I will return to angel status after my human incarnation.

I will give up a single wing.

Fifty-eight
HART/JAMESON

~ Twelve hours before the end ~

Ruby's mom's out of town, so we headed back to her place, where we got to spend the whole night together, talking in whispers, laughing, wrestling, making out, looking at old photos, reading my songbook—staring at an unfinished song. At the words that she penned, the ones that break my heart:
When is this ache going to end?

I was too afraid to sleep. Too afraid to lose sight of her. She has no idea how much I wanted to grant her wish last night, to be her first. Her only. But it wouldn't be fair, because in a few days' time I'll forget her; I'll forget the most special moment of our lives and it will shatter her.

I understand now that our love was holding her back, was making shadows of her life, was causing her nothing but misery. I don't want that. I want her to be happy. I'll hold on as long as I can.

But even without sleep last night, when the dawn came, I felt more of my memory fading. I felt less like myself than I ever have. So I kept my eyes glued to Ruby. I watched her sleep, fought my own. I have this twisted sense of logic that as long as I can see her, I won't forget her.

Sunlight spills through the narrow gap in her drapes. She opens her eyes, half lidded, and smiles at me.

“You're still here.”

“Where would I possibly go, Rubes?”

She stretches and wraps her arms around me. “Only here with me. That’s all. You are officially not allowed to be out of my sight.”

I laugh softly. “I’m all in.”

“Tell me you love me,” Ruby says.

“I love you, Ruby Armenta.”

We stay like that for a few moments. Until Ruby says, “I wish you could tell me about that day . . . I just want to know everything.”

“It was awful.” The second the words are out of my mouth, I freeze. And then it’s like a cosmic door swings open inside of me. I decide to tread cautiously, to test the waters with the simplest statement: “I’m Hart Augusto.”

Ruby rises onto her elbow, staring at me. “How . . .”

I jump to my knees. My voice is all frenzy and terror and hope. Tears pool instantly. “I died saving that kid and it was awful and I tried to hold on, Ruby, I really did, but the waves were so big.”

On and on and on the words pour out of me. From beginning to end; it’s both exhausting and exhilarating, and for a moment I think this was all just a bad dream.

Ruby’s holding my hands in hers, listening, trembling, taking it all in. Sometimes she hugs me, or kisses me, or strokes my hair. When I’m spent, she quirks her mouth and says, “Lourdes is an angel?”

“She might be part demon,” I tease. God, I feel so free. So alive. I go on to tell her how Lourdes was punished, too, and that’s why she’s in human form.

“Wow . . . that must suck for her.” Ruby scowls, asks me a million questions; some are harder to answer than others. She takes it all in stride, each morsel, both good and bad. I can finally tell her my story, how much I’ve been holding back, why I couldn’t tell her the truth. It feels better than amazing, like I’m in the most incredible freefall with no danger of a hard landing.

“But George doesn’t remember anymore,” Ruby says, a slight tremble in her voice. She goes on to tell me about their recent conversation.

I nod, swallow. I knew he would lose his memory, and we considered a goodbye but then decided it would make it way too awful, so the last time we

parted, we just said, “See ya,” like we had so many times before.

I suddenly feel the same sense of deep loss I’ve felt since I came into Jameson’s body. An emptiness that can never be filled and even though I’ll forget my dad, George, Ruby, I think maybe that kind of pain is carried inside of you forever, even if you can’t name it. Somehow, somewhere your soul knows something is missing.

Ruby says, “I don’t want my memory wiped clean. I want to remember these days with you.”

“It’ll only hurt more.”

“The last time I lost you, there was no closure, no goodbye.” She puts on a stoic face I know is a façade but damned if she isn’t a pro at it. “This time I want to know what’s coming so I can make every second count.”

I grip her hand tighter. “Okay.”

“But why do you think you’re able to tell me all this now?”

“I don’t know, but let’s not question it. Let’s . . .”

“Eat!” she squeals. “I’m starving.”

I bundle her in an enormous blanket hug. “Or we could just stay like this.”

She wiggles her head free, pins her gaze on mine. “Hmm . . . wrapped in the sheets with Hart Augusto or food.” She quirks a playful brow. “As hot as you are . . . I could really go for some orange juice and hash browns.”

I lift myself off of her, faking a pout. “You think Jameson is hot?”

“You’re not Jameson.”

“But I’ve got his body.”

Ruby trails her hands down my arms adoringly. “Yes, you do.”

I shove a pillow over her face as she breaks into a fit of giggles. “Shh . . .” I warn, my own smile so wide my cheeks hurt. “You’ll wake Gabi.”

Ruby peers at me from under the pillow so I can only see half of her face. “Not a chance. She sleeps like the dead.”

We eat a quick breakfast and head out before Gabi wakes up.

With an entire day before us, we decide to hang all day at the beach. We ride bikes on the boardwalk, soak up the sun, bodysurf the freezing waves. I play the guitar. And when she asks me to play her one of my songs, I fumble.

Unable to remember. “I’d rather do this.” I lean over and kiss her. She happily returns the gesture.

I continue to tell her bits and pieces of my time as Jameson, like how I hate tortillas, which earns me a scowl and a gasp that make us both laugh.

“Is it weird?” she asks, shielding her face with her hand. “Being in his body?”

“It was at first, like stepping into an icy pool of water, but then I got used to it.”

“And Elle? Do you . . . feel anything? I mean, since you’re in Jameson’s body?”

I nod slowly. “But it’s not like you. It’s like this faraway memory of someone who is tied to this heart, but it doesn’t hurt.”

Ruby is silent, tracing her fingers through the sand.

“Are you mad?” I ask.

She tips her face toward me. “How could I be? He loved her a lot, and you have his heart.”

“But not his spirit, and isn’t that where the real love is?”

Ruby gives me a doubtful look. “What, are you a songwriter or something?”

She wants to go to the docks. To show me a boat named *Ladybug* that I pretend to remember.

I guess I sort of do. Or I feel it. Broken, blurry images skitter across my mind—my hands sanding a boat, dust floating in the air. And then they’re gone, and I call up the image of Ruby saving the ladybugs at the hardware store that first day I ever laid eyes on her.

“I called Miriam, asked her to dock *Ladybug*,” she says as we climb into the boat that feels both familiar and not. “Should we take her out?”

“I . . . I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” I lie, because I have no idea how to sail this boat that evidently, I bought and fixed up and don’t remember a damn thing about, and I don’t want her to know how many of my memories are gone.

“You’re worried it would be dangerous?” she asks.

I pull her onto my lap, wrap my arms around her. I hold her close, stroking the warm skin of her arms, her shoulders.

She kisses me, soft, then deeper. Our hands roam. I spin her onto her back, lie across her. Kiss her neck, press closer.

She whispers my name like a magical chant.

I force myself to stop. I sit up. My lips feel swollen. Her hair is tangled. The strap of her dress falls over one shoulder, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to surrender.

“This is way more dangerous,” I tease.

A few minutes later, we slip onto the bay shore. The sun is already going down and I feel an aching emptiness as I watch *Ladybug* rock on the water.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” Ruby asks with a lilt in her voice as she digs her bare toes into the sand.

“Ditch school again?” My eyes burn with fatigue, but I fight every inch of the exhaustion threatening to take me over.

She laughs. A sound that fills me up, that I never want to forget.

As the sky darkens, we fall back onto the sand. I hold her, stroking her back. If there was one thing that I could commit to memory, it would be the soft warmth of Ruby’s skin.

She curls back into my arms, whispering words I lose track of because sleep is coming. I struggle against the weight of it. Wondering if the message I left for her when she wasn’t looking will be enough, if it’s small enough, covert enough to go unseen by the universe. If our love can be the exception.

“Hart?” Her voice is far away now. My lids are heavy.

“Mm?”

I feel the vibration of her voice but don’t hear it as the dark consumes me. And the last thing I remember is the touch of her skin.

Fifty-nine

RUBY

*H*art sleeps for hours.

I study every inch of him in this new body. The sparse hair on his knuckles, the length of his arms and legs, the thickness of his eyebrows, the long dark lashes that trace his cheek. His face is so peaceful. I can hardly believe the miracle of it all. How we've gotten this second chance.

Sometime after midnight, Hart stirs. I trace my fingers along his chest, smiling, basking in the glow that he's here . . . with me.

Slowly, his eyes open. They're sleepy, dreamlike as they take me in.

"Hi, sleepyhead," I whisper.

He blinks, studies me. Then he ducks his head to the right with a look of sudden panic. Enough so that the moonlight catches the iris of his eyes. And I know.

Hart's gone.

Sixty
LOURDES

*H*art's last memory was the hardest one to take. He didn't want to let it go. Why do I feel like such a monster? All the taking of memories is complete. So is the transformation. And that means I've failed to prove myself. I won't be rejoining the angelic ranks. At least not until I complete an entire human lifetime.

I watch as he sleeps, his face so peaceful. It's better this way, I tell myself. He can't hurt over what he can't remember. I feel an ache deep inside of me as I realize that Hart won't remember me either.

A beam of light breaks through the dark. My time is up. I don't want to turn away from Hart, to face the death angel, the one who will take me to my next incarnation.

In those last seconds I find myself wishing for what all humans wish for . . . more time.

Sixty-one
JAMESON

Why is Ruby Armenta staring at me like that?

Why are we here? My memory comes slow, then rushed. We're friends now. Since my coma. She's been there for me. I don't remember the details, only that she's cool and she understands about Elle. I guess I told her. Maybe because I knew she'd understand. And then I remember I took Victoria to Pepe's. Ruby and I hung out after and ended up here. Why is everything so muddled?

"Why are you crying?" I ask her.

She wipes her face. "I'm not."

"Is it Hart again?"

She nods slowly, her gaze forceful.

"Yeah, I can't stop dreaming about Elle." I rub my chest. "It sucks so bad."

More nodding.

"This might sound weird but I feel way off, ya know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like someone drugged me and everything is kinda foggy and . . ." I shake my head.

Why is she looking at me so intensely?

"Did I do something wrong?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"You seem . . . mad at me."

“No . . . not mad . . . just . . . I dunno. Do you remember anything about today or last night?”

Oh, shit. What did I do now? “Did I do something awful?”

Ruby smiles unconvincingly. “Not at all.”

“Do I do this a lot?” I ask. “Forget big chunks of time?”

She clears her throat. “Tomorrow you’ll feel better.”

“You seem really sure about that. Is it because this has happened before?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, uh . . . thanks, man. For being here.”

“We should go,” she says, getting to her feet.

I stand, wipe the sand off my jeans. My gaze falls on a boat tethered to the docks in the distance, but even from here I can see the big red loopy letters: *Ladybug*. “That must be why,” I say, feeling like I just stepped into a movie scene starring someone else. Man, my memory is so fuzzy, almost dreamlike.

“Excuse me?”

I point toward the boat. “I had a dream about that.”

“The boat?”

“Not that exactly,” I say. “It was about this little girl and . . . some ladybugs.”

Sixty-two
RUBY

*I*t's been three days. And I'm alone in the memory of Hart, of the truth.

But how? My memory should have faded too. Or maybe the awful cosmic rules that have messed with George and now Hart have somehow bypassed me.

Love doesn't need more than one heart.

And Gabi being Yoda Gabi, knows that the event the ancestors warned about has happened. I can't bring myself to share the details because they feel private, a memory for just me and Hart. But I do tell her that I got to say goodbye. And as crushed as I am, I'm also so incredibly happy I got that last day with Hart.

School is the worst of it. Every day I dread seeing the not-Hart Jameson. The one who treats me like the good friend I am. And every once in a while, I see a glimpse of what might be Hart. An incline of the head, a spark in the eyes, a clenching of the jaw. And then it vanishes before I can take hold of it.

Those are the moments I feel a sob wanting to break free from my chest. And all I want to do is run to him, to hold him close, to make his heart remember me.

The last bell rang thirty minutes ago and I'm in the library, looking for a book for a research project I have to do on Napoleon. I travel the aisles in a fog.

"Ruby?"

I look up to find Lourdes standing at the end of the aisle.

“Hey,” I manage, startled to see her. I figured she went back to wherever she came from. So why is she still here? “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Hart told me everything.”

She nods. “I figured he would. I wanted him to be able to give you the truth. It was the least I could do.”

I shudder, trying to think clearly. “I still remember and . . . why?”

“I don’t know all the intricacies of the universe, but I imagine it has something to do with your love, with your heart, with your ability to endure the suffering to see the truth.” Lourdes smiles. “The universe loves victories of the heart.”

“So, I get to keep him, my memories of Hart?” I never thought I could feel such relief, such comfort. When I first lost Hart, my memories of him felt cruel, and now? They feel like the greatest gift in the world.

“Seems so, but you don’t have to. If you want—”

“No!” I blurt. “I’d never give them up.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“And what about you?” I ask. “What’s going to happen now?”

Lourdes smiles. “I bought a bit more time, but . . .” She waves a hand through the air too casually for the moment. “Enough of that. I just wanted to tell you goodbye.”

I feel a sudden desperation to make her stay. “I still love him. Even if . . .”

“I know,” Lourdes says. “And at some level, he knows too.”

I cling to her words as she turns to leave. “Wait!” I call out.

She spins back, and a look of wonder flashes in her eyes.

“Can I ever bring him back?”

At first she says nothing, and in the nothing I feel hope. At least for a few seconds until she offers me this: “I’m afraid not, Ruby.”

. . .

When I make my way to the nearly empty parking lot, I pull up short. George and Jameson are sitting on George’s tailgate.

They seem to be actual friends now and I have to wonder if at some level they know. I mean, they're not super close, but they're hanging together and that makes me genuinely happy.

They don't notice me, but I watch as they talk and laugh. And then I see Josie. She's all over Jameson, bouncing around the bed of the truck, trying to lick his face, which only makes him laugh harder. He tosses a ball and Josie leaps down and runs after it, directly toward me.

The ball rolls to my feet. I glance up. Jameson stares at me for a beat or two. I feel lost. Alone. My pulse begins to race. And then a smile spreads across his mouth and he waves as Josie collects her goods and races back to him. He rubs her between the ears and I feel a painful pressure in my chest. Sweet Josie still knows Hart's in there. She still senses him.

In that moment I know that I'll never give up on him. Ever. I have to find a way through. I'm just not sure how yet.

• • •

At home, I distract myself by curling up on my bed with my computer to zone out on some (any) show, and my phone rings. It's Serena. "Please come!" she begs before I can even say hello.

She's talking about the homecoming dance, which was postponed a week so that the gym's renovations would be complete. "I'm already in my pj's." It's a terrible excuse. We both know it. I put her on speaker to free up my hands to choose a movie.

"Ruby! Besides, you need to tell me if you like the dress I'm wearing."

"Send a pic."

"If you don't come, I'll come over and drag you out of the house."

I hear George's voice in the background. "George just walked in," Serena says while I'm halfway considering. "And he says to get your ass to the dance."

Gabi waltzes into my room, carrying an armful of clothes. "Help me pick something."

Serena shouts, "Tell her to come, Gabi!"

Gabi laughs. Tosses the outfits on my bed. She offers a not-so-believable “Come,” then, “Can you help me pick?”

“Fine!” Serena cries.

When I don’t budge, she adds, “Jameson will be there.”

I decide right then that staying home isn’t doing me any good. Plus, I’ll get to see and study Jameson, maybe try to figure out a way to get him to remember. Yeah, it’s going to hurt like hell. But if Hart could do it, if he could wait for me all those weeks, then I can too. No matter how impossible Lourdes tells me it is.

“Fine!” I shout. “I’ll meet you guys there in an hour. Just let me get cleaned up.”

Once I help Gabi choose a black minidress so she can head out with Inez, I go to my own closet and stare at my choices.

Then I see it.

Hart’s songbook I set on the shelf that is at eye level, and it’s staring me down.

With a sigh, I take it out, sit on my bed, and flip through it. I guess I should have known he had already lost some of his memories by the way he couldn’t play these songs. But I didn’t want to see any of the forgetting. Only the remembering.

Rain begins to patter across the roof.

I turn the last page. To Hart’s unfinished lyrics.

Everything in me goes stiff.

There’s a note under the last lyric that wasn’t there the other night.

Ask me to finish the song.

Sixty-three
JAMESON

The music is blaring so loud all I can think about is getting out of here. Maybe I can chill at home, play some guitar. It's still so wild to think I can do that. That a coma can wham bam give you a talent like that. I mean, I admit it. The guitar, the piano, the music . . . it's all been pretty calming. It helps a lot when the memories of Elle are too much.

One of the guys is yakking about something. Bright lights flash across the darkened auditorium. People are dancing in thick groups. My head is pounding.

And then I see her.

Ruby Armenta. She's soaking wet, walking toward me with a look of sadness on her face. Something tugs at my heartstrings.

"Dude, what's her prob?" one of the guys asks as she walks straight toward me, her eyes never leaving me.

A few are laughing.

"Back off," I growl.

I'm walking toward her; I need to make sure she's okay. She's gripping something in her arms.

"Come outside." She spins back around. I follow.

The wind is whistling. The rain is coming down in sheets. We stand beneath the awning. "Ruby, what's wrong?" I ask.

She puts the book in my hands. "The last page."

I take a look. I see a note under Hart's lyrics. *Ask me to finish the song.*

"What is this?" The lashing wind is spraying the rain into our faces.

“Will you do it?” Her drenched hair clings to her head and shoulders.

I don’t know what to tell her. I can tell she’s messed up over Hart, but this is too trippy.

“Ruby, I . . . I can’t.”

“Jameson,” she says, stepping closer, never breaking eye contact. “I’m begging you. If you do nothing else for me ever again, I only ask for this. Just try. Please.”

“It won’t bring him back,” I nearly shout over the rain. “And Elle’s not coming back either. We have to accept that.”

She takes my hand in hers, squeezes. “Okay,” she says so softly I can barely make out the word. Then she reaches up and kisses me softly on the cheek. Whispers in my ear, “If you’re still in there, finish the song.”

And then she turns and runs back into the rain.

The music from the dance booms loudly, like it’s trying to compete with the storm. I stare at the door, then look back into the rain, and decide it’s time to go home.

I fold my arms over the book and rush to my car.

When I get home, I shower, tug on some sweats, and fall onto my bed. I think about Ruby, about how desperate she seemed. Sitting up, I snag the book from the end of my bed and pull out the guitar. I play the notes, try to sing the verse:

*The ocean rushes by so fast
Moonlight splinters through the mast.
Our hands stretch tall toward the stars.
Oh, yes. Yes, the future is ours.*

Why does Ruby want me to finish Hart’s song? Why does she think I *can*? Just because I can play the guitar doesn’t mean I’m a songwriter now.

I play around with the notes, the music. There’s something about it. Something I can’t let go. It reminds me of practicing for a big game. I’m never ready to leave the field, I always want to give it one more go, one more

run, one more throw. An hour passes. Two. Sometime after midnight, I decide to give up. I strum one last string. That's when it happens.

Words rise up in me. From nowhere.

Frantically, I search for a pen, write the lyrics, scratch them out, begin again until the song is staring back at me, telling me to play it.

So I do. And with each note, my heart floods with images, memories.

Next come the footsteps. I look up. Lourdes is standing in the doorway.

I remember the angel.

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty-four

HART

“Lourdes?”

She blinks. Studies me. Comes over, slowly like she’s approaching a serial killer. She stands before me, no longer in human form, her eyes searching my face. My head feels fuzzy, my thoughts jumbled. The last thing I remember is Ruby coming to the dance, asking me to finish the song. And then it hits me like a hundred-foot wave. The message to her worked, my music was somehow the road to the truth.

“You told me to leave that note for Ruby,” I say as the memory unfolds.

She nods. “I understand now.”

“Understand what?”

“How you and Ruby can remember.”

I’m still not following.

Lourdes says, “I was punished to become human.”

“Yeah, I know all that.”

“But I learned about true love because of you and Ruby, the kind that gives and gives and asks nothing in return. The kind that is willing to let go.” She looks away, then back to me.

“But . . . I thought you were going to be a human again since you didn’t prove yourself before the transformation.”

She waits a moment like she’s collecting herself. “I did prove myself.”

My heart jumps. “How?”

“I . . . I . . .”

Why is she having such a hard time spitting out the truth?

“It’s okay,” I tell her gently like the words could shatter the moment. “You can tell me.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

Her eyes burn with a violet light as she whispers, “I gave up my wings.”

I’m not sure I heard her right. “Huh? What do you mean? Weren’t they going to vanish once you became human?”

“Yes, but they were my connection, my promise to return to heaven.”

“And without them . . .” I can hardly grasp the sacrifice she’s made. “But why?”

“They were the biggest sacrifice I could make. And the first one,” she goes on, “was to give you the ability to tell Ruby the truth.”

The shock is enough to make my knees nearly buckle, and then I realize that’s why I was able to spill everything to Ruby.

“And the second wing?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“When the death angel came for me,” she continues, “I asked to use my last wing to give you back your memory.”

I’m filled with so many emotions right now, I’m not sure how to breathe. The angel gave up her wings . . . for me?

She smiles shakily, avoiding my gaze as she stares at the wall, the floor, anywhere but me, which is fine because I feel like I’m melting into the floor. “I was told that if you could find your own way back, then the deal could be struck. What they didn’t know,” she says, and there’s that devilish grin I love so much, “was that you had already planted the seed with that note in the songbook.”

“Which was your idea,” I remind her as the memory simultaneously surfaces.

“Yes, well, I *am* rather brilliant,” she declares. “But you were right about something too. Music *is* more than a body or a voice—it’s a feeling, it’s spirit, it’s everything. It was what paved the path for you to come back.”

I feel like I’m outside of myself, weightless, a speck of dust that could blow away any second. Then I come back to the only thing that matters in this moment. “Lourdes, I can’t . . . let you give up your wings for me.”

“Don’t look so glum,” she says, widening that devilish grin. “Apparently the purity of my self-sacrifice was enough to earn my way back into the angel ranks.”

I can’t help it. I rush over and swing Lourdes off her feet, spin her around. I think she might rip my head off but she laughs, actually laughs. And in the spinning and the laughing I see a shadow on the wall. Two expansive wings emerging from her back. When I put her down, I’m out of breath.

“Goodbye, Hart.”

“That’s it?”

“Aww . . . you’re going to miss me.”

I laugh. “Not as much as you’re going to miss me.”

Her mouth curves up. “I have a favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you take care of Dante?”

I pull Lourdes into a bear hug, wishing I didn’t have to let her go. I admit it. I’ve gotten used to her, her weird humor, her annoying personality, the goodness that radiates from her, and there’s something about her leaving that makes me feel like I’m truly on my own now.

“I really am going to miss you,” I say.

She steps back, eyes trained on me. “You are a very stubborn, exasperating human. Hart? Why do you look so sad?” she asks. “I just told you that you won the lottery.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I say, “You’ll never know how grateful I am to you, or how lucky I feel that I got to know you . . .” Man, this is so hard to say without sounding like a thankless dick, but . . . “My dad . . . I just . . . I’m going to miss him every single day.”

“You will,” she says, “and he’ll miss you. But, Hart, this is the way of things. For every loss there is a gain and for every gain there is a loss. This is part of being human.”

Still doesn’t make it any easier. “Are you going to give me the universal balance lecture again?”

“No, I’m going to tell you that the human life is a blink.” She places a hand on my arm. “You will see your dad again.”

I take it in, try to process the vastness of it with my mortal mind, but it's impossible. Still, for now, it has to be enough.

"Since I'm doing you a favor with the scoundrel," I say, "can you do me a favor?"

She sighs dramatically. "MORE?"

"Can you just make sure Jameson and . . . Elle . . . that they're okay?" It's the first time I've ever said her name that I don't feel a snag in my chest. Like this body, this heart is finally mine.

"I knew you would ask."

"And?"

"Let's just say you'd like the outcome."

OceanofPDF.com

Sixty-five

RUBY

I'm woken up by my buzzing phone.

It's Miriam.

"Hey," I say, sitting up, rubbing my eyes, checking the time: seven a.m.

"Sorry to call so early, but we have a buyer for the boat," she says. "And he insisted I call you first thing. Do you still want to sell?"

My heart squeezes. I hadn't made the decision until this very moment.

"I . . . I can't."

"He's offering double what you asked."

I sit up, frown. "Why?"

"He also asked if he could get a tour of the boat."

Irritation rears its head. "He sounds like an . . ." I stop myself from telling Miriam that her buyer is an ass. But now I'm curious. "Who is it?"

"Jameson Romanelli."

Silence grips me by the throat.

"Oh, and one more thing, he was very clear about this. If you decide to sell, he asked that you meet him at the boat in thirty minutes. Galling, I know. As if I'm his secretary . . ." Miriam continues on with her list of annoyances. But I'm no longer listening.

I don't even take time to shower. I brush my teeth, tug my unruly hair into a messy ponytail, throw on some sandals, and race to the docks so fast, I'm sure only three breaths have passed by the time I get there.

Ladybug is floating at the far edge of the docks, looking like her beautiful self in the fresh morning sun. I scan the length of her, looking for him. Just

then Jameson comes up from below deck, wearing board shorts and a T-shirt.

He tugs off his shades. Stares at me with an intensity that is so familiar my heart leaps into my throat.

What if . . . I'm dreaming?

"Are you going to come over here and say hello, or do I have to carry you on board?"

I can't move. Terror holds me so tight that I don't know if I have room for hope.

He takes a step. Then another. "I finished the song."

The dam breaks. I'm running. He's already there at the boat's edge. He lifts me into his arms and onto the deck. Cupping my face, kissing me. A million tiny explosions detonate all over my body.

Hart. Hart. Hart.

I grip him tight, pull him closer, so close I can feel his heart hammering in his chest.

"Please tell me," I manage between kisses. "Tell me . . ." Breath. "It's not . . ." Kiss. "For a day." I can't bear to think I'd have to let him go. Not without a lifetime lived between us.

"I think it's for longer than that." With his hands holding my face, he looks down at me, his eyes sweep across my mouth. "Do you want to take her out?"

Still clinging to him, I say, "All the way to the horizon."

A few minutes later, we're sailing across the sea, and the cool wind bursts against the sails with a clean snapping sound. I'm so overwhelmed by the gift of it all I can't cry or laugh or do much of anything but keep my eyes locked on Hart. The boy I've loved for more than half of my life, the boy who opened my stubborn heart more than once, the boy I never want to let go. A sudden bliss rises up inside of me, slow at first, then faster until it feels like an otherworldly euphoria I might never feel again.

Hart sits on the bench with his guitar, strumming mindlessly like he's looking for the right note. "My voice isn't the same," he says.

"I don't care."

He lets the music come, the slow notes and the words.

*The ocean rushes by so fast,
Moonlight splinters through the mast.
Our hands stretch tall toward the stars.
Oh, yes. Yes, the future is ours.
It's always been Ruby, she's always been mine.
In dark stormy weather and bright sunlit skies,
The color of memory lives deep in my heart.
It's always been Ruby, it's been her from the start.*

After he's done, he glances up slowly. The sun catches the gleam in his eye and all I see is Hart.

"It's perfect," I tell him.

He barks out a laugh that comes from way down in his belly. "So about payment for the boat."

I walk over and pull him to his feet. "I heard you're willing to pay double."

"Triple."

I think about the ancestral message: *Hearts will burn before they break.* And I realize the broken part doesn't have to be the end. You can mend and heal again.

The boat rocks gently.

"What if you disappear again?" I ask.

"Then you'll make me remember."

I press my lips to his throat. His pulse is calm, steady. Then I look up, our eyes meet. "I sort of love you, Hart Augusto."

He grips me tighter, his mouth begins to move, to form a silent word, *Always.*

And then I realize that just maybe, always really is forever.

Sixty-six
LOURDES

*I*t's been eighteen months.

They've been traveling the world like they said they would. They fight over insignificant things like toothpaste caps and book reviews, spicy foods and politics. He annoys her. She unnerves him. They laugh more than they fight. They've been to the Chilean Salt Flats, Iceland, and a small island off of Portugal.

The summer is nearly over. They'll both be going to UCLA. He didn't give up Stanford or football for her. He gave it up because it was never his dream to begin with. His dad was furious, but in the end the two came to a sort of agreement, or at least one where they didn't have to be at odds all the time.

I watch as they cross the rickety bridge stretched over a wide chasm. He's nervous, unsure, wondering why he ever agreed to follow her. She's happy, confident, wondering how she got so lucky.

"I get to pick the next vacation," he calls out as he steps gingerly over the wooden planks, keeping his focus on Ruby's back.

"Okay. Like where?"

"Somewhere not a thousand feet in the air."

"Hart, you stand up to giants on the field."

"Yeah, but my feet are on the ground."

"Stop being a chicken," she calls over her shoulder.

"I'm not chicken," he argues, white knuckling the rope. "I just really don't want to break this chicken neck."

She laughs. Circles back, takes his hand in hers. “I’ll catch you if you fall.”

He believes her. Kisses the tip of her nose.

Then releases his hand from the rope, holds her waist. “I won’t fall.”

She wraps her arms around him, smiling. “I believe you.”

As for me? I’m a believer too.

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgments

I don't have favorites. Honestly. But if I did, this book would be on the list. It's a story that haunted me for years, one that felt as if it was always fully formed just waiting for the right moment. I'm grateful to those who carried this book through its many iterations. A dozen abrazos to my editor, Tiara Kittrell—you've got the sparkle every author dreams about. Thank you to the entire Razorbill team for your creativity and unyielding dedication: Casey McIntyre, Simone Roberts-Payne, Rūta Rimas, Jayne Ziemba, Misha Kydd, Olivia Russo, Bri Lockhart, Lyana Salcedo, Felicity Vallence, James Akinaka, Kristie Radwilowicz, Rebecca Aidlin, and Lisa Schwartz.

To my agent, Holly Root—what can I say? You are the very best. The end.

I will forever be grateful to my family—for your love and loyalty and for listening to this writer's deadline/story/character/life woes. I owe you all the chocolate in the world.

And to my readers: Thank you from the bottom of my heart for turning the pages and taking this journey with me.

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

J.C. Cervantes is a *New York Times* bestselling author of books for children and young adults. Her books have appeared on national lists, including the ABA New Voices, B&N's Best Young Reader Books, and Amazon's Best Books of the Month. She has earned multiple awards and recognitions, including the New Mexico Book Award and the Zia Book Award. She currently resides in the Land of Enchantment with her family, three spoiled dogs, and a lifetime collection of books. When she isn't writing, she is haunting bookstores and searching for magic in all corners of the world.

OceanofPDF.com



Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN YOUNG READERS

***What's next on
your reading list?***

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this
author.**

Sign up now.

OceanofPDF.com