

# The Other Year

A Novel

Rea Frey



*The Other Year*  
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*For my daughter  
in every life*



HARPER  
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# Summer



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## Prologue

THE RED FLAG RIPPLES IN THE WIND.

Olivia is all business, her body primed for the impending crush of waves. She squints up at me, as if to ask permission:

*If I go in alone, will I be okay?*

I nod. Olivia knows her boundaries. She passed her swimming test at the YMCA three years ago, and she will stay close to shore. Other adults and children dapple the ocean like buoys, towheaded, brunette, shaven—it's all one nation in the arms of the sea. Olivia glances down at a partially washed away sandcastle, mildly curious, then retrains her focus on the ocean.

“The current is strong, Liv. Stay close, okay?”

We've talked extensively about how to swim parallel to shore if she is ever tugged out or gets spun up in a wave from the undertow. I gaze at her, brown toes flexing against the pliable sand, chest aimed at the water, her defiant chin angled toward a flawless sky. I love the way she announces herself to the ocean, the respect she has for its ruthless power. While she still makes occasional comments about the salty air, the stench of fish, or the way the coarse sand scrubs her ankles, she adores the water as much as I do.

Liv bobs her head, eyebrows scrunched, her mind already inside the thrashing waves that churn against the beach, receding in a froth of clotted, white foam. I delight in her anticipation, wishing I'd worn my bathing suit too, but we'd come straight from the car instead of heading to the rental house first. She'd managed to wriggle into her suit in the back seat and had been so impatient to get to the water, she hadn't even closed the car door.

The first wave smacks her square in the chest. Her squeals send a swift punch of joy straight to my heart. It melts the tension from the overly long drive, the way we bickered about nothing. Mostly she'd stayed crooked over her iPod touch while we waited out a horrific accident, which resulted in an extra hour of travel time. When we'd passed the hunk of disfigured steel on the highway, like some god-awful modern art installation, I'd told Olivia to look away. But I hadn't. The image of the flattened truck was seared into my mind, the blood splatter along the pavement—still fresh—the endless ambulances, and cop cars. I am still processing it, hoping whoever was in that truck is okay, but also knowing that almost no one could survive a crash like that.

Olivia waves. I wave back and take one picture too many as her limbs buck and dip in and out of the ocean. I send a quick photo to my best friend, Jason, who arrives tomorrow with his daughter, Ayana. He sends back a heart emoji and a quick line.

*I can't wait to be there with you.*

The sudden sexual tension between us floats through my mind—after one recent admission from Jason wondering what it would be like as more than just friends—and I begin to panic. We have never crossed any physical lines, and I haven't dated since my divorce, but something has definitely shifted, and I'm nervous to see what might happen when we are alone, on vacation.

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I text the same photo of Liv to my mom, then post one on Instagram of my own sandy feet, which my ex-husband, Michael, insisted evolved from hobbits. I smile from the memory, all the ways he used to make me laugh. The smile vanishes as I think of his text message yesterday. He's wants to talk.

After not seeing him for over a year, as he's been on an archaeology dig in Israel, I know, in typical Michael fashion, he will want to jump right back into Liv's life, even though his absence has left a painful residue for us both. Michael is either all in or completely wrapped up in his work. He's never been able to juggle being a full-time father and an archaeologist, something that has crushed me time and time again and disappointed Liv.

While he's been gone, I've been rethinking our parenting arrangement; though we technically split custody, Liv lives with me. He's always on the road, always on a dig, something we used to embark on together before I became a mother and decided to take a steadier, more stable job in Nashville. Michael didn't want to move from our life in Virginia, didn't want anything to change, but he did it for me. However, once we moved, he was constantly on the road. It got to the point where I told him I didn't want a husband *sometimes*; I wanted him all the time, and he just couldn't make that promise to me. To Liv. To us. My body tenses as I replay that painful decision to separate, then eventually divorce. Becoming a single mother changed my life completely. For Michael, it has changed nothing.

Now, as the water rushes over my feet, tugging and receding, I toe a sand dollar free, rinse it clean, and wag it in the air at Liv.

"Hold on to it for me, Mama!" She wipes the salt from her eyes and dives under again.

I pocket the treasure and check the time. It's our yearly tradition to order pizza and salads for dinner on our first night of vacation, and

the delivery is expected in less than an hour. I'm eager to get to the beach house, air it out, and unpack. I stalk the sand, watching Liv float, dive, and pivot.

Though this year has been tough, with demanding clients and huge projects that I must oversee, I've made a vow to be a more present parent. As an agricultural engineer, so much of my career has been spent in the field, designing equipment, developing methods for land preparation, planting, and harvesting. With the promise of a promotion on the horizon, which would mean more computer work and less field work, I promised Liv I would be more available. I could sign up for PTA meetings. I could chaperone field trips and get to know the other moms at school. I could finally start the garden that Liv has been begging for but hasn't happened yet because I'm always so busy with work.

Being more available means a lot to Liv, and I want to make her happy. I know that childhood is fleeting; soon she will be in fifth grade. There will be boys and hormones and battles between friends. I'm already witnessing her childlike traits disappear, her identity as my little girl transforming into someone else. I don't want time to pass us by.

She erupts from the waves every few seconds, her orange, long-sleeved one piece slightly too large. She is growing so fast and caught between sizes. Her crotch sags with collected sand, but surprisingly, she doesn't complain. After a year of no vacations due to my intense work demands, this is Olivia's first, and she isn't going to waste a second of it.

When my phone dings in my pocket, I answer, one eye trained on Liv while scanning for shark fins, the other on the message. It's from Michael, as if by thinking about him I've conjured his text.

*We really need to talk, K. Call me when you can, por favor, mi amor.*



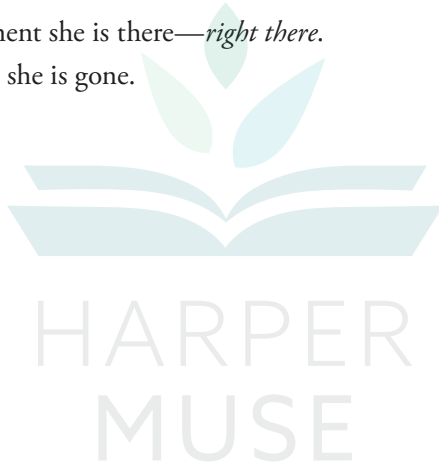
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I sigh. *Mi amor*. Though we are divorced, there is still so much love between us. I miss him. I miss us. I miss being a family. I text back a reply that we are on vacation and I will connect with him when we're back in two weeks. Disgruntled, I retrain my focus back on the ocean, back to Liv.

The waves climb and crash. Other children scream and play, tossing tiny footballs to each other or riding boogie boards on healthy waves. I search for Olivia's unruly brown curls, her bright bathing suit, that oversized rainbow on the chest. My heart seizes, and I take a step toward the water.

One moment she is there—*right there*.

The next, she is gone.



# 1

INSTEAD OF SCREAMING HER NAME, I SCAN THE SEA, SURE she's just drifted and will pop to the surface, algae braided through her hair like ropes.

After seconds of not seeing her, I step into the water until it drenches my pant legs, my eyes combing the sea from left to right.

As if on cue, Olivia explodes out of a wave, her limbs arched like a starfish. Her emergence sends an electric assault through my chest, followed by relief at her exuberance.

*She is fine.*

I motion for her to stay closer to shore. I stuff the phone into my fanny pack and delight in Liv's manic, practiced movements, wishing once again that I had my bathing suit. I glance behind me, suddenly aware of the few families still on the beach for the day. Under my jumpsuit, I wear a sports bra and boy shorts, both black, both luckily resembling a bathing suit. I step out of my clothes and crumple the jumpsuit on a nearby dry patch of sand, then wade in after her, the water an icy shock against my skin.

"Mama!" Olivia shrieks and slaps the top of the water with her

tiny, open palms. “You’re coming in?” She blinks and wipes water from her eyes, as we forgot her goggles back in the car.

In response, I dive under a wave and swim to her, my limbs jarring awake after so many hours in the car. I grip her middle. She loops her spindly legs around my waist. She is slippery and warm. We look so alike and nothing alike—Michael is Mexican, I am white, and Olivia is a perfect blend. She has pieces and parts of my family and his. She has my family’s Eastern European cheekbones and strong chin; she has Michael’s wavy, dark hair; dark skin; chocolate eyes; and a gap between her front teeth. I kiss her wet nose and smooth her unmanageable hair, now damp and flat, from her face. “*Hermosa*,” I say. *Beautiful*. Though Michael hasn’t been as present in her life, I try to work in Spanish as much as I can.

“*Tú también, Mamá.*” *You too.*

I praise her flawless pronunciation, and she offers me a generous smile. Freckles trample her nose and cheeks. Another trait from me. A notched scar mars her right eyebrow from when she walked straight into our dining room table as a toddler, which resulted in two stitches above her eye. What used to embarrass her, she now embraces, as she’s reached that age where scars are cool.

The water seems to pick up in its late-afternoon ferocity, and I keep my eyes out for shark fins, always aware of whose territory we are really in. We swim and float, and then finally ride a wave all the way to shore. Olivia’s bathing suit slides up to reveal a perfect half-moon of her butt cheek. I laugh and motion for her to fix it, emerging from the water refreshed, just as the flag changes to double red and lifeguards blow their whistles, commanding everyone out of the water. I gather my clothes, shimmy into my jumpsuit, and the two of us walk back to the car, without towels.

Olivia chats a mile a minute on the short drive to the rental house.

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We pause at a four-way stop for an ambulance. It careens around us, sirens blaring.

"I hope the people are okay," Liv says once it passes.

"Me too." I think again of the accident we saw on the way down, the dismantled truck, crushed like a flimsy toy.

Once we park, Olivia jumps out. "Look! A chicken!" Olivia points to a beautiful rust-colored chicken waddling down the cobblestone path of our short block. "Can I pet it?"

I shrug, unsure if chickens carry diseases like birds. I once saw a documentary where people groomed their chickens and entered them into competitions for money. Olivia, who adores all living creatures, reaches out her hand, but the chicken ignores her and keeps clucking and walking in the opposite direction.

"So cute," she says on a sigh. "Could we get a chicken for a pet?"

"I don't think so."

I catch her side profile, not for the first time registering just how much she's changed this past year. For starters, she's growing boobs. There will soon be locked doors, training bras, and a demand for privacy. No more joint baths or Liv running carelessly through the house in her underwear. That fleeting window of parent-child intimacy shrinks by the day, and Liv runs hot and cold—one minute treating me as someone she's always turned to, and the next, shutting me out completely. And Michael is missing it all. I loop an arm around her shoulder and squeeze tight.

"I need a pet, Mama. Every girl needs a pet. It's part of my hero's journey."

"Your hero's journey? What part would that be?"

"The call to adventure. Duh," she says. "Plus, if we got a chicken, they could lay fresh eggs, right?"

"True. But we also have coyotes and foxes that aren't too kind to

chickens.” I ruffle her damp hair. “Liv, I know having a pet sounds fun, but they’re a lot of responsibility too.”

She rolls her eyes and sighs. “You always say that.”

“Because it’s true.”

At the door to *Here Comes the Sun*, I fiddle with the key, admiring the renovated rental. Inside, Olivia bolts upstairs, clearly annoyed with me about the pet conversation. This is the first time I’ve rented the house longer than a week, and while I initially had second thoughts about being gone so long, Jason and Ayana offered to keep us company (and pay for half, which helps). Plus, it’s my fortieth birthday, so I figure it’s worth the splurge.

When I hear the shower crank upstairs, I find a spare towel and pat myself dry while I assess the living room. A comfy sectional opens to an oversized coffee table, fanned with local magazines. The open kitchen sits beyond, cut in an L shape with all new appliances. The twenty-foot dining table sits to the right, loaded with chairs for renters with large families. After making a quick grocery list and checking the app for the pizza delivery, I walk up to the third-floor primary suite and rinse off in the steam shower, then head back to the kitchen to chill a bottle of wine. I take the opportunity before Olivia comes back downstairs to slip onto the front porch and ease into a rocking chair without my phone.

Even though I am on vacation, I’ve already received at least twenty-five emails from my boss with the subject line, “Don’t you dare respond until vacation is over, but . . .”

As if I won’t read them. As if any workaholic unplugs enough to not constantly worry about the never-ending to-do list. I’m currently managing three big project builds, and my boss has implied that if all goes well, I could be looking at a promotion. While I’ve always been career-driven, once I became a single parent, it became

mission critical. Though Michael helps with child support, most of the monetary responsibility falls on my shoulders, and I want to give Liv everything I can, everything I never had growing up.

It has taken me years to get where I am, and though no one is telling me I have to prove myself, the innate need is always there, especially working in a predominantly male field. Though most companies have gone remote since the pandemic—a wonderful gift for single parents everywhere—I still go into the office several days a week, just to have in-person meetings with my boss. I show up to project sites regularly, and I even work weekends if there's a client issue.

Much like Michael, I've never established proper boundaries on my climb up the ladder, and I've paid for it in numerous ways: no time for romance, a shameful lack of presence with Liv, and various house projects or goals that never seem to get done because I'm too busy working.

And though I've carved out two entire weeks away—weeks that I've more than earned—there's always that nagging feeling that I'm not doing enough, that my team will drop the ball in my absence, or worse, that someone else might do a better job and my expertise will become obsolete. It's unnerving to try to maintain the balance of being a single parent with a demanding career, and for once, I just want to tuck the deadlines away and enjoy a vacation. I've vowed that this year will be the year that I strike the balance; that I stop trying to prove myself in the office and that I carve out more quality time with Liv.

Which starts now.

I blink into the waning sunlight, coughing as the neighbor next door lights up a cigarette. I close my eyes, bracing myself for the next two weeks. So much of this vacation hinges on how it all goes these

first few days: Olivia not getting sunburned, not having irritated eyes from her goggles, not getting overly tired, not getting stung by a jellyfish, not getting homesick, not getting into a fight with Ayana . . . It seems all our trips hinge on her moods, and I often can't keep up with how savagely they swing.

I lose myself to the rhythmic push and pull of the chair, and my thoughts wander back to Jason. What he said to me as we sat out by the fire in my backyard a few nights ago. *"I've always wondered what life would have been like if we'd ended up together."* Twenty years of friendship rattled with one brazen sentence. And now? Now I can't stop thinking about the possibility of more.

The food delivery guy turns into the driveway, startling me from my thoughts, pizza boxes hot and fragrant in his outstretched arms. I take them and hustle inside, arranging the boxes on one end of the dining room table. The strong aroma of oregano and garlic makes my mouth water. I call for Olivia, who is already in her pajamas. The two of us sit at the dining room table with its fourteen metal chairs crammed around it. We are just a party of two. It amazes me how some families fill these rental homes completely.

We chew in silence before Olivia launches into the plot of a story she wants to write. I nod and swallow my wine, my mind working out how it's going to be to share a house with Jason, starting tomorrow. Finally, she loses herself to her food, and I ignore the itch to look at my phone, a typical distraction that keeps me from the present moment.

I tear off another slice of margherita pizza, which has grown cold, the cheese congealed, the crust hard. I eat it anyway, stabbing baby kale leaves and scooping some roasted brussels sprouts and cauliflower onto my plate. I barely say a word, but Olivia doesn't seem to notice.

Outside, a raucous family throws a football. Having been raised by a single mother, I always longed for a giant family, but after an

extremely difficult labor with Olivia—and not getting pregnant until thirty—I took what I could get. I wanted more children, but after the divorce, the desire for a bigger family closed up like a box.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Olivia chews and stares thoughtfully at me.

“What do you mean?”

“You have your worried smile.”

“I do?” I reach over and kiss her cheek. “You know me so well. I’m not worried, though, I promise. Just trying to go from work mode to vacation mode. Sometimes it takes Mama a minute.”

“That makes sense.” She plucks a glob of cheese from her pizza and abandons the crust. “Are you excited about your birthday?”

I smile. “You know me. Not much of a birthday person.”

“I know. But maybe this year can be different.”

I try to figure out how to explain why getting older isn’t as awesome as celebrating birthdays when you’re a kid. I don’t dread aging; in fact, I’m looking forward to my forties, but I’ve also never been someone to throw big parties for myself. “I think sometimes it feels a little selfish to make a big fuss for just turning one year older.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not selfish. That’s what people do.”

“Which is why you always have the best birthday parties.”

I admire Olivia as she launches herself into play with two tiny dolls and a pizza crust. Something rough roots around my heart. With every passing day, I worry that I’m not showing up as the role model I want to be. Yes, I am a hardworking single mother, and that’s something. But when I look at all the other moms at her school, who constantly devote themselves to committees, fundraisers, and field trips, I feel like a fraud.

Doesn’t she need more in her life than just me, my mom, Jason, and Ayana? Is she missing out on the great big family I always imagined



for her? I chastise myself for going down the rabbit hole of *what is not* instead of *what is*, but that stab of worry needles its way in: What if it turns out that I've been failing her all this time?

But when Liv looks at me and smiles, a fleck of oregano stuck to her oversized front tooth, I begin to laugh, which makes her laugh. She chews a piece of kale, smearing it across her teeth with her tongue, and then asks, "What? Do I have something in my teeth?"

And just like that, the worry fades to a slight residue. Perhaps she has everything she needs . . . but do I?

Jason floats through my mind again. I haven't entertained the idea of bringing a man into my life since the divorce. I'm not one of those women who thinks her life is completed by a man. Quite the contrary, in fact, as my yearslong hiatus from dating has proven. At some point it became less about not wanting to date and more about not having time.

I'm also afraid of disrupting the dynamic between me and Liv. Even though she's creeping toward ten, I feel like I've finally gotten the hang of how to be a single parent. What would life look like if I added one more person to the mix? Would Liv feel left out? Would she feel as though she were competing with someone else for my attention?

Liv continues to goof around, and I hand her a napkin to smudge the greens from her teeth. I know the real question isn't necessarily just around what Liv needs. It's also about what I need too. Sometimes I feel stuck in my past with Michael or too fully focused on the future.

When I really think about what I want for my life, what—or who—might I find waiting there?

## ONE

INSTEAD OF SCREAMING LIV'S NAME, I HESITATE AND SCAN the sea, sure she's just drifted and will pop to the surface, algae braided through her hair like ropes.

I glance behind me at a large sandcastle. Is she there now, crouched in a ball as she sometimes is, inconspicuous enough to be trampled? *No*. The panic catches fire and spreads. One moment I am calm. The next, I howl her name with enough ferocity to quiet the remaining beachgoers.

I sprint down a stretch of beach, hunting for her bright suit. Children with buckets and shovels startle as I hurry past them, examining both water and land. I turn in a hasty circle—check the dock, the packed parking lot behind me, the expanse of seagrass tall enough to conceal a body.

I jog to the right, my feet slapping the damp sand. I grip a sun-burned man who's shading his eyes, staring into the ocean. "Have you seen my daughter? She's wearing an orange suit." He shakes his head, and I ask a few kids, rotating back toward the parking lot.

Did she go back to the car for her goggles or float?

Not knowing what else to do, I sprint forward into the ocean until the spray hits my calves and drenches my jumpsuit. My body is charged, my heart its frenetic leader. I wade deeper, scanning and talking myself out of my instinctive panic. *Olivia is a strong swimmer. Olivia knows to stay close to shore.* I watch for the orange bathing suit again and flap my arms toward the slightly tilted lifeguard tower. It sits, thick with rust, vacant. There is no jet ski, no four-wheeler with an emergency red logo embossed on the side, no beach bodies clad in lifeguard apparel, tan and primed for rescue.

“My daughter!” I scream to no one and everyone. “She was just here!”

Barrel-chested men with deep tans and beers in ham fists join me; a few children smacked by waves stare, slack-jawed and unsteady. A little girl begins to wail. Her mother scoops her up and shoots me a concerned look. I press a hand to my chest in an attempt to calm myself. A child does not just disappear in the ocean. It is a clear day. She has to be on land somewhere. But then I think of the red flag violently whipping behind me, an obvious warning of a strong undertow.

“Olivia!” I call her name again, an eternity of nine years of worst-case scenarios and almost disasters frozen on my lips.

The crew divides. The current strengthens, and I am ripped to the left of where I just stood. I dive under, which is pointless, and choke on salty water. I emerge, coughing, my soggy clothes an extra weight. Waves pummel my back and knock me under. I grapple to find my footing and stand. Finally, a lifeguard high-steps into the water, a red buoy tucked under his arm.

I can hardly breathe as I utter the words, “My daughter was just here,” and point to the endless depths of the Gulf. It seems to stretch forever. “Orange suit.”

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The lifeguard, who can't be older than twenty, whistles toward the beach and two more able bodies sprint from the shadows. I search the shoreline, praying that Olivia will suddenly reappear, wet and oblivious to the nightmare unfolding before me. We can apologize to the lifeguards, eat our pizza, and get on with our vacation. Nothing more than a terrifying false alarm.

"Please." I tent my hands in a mock prayer and wait, count, breathe. "Please find her."

My legs nearly buckle as the undertow tugs us sharply left.

"Riptide!" the main lifeguard exclaims before blowing a whistle and ushering people out of the water. The lifeguards dive in despite the danger, dipping and resurfacing empty-handed as I stand, helpless, waiting for my maternal instincts to tell me exactly where she is. I clutch my wet phone in my hand, realizing I turned my attention away for just a second—*one second!*—and now she is lost at sea.

I think briefly of Michael, whose text is the very reason I looked away at the most critical second of my life. If she doesn't return, if she drowns . . . I will never forgive myself. Or him.

I advance deeper into the water, despite the dangerous undertow, and call her name, tears mingling with the salt on my cheeks. The beach was nearly barren when we arrived, in its pre-dinner wind down, but an excitable crowd has grown and strengthened. Women grip their children while the professionals do their work. Somewhere far off, a siren sounds until an emergency vehicle speeds toward us, spitting white-gray sand under monstrous black tires. A female with sunbaked skin hops down. She radios something in as I'm wrenched again by the undertow.

A far-off whistle brings me back to my body. Something brushes against my leg and makes me instinctively jump. Hope springs. Liv?

I scoop the object into my hand—just a mangled knot of algae—and fling it back into the sea. I lunge toward the sound and spot a lifeguard, about thirty feet out, waving his hands. His head disappears and re-emerges, Olivia's limp body draped across his buoy. "Olivia!"

My voice cracks as I hurry out to meet him, but sets of waves gather strength and keep me from her. My body trembles and quiets as he nears the shore, slicing through the waves with one arm, my daughter being dragged, head above water, behind him. I struggle to follow as the sea's impossible current yanks me backward. My phone slips from my fingers, then disappears in the churning surf.

Once out of the water, the lifeguard cradles Olivia on the sandy beach as others bark to give him room. Her body is all wrong. Bones loose and bendy. Mouth yawning open, jaw slack. Eyes half-open. Lacerations spatter across her cheek; she must have smashed into coral. Blood runs in thin, pink lines down her face, mixed with the seawater. I catalog what I will need to fix her up: ice for the swelling, soap and water, ointment and bandages for the cuts.

"Liv!" I say her name and expect her to startle awake, as she sometimes does after a bad dream. I stand behind the lifeguard, then drop to my knees on the hard-packed sand, unblinking, in utter disbelief. Instinctively, I lunge toward her, hungry for contact. I scoop her hand in mine and squeeze.

"Come on, Liv. Wake up. *Please* wake up."

Her face is pale, lifeless, her limbs splayed like a starfish. I clutch her fingers again, willing life into her. Any moment she could spit up a gallon of water and suddenly come to.

The lifeguard asks my permission to give her CPR, checks for a pulse, and leans over my daughter, creating an airtight seal with his lips before giving her two rescue breaths. The shock of it consumes me—this grown man's mouth on my unconscious daughter's

lips—and I'm suddenly struck with the idea of Olivia never growing old enough to be kissed.

He arranges his hands on her breastbone and begins chest compressions. Her hair sticks to her skin and wraps around her throat like black vines. He works diligently. Olivia's head makes sharp, jerky movements as beads of water drip onto her motionless face.

After a minute, another lifeguard steps in with a defibrillator. He rips her bathing suit down, exposing her bare chest, and towels her off before sticking the electrode pads on her skin. Voice prompts call out the directions in a robotic monotone, advising her to be shocked. Liv's tiny body jolts, then settles, lifeless, in the sand.

When nothing happens, the first lifeguard begins the ventilation cycle again with two breaths before compressing her ribs in the same spot between her nipples, aggressively pressing down again and again until my maternal instincts make me scream for him to stop.

"You're doing it too hard!"

I have no way of knowing that, other than what my eyes tell me. He ignores me. I fear the audible *crack* of her ribs, like kindling, and worry that, even if he doesn't break her ribs, she'll be sore in the morning. My mind floats above my body as I try to let hope override the fear.

*There will be a tomorrow. This is just a scare. Olivia will be okay.*

He works for another minute until the defibrillator administers its second shock. The first lifeguard sits back on his sandy heels, defeated and breathing hard as an ambulance arrives. He waves them over as EMTs spill out of the back.

The first lifeguard resumes breath and chest compressions as the medics cluster around us, but I refuse to let go of Liv's hand. An indignant scream threatens to erupt as they huddle around my daughter with bags and boards, snapping commands, while continuing with

the CPR. I hold Liv's hand tighter, her wilted fingers laced through mine, floppy and wet.

"Wake up, baby. Please wake up. Olivia. *Please*. You have to wake up." I rattle her arm and pat the back of her hand.

Even as they prepare to usher her to the ambulance, I fear the worst. I assess the stern looks on the EMTs faces, the weeping onlookers, the nervous whispers and solemn faces of the lifeguards.

An inhuman cry erupts from my mouth as I squeeze Liv's unresponsive hand in mine, begging her to *just wake up*. But her limbs are cold, shriveled. She smells of salt and fish—nothing like my Liv. The blue and red lights of the emergency vehicles explode around us in a kaleidoscopic halo. My senses shut off. The bystanders, horrified and hushed. The awestruck lifeguards, humbled by the unexpected turn of events. The bonfires canceled, empty chairs fanned in semicircles that will see no life or laughter tonight. The possible tragedy ricochets off this slice of beach, forever tainting it.

"Oh, my sweet Liv." I choke on the words and begin to sob all over again. I am not a woman who cries openly, but I let it all go—snot, tears, screams, agony. "This can't be happening."

I watch the paramedics slide Liv onto a stretcher and strap her down, her body relaxed and still unresponsive as they continue working on her.

My voice is raw, my legs rubbery, my throat sharp and dry. I command my legs to work and shuffle across the sand, wishing I could go back in time to change that one solitary moment—looking down instead of paying attention to my child. I pause at the back of the ambulance and watch as they hoist her up and in.

My mind is numb as I step up into the back of the mammoth vehicle, a witness to my motionless daughter on the stretcher. The

female EMT hooks her up to a heart rate monitor, and I wait to hear signs of life. Maybe she's just unconscious. Maybe she will finally wake up. Maybe her body is still working, even though she's asleep. I search for the punch of an audible pulse, but the monitor is flat.

They push fluids and epinephrine and warn me they are going to intubate. I've seen this procedure on medical TV shows, but now that it's real, I can't watch. I squeeze my eyes shut just as they force a tube down her throat. The EMTs call out different demands, and once intubated, they continue to monitor her.

The sirens blare as the ambulance cuts sharply around a corner. The EMTs are quiet as they fuss around Liv, working diligently. I sit, steadying myself with the jostling equipment and cramped space, and fight the instinct to drape my body across hers. A steady stream of tears that seem to have no end leak down my cheeks and saturate my neck. I take an unsteady step forward to run my fingers along her arms and adjust the blanket they have draped around her bare legs. "Come on, baby. Wake up."

Olivia has so much life—she *is* life. She must wake up. I wait for an improbable flicker, a miracle that will help her spring back to life. It will be a story we tell, the time she almost drowned but didn't. That vacation she nearly scared me to death. The improbable moment she returned and everything, from that miraculous moment, was different.

"Ma'am, please. We need you to sit down." As if to illustrate their point, we fly over a bump, and I lose my footing, my body cocked at an unnatural angle over the stretcher. I don't want to sit down, don't want to let go.

*This is my child.*

"Ma'am. Please, it's for your safety."



*Rea Frey*

Reluctantly, I release her and take my seat. My eyes flicker to the screen again. More tears pepper my cheeks and slip onto my chest, mixed with incessant regret. If only I could go back. If only I hadn't looked at my phone. If only I would have gotten in the water.

If only I had one more chance.



THE NEXT MORNING I RISE EARLY AND TAKE A WALK BY THE beach while Liv's still sleeping.

I leave her a cheery note next to her iPod so she can message me if she wakes. While most of my friends never leave their kids at home alone under any circumstances, no one I'm friends with is a single mom. Sometimes I have to run errands or make a quick stop and trust she is being safe and responsible.

I check the time. Jason and Ayana should be arriving later this afternoon. My heart quickens in my chest as I think about his admission. Will he simply pretend he never said it?

Though Jason has been single for years, too, casually dating here and there, his circumstances are wildly different from my own. His wife, Shelby—my other best friend—died seven years ago from breast cancer. As they hadn't had children yet, five years ago, Jason decided to adopt a four-year-old from Ethiopia in honor of Shelby's heritage. He named her Ayana, which means "a pretty flower," and her middle name, Adia, means "returning." Over the years we have helped each other navigate every parenting challenge imaginable, and because of that, Olivia and Ayana are inseparable.

I walk across the cool sand. The waves break over my feet, revealing translucent crabs, shells, and half-broken sand dollars I collect for Liv. Suntanned men hustle across creamy stretches of beach, timers set, umbrellas expertly drilled into the earth for the crush of vacationers staying at overpriced condos.

This year we bought cheap umbrellas and backpack chairs to avoid the exorbitant rental costs. I walk for twenty minutes, then turn back, a light sweat working its way over my body. My phone dings.

*Ayana just hugged me and said, "I love your stomach, Daddy. It feels like my pillow." WTF? #fatboy #over40 #dadbod*

I laugh and type back a response. *Did you really just use hashtags like a MILLENNIAL? #officiallynotmybestfriendanymore*

*Only an extremely old, out-of-touch person would use a hashtag so long,* he replies. *#coolerthanyou*

*At least my daughter doesn't refer to my stomach as a pillow.*

*You are not a nice human, Kate Baker.*

I roll my eyes. Jason runs a functional-training wellness facility back in Nashville and is one of the fittest humans I know. We've been friends for half my life and have been through the ringer in every way. Shelby and Michael used to joke that in another life, we were probably meant for each other.

They aren't wrong. Jason and I have an unshakable bond. We are passionate in the ways we talk and argue, and we have similar interests. We met randomly when I was just out of college and took a trip to Nashville to visit my mother, who had decided to move from our hometown in Virginia. I was hunting for my first job and had gone on a hike to clear my head. We literally bumped into each other and have been friends ever since. Over the years our friendship always trumped any potential for romance. At least until last week.

## *The Other Year*

I type back a hasty reply. *We'll do wind sprints on the beach every morning. Get ready, old man. #olympics2024*

Though Jason is a few years older than me, we were both prepared to step proudly into our forties, certain that we would avoid the same clichés as everyone else. Instead, we have succumbed to the typical telltale aches and pains and attempt to deny that we are, in fact, getting older and that, yes, everything hurts when we get out of bed in the morning.

*Did you mean to send this to Michael?*

*Ooh, burn, I respond.*

Jason first met Michael when we were dating, and they get along famously. But that's not surprising. Michael comes off charming, affable, trustworthy, and passionate to almost everyone he encounters. It's being married to him that's the challenge.

*Drive safe. Can't wait to see you both!*

*I can't wait to see you too, Kate.*

A small spasm of pleasure hits me in the chest. I silence my phone and turn toward the sea. Over the years, I've definitely thought about dating Jason. Sometimes, when I'm lonely, I daydream about what life might have looked like if I'd married my best friend instead of Michael, but that fantasy never gets too far, because it means I wouldn't have Liv.

On the way back, I stop at Sunrise Coffee and order a large coffee and a chocolate peanut butter smoothie for Olivia. I cradle the carrier in my arms and walk past Gulf Place, with its boutique restaurants, overpriced shops, and antique ice cream parlor that Olivia and Ayana will most likely beg to go to daily.

At the door, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I set the carrier on the front porch. I'm praying it's not a work emergency.

*It can't wait until you get back to Nashville, mi amor. Please call me.*

Annoyance pushes into my morning peace, because Michael knows exactly what he's doing.

*Just tell me what this is about,* I reply.

*Olivia.*

He never calls her Liv. It's always Olivia. I almost fire off a defensive response, but I take a breath and don't give into the bait. *What about her?* I contemplate all the reasons he would suddenly reach out. Perhaps he wants her to go on a trip, which hasn't happened in years. He always comes to her, as he has yet to settle anywhere post-divorce. Michael is always traveling, always living out of a suitcase, ready for the next assignment.

*It's not something to discuss via text, Kate. Por favor, mi amour.*

I sigh and fire off a quick response that I will call him later and then pocket my phone. Of course he would do this to me at the start of vacation, which Liv must have told him about. How often is she talking to him? I try to push him from my mind and listen for her, but all is still quiet. I pop her smoothie in the fridge, tiptoe upstairs to make sure she's sleeping, and then drink my coffee in silence out on the front porch, staring at the house across the street, which is for sale.

I think about pulling it up on Zillow to see how much it's going for. How fun it might be to buy a beach house and have it as an investment property. Then we could come down whenever we want.

The fantasy subsides, and I find I am still rattled by the sudden intrusion of a man who appears and disappears like the wind. When we first divorced, he promised to visit often and stay involved. And he did. Then his frequent visits tapered as work ramped up, and during this past year especially, Liv has felt the sting of his absence. But if he's back in the country, Liv will want to know. She will want to see him. Despite the fact that he's not around often, he's still her favorite person in the world.

*The Other Year*

I re-read his text and wonder what he has up his sleeve. I pocket my phone and suck down my coffee too fast, eager to burn off some of this jittery energy. I glance at my watch and wonder if I have time for a quick workout before Liv wakes up.

Inside, I quietly head up the three flights of stairs to change. The weight of my feet groan with every step, and Olivia, always a light sleeper, calls to me just as I pass her room. I open her door. She is sprawled on the lower bunk bed of four total.

“Hey, monkey. How’d you sleep?”

She stretches and opens her arms wide. I fold into them, her sour breath sweeping across my face.

“Good.”

I pepper her cheeks with kisses until she giggles. Her sleepy voice worms into my heart, and I cuddle with her, telling her she has a smoothie waiting downstairs. I think of Michael again, how the two of them used to snuggle for hours, how naturally and openly affectionate he is with her. Not being as physically affectionate myself, it makes me feel like I must work overtime so that she feels just as loved. Just as safe.

“Ready to see Ayana today?”

Her face stretches into a smile, and she clutches her stuffed fox to her chest and nods. “I’m always ready to see Ayana.”

I cradle her against my chest, her warm, compact body contained and safe. I wish I could keep her this size forever. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“That was a question.”

“Okay, smarty-pants.” I hesitate how to frame it but decide to be direct. “You know how you can send messages to people on your iPod?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Have you been sending messages to Papá?”

I expect her to wrinkle her nose and say no, but she's quiet. She picks at her stuffed animal.

"Is that a yes?"

She shrugs.

"Hey, Liv. It's okay if you have. I just didn't know." Normally all the communication with her father comes through my phone, but now that Liv can chat or message on her own, I'm sure she reaches out to him. I gave her Michael's number ages ago so that she could memorize it in case of emergencies.

"We talk sometimes," she finally says. "He's back in America, you know."

So she already knows. "That's exciting, right? We've missed him, haven't we?"

She nods again. "*Mucho*."

My initial reaction is to ask what they've been talking about, but it's her right to have her own private conversations. Sensing Liv is on the verge of a shutdown, I change tactics. "Want to go to the beach?"

She nods and then tells me about her dream of an evil cat that shrunk itself and got stuck in her hair, and then she is up and getting ready for the day.

Upstairs, I change into my white one-piece and let Olivia rub sunscreen on my back. She promises not to miss a spot. I do the same for her, kissing the top of her head, which smells like bottled sunshine.

"*Deliciosa*," I say.

"Do you want to eat my head, Mama? You love that smell so much."

"I do," I say, play munching her hair. "It's my favorite smell in the whole world."

We gather our chairs, towels, and toys, walking the few minutes

toward the beach for our first full day. Thoughts of Michael aside, I remind myself how lucky we are to be here for an entire two weeks.

When I was a little girl, I used to come to this very beach with my mother and imagine what it would be like to own a home here someday. To vacation every summer and have the ocean for an entire two months. That used to be one of my main goals when Michael and I got married, and now it feels like a pipe dream.

We claim a spot near the water, though the beach is already crowded. Olivia clutches her pink inner tube and goggles and runs toward the shore.

“Stay close, *belleza*,” I call.

“*Voy a*,” she assures me.

I erect the rainbow-colored umbrella and stab the pole into the ground, packing sand on all sides so it won’t tip. I pull out my novel and my towel and toss them on my chair before walking down the beach to feel the water. It is still surprisingly cold but crystal clear. I wade in, inch by inch.

“Just do it!” Liv calls. “Don’t be a wuss!”

“A wuss?” I call as a wave slaps my chest and drenches me. I let out a surprised cry, then plunge my shoulders beneath the water and swim to Olivia, who is already laughing in delight. Her pink goggles make her eyes bulge, and I ask her where her hat is.

“I don’t want my hat.”

“But you don’t want to get burned on the first day,” I remind her.

“I’m going to go under anyway,” she insists.

“How are you going to go under if you have your inner tube?”

She shrugs. “I just am.”

I know what a fight this will be if I persist. I sigh, letting it go for now. Instead, I enjoy the feel of the waves on my skin, the ocean lulling us back and forth. We bob and weave with the current, which



is weak today, thankfully. I glance back at the beach, at the families with multiple children to wrangle.

I smile and splash Olivia, who expertly ducks beneath a wave. Thoughts of Michael trample my brain again. If he were here, he'd get her to laugh and smile. He'd get her to put on her hat without a fight. He always knows just how to talk to her. I attempt to shake those thoughts away and choose to savor the moment, to focus on what matters most—Liv.

But I can't help but wonder what he and Liv have been talking about. Part of me knows I should call him and get it over with, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I feel there is only one reason he could be reaching out. He wants to be an active presence in Liv's life again, which might mean more travel and shuttling her back and forth to wherever he is living. It could also mean a new custody arrangement. But as I try on that scenario, I let it go. Michael would never ask to revisit custody. He could never take on more responsibility than he already has, especially with the nature of his work.

I'm grateful that part of life is over—lawyers' fees, paperwork, and the division of time. Liv splashes and ducks underwater, and I float next to her, my head tipped up to the clear sky.

But what if it's not?

## TWO

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF THE MORNING, I SIT IN THE rental house, unable to move.

Snapshots from the hospital haunt my mind: moving out of the way as Liv was rolled into the emergency room, so many bags, bodies, and equipment fighting for space. They took her from me, and I was told she had chest X-rays. Then, at last, they found a pulse. The doctor worked on her for a full forty minutes. A flicker of hope, something to cling to. Then . . . nothing. All that effort defeated in one defining moment, when the doctor stepped into the waiting room. He'd removed his mask, scrubbed a hand through his brown hair, and leveled me with a glance.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "She didn't make it."

I didn't believe him. I hadn't been in the room, hadn't seen their hands and instruments attempting to revive her. I hadn't witnessed her last breath. Because of that, I'd pushed past him, down the bland hallway and into her room. I lunged toward the hospital bed and gathered my daughter in my arms, a rag doll against my abdomen. I'd stroked her back, cradled her, as if she had simply fallen asleep after a hard day at the beach and I was going to carry her to bed.

I'd gripped her too tightly, unable to fathom putting her down for good. When I'd lowered her against the stiff sheets, I'd pressed my palm over her heart, rooting for what they must have missed: *life*. Her bathing suit was icy and wet, rolled down to her middle. I hunted for a pulse for a full five minutes, even as the doctor seemed on the brink of intervention. I waited, willing time to reverse and the thick pump of her heart to fill my hand.

Finally, I'd mashed my ear to her chest. I'd grown this heart in my body, this electric, lively organ that never stopped beating. How many times had I listened to her heartbeat in bed? It was always fast as a hummingbird, as swift as her ever-shifting mind, so full of life. I kept my ear wedged against her chest, but there was no wild, consistent thump. No whooshing air running smoothly in and out of her lungs. Just the ruthless clutch of death.

The doctor had gently explained what would happen next. There would be an autopsy, which could take up to four hours. They would then move her to the morgue and await pickup from the funeral home, which could be sometime tomorrow. While I filled out paperwork, I was peppered with questions. *What do I want to do with her body? If she isn't cremated, can I transport her home? Can I make arrangements for that? Will there be a funeral? Is there someone they should call?*

Once a doctor got my information on where to mail the death certificate, I was free to go before I could even make sense of what happened. But I didn't go. I sat and waited until the autopsy was performed, practically catatonic in one of the cold, plastic chairs. When there was nothing left for me to do, I'd paused at the elevator, turning back. How could I leave her body here? How could I not bring her home, tuck her into bed, kiss her goodnight, and begin again tomorrow?

The truth slices through my body now, eternal knicks that will

never heal. My daughter is gone, and yet here I am, in her favorite place, still breathing, unable to quantify what this means.

I blink into the early morning light filling the living room. While other families are just arriving in Santa Rosa, eating a hearty breakfast before heading down to the beach for the day, I am contemplating how to handle my daughter's remains.

I've always been exceptionally calm in a crisis, wearing that ability like a badge. Not today. Maybe not ever again. I sniff, my nose clogged from so much crying. "What am I supposed to do now?" I ask no one. I can't stop shaking. I need to call Jason and my mother. I need to call Michael. *Oh, Michael. How will he ever deal with this?* But I can't seem to make myself move. Suddenly I look around. Where is my phone? Do I even have it?

I think of each emotional conversation, breaking such unbearable news. From there, it will be more people to call, more hearts to break. In nine years I have never known someone's child to die. Not in my circle, at least.

I need to shower. I'm freezing, but I feel rooted to the spot. I think of the stairs I must climb, the process to undress and stand under the spray. I glance at the mirror above the couch. Already the burden of Olivia's death mars my features, evidence of my eternal mistake. It's all my fault, and everyone will know it soon enough.

Uncertainly I stand, as if I've just learned to walk, and shuffle toward the stairs. I take them slowly, going over and over what the coroner said. Apparently Liv had either caught a rip tide or been pulled out by the undertow and smashed into something that had knocked her unconscious, rendering her unable to swim. I think of the wounds on her face.

I shake my head. Olivia knows to swim parallel to shore; to roll and float, to not fight the current. She would have tried to get my

attention if she were in trouble—popped up, waved her arms, made herself loud. I used to joke that you could hear Olivia from a mile away. She is not a quiet child. She announces herself, wherever she is.

*Was.*

The coroner's report also stated she had water in her belly, which prevented her from screaming for help. I clench the blanket tightly in my fist and drop it on the second-floor landing. I can't stop imagining her panicked face, that feeling of running out of air, the fear as she drifted out and then lost consciousness.

*Drowned.*

I pass the bunk bed room, devoid of Olivia's belongings, which are still packed in her pink suitcase in the car: bathing suits, pajamas, shorts, flip-flops, brightly colored underwear. She'd brought the whole series of her Warriors chapter books and an armload of art supplies. Her stuffed animals that she would have arranged on the bed tonight. I stare into the cheery room, sobered by the stark realization that I'll never see her again. All I have are the reminders of her, mere possessions and toys.

*She's gone.*

My heart begins to pound, then ache, as though someone has stabbed me through the chest. This is too much; it's all too much. I stand and back out of the room, closing the door firmly behind me, before winding my way up the last flight of stairs. The air is frigid, but I'm too tired to adjust the thermostat. Instead, I undress and turn on the shower, stepping into it before it's fully warm.

I move under the showerhead, thinking of all the bickering we did yesterday morning on the way down. Olivia got up late and insisted on swinging and listening to music for a full twenty minutes, which was part of her morning routine. She wouldn't eat breakfast and had already packed her toothbrush, so she didn't brush her teeth. Her hair

was tangled. She didn't help load the car and instead buckled herself in and then complained about the iPod not working before we'd even hit the road. On the way she'd snacked endlessly, which dusted the back of the car in crumbs. I'd criticized her and accused her of not caring about the car. And then, just moments after we arrived, I'd lost sight of her because I was texting. Now she is dead.

The whirlwind thoughts cascade with the water, pounding my shoulders and chest. So many mistakes I've made as her mother, so much unfixable, permanent damage. My one child, my *one* chance at being a parent, and I've ruined it.

I don't even wash myself but instead stay under the spray until my skin burns and the water turns cold. Finally I emerge and wrap a towel around my body, climbing into pajamas and then under the covers, even though there's so much to be done. I have to call Michael, then my mother. I must tell her teachers and friends, our friends. Jason floats through my mind, but leaves again just as quickly. I can't talk to anyone right now. I don't even know what to say.

And where is my phone?

I pull the covers over my head. I don't expect sleep to come—I'm not sure I'll ever sleep again—but suddenly the weariness wins. I think, for just a foolish moment, that maybe Olivia will appear in my dreams. Maybe this is all a nightmare and I will wake up and everything will be different.

Before I know it, I'm slipping under. I let myself be taken, half hoping I'll die too. At least that way I can be with my daughter, my sweet baby girl.

*My Liv.*

Hot tears slither down my cheeks, and I take a shuddering breath. I imagine her here, in my arms. I can almost feel her, almost smell that favorite spot on the top of her head. Bottled sunshine.

*Rea Frey*

*Deliciosa.*

Guilt materializes, agonizing and fast. I will myself to go under as the morning becomes shockingly bright. Thoughts grip and torture, but I allow them to come. I deserve them. I deserve all of this.

I have no idea how our vacation has turned into this nightmare, or what I'm supposed to do next.



BY TWO IN THE AFTERNOON, WE ARE SPENT AND CRISPED, ravenous from hours in the water.

I take a shower and throw on a dress, wearing my hair loose and wavy around my shoulders. *Mermaid hair*, as Olivia calls it. I normally don't wear makeup at the beach, but today I slick on some red lipstick for a little pop of color. I make my way downstairs. Olivia's shower blasts, and I hear her little voice making up songs. She has a beautiful voice but will only sing if she thinks no one is listening.

I round the last step and pour myself a glass of wine. It's a little early for a drink, but I'm on vacation. Jason texts that they are almost here, and I find myself irrationally excited for the days ahead.

I'm sitting on the front porch, nursing my glass of Syrah, when Jason lays on the horn in a quick succession of honks, announcing their arrival. I rise and wave as he parks their rental car in our chubby driveway. Ayana explodes out of the car, searching behind me for Olivia.

Her hair has been neatly braided in cornrows and her beautiful black skin glows from the strict skin regimen Jason has adopted after a few bouts of contact dermatitis. Before Shelby died, she was



meticulous about Jason knowing how to care for Black hair and Black skin. She assumed they'd have a child one day and wanted Jason to be able to share her heritage: how to dress, how to celebrate her culture. It pains me to know she will never see what a good job Jason is doing, how he continues to honor Shelby through Ayana.

As if on cue, Olivia bursts from our front door, hair tangled and damp, clad in footed pajamas. I roll my eyes, as this is one of Olivia's quirks. She wears short sleeves in winter and sweaters in summer and insists it's "her thing" and that I leave her alone. I have learned to pick my battles. Ayana sprints into Liv's outstretched arms. Liv picks her up and Ayana yelps in protest before the two disappear inside our house. Jason exits and stretches his arms over his head, revealing a patch of flat—not pillowish—stomach.

"God, they really are useless, aren't they?"

I laugh. "When it comes to helping load or unload anything? Um, yeah, utterly."

I walk around the car to give Jason a hug. He pulls me tightly against his chest, and I inhale the sharp scent of palo santo and soap, standing on tiptoe to give his cheek a quick kiss. His heart beats against mine, and it feels strangely erotic, the mad thumping of blood and muscle, separated only by fabric. His hands linger on my lower back, and I step back, embarrassed, as I study him. He is impossibly tall and annoyingly handsome, a former basketball player whose career ended in a knee injury—hence his profession in functional training. I hold my breath as our eyes lock. His words burn through my mind again, a blinding sear of possibility. It is a weighty statement, much too heavy for now. To lighten the mood, I punch him on the shoulder and ask if he's ready to go for a morning run tomorrow.

"Only if you can keep up."

"You're on."

*The Other Year*

Jason and I are both morning people, and our spouses were not. I remember how I used to have coffee, go for a run, do a load of laundry and the dishes before Michael had even stumbled from bed. He often got inspired late at night and would spend hours out in his studio until the wee hours of the morning, researching or working. I used to tiptoe around our home in the mornings because he did not like to be woken up. Shelby was the same, often sleeping in until noon on the weekends or vacation. Now Jason and I can do what we like. Though I miss Shelby like a limb, we keep her memory alive by talking about her as often as we can.

He playfully pulls me into a headlock, and I finally escape.

"You remind me of the brother I never wanted," I say, winded.

"You remind me of my actual brother I never wanted." He rubs my head affectionately.

"Austin? Wow." I extricate myself and step around to help. "I'm calling him."

"Trust me. He knows."

I help Jason unload the car and tell him I've made reservations at Borago, one of our favorite Italian restaurants in Santa Rosa.

Inside, he whistles as he surveys the house and collapses on the couch, arms outstretched. "Thanks for having us," he says. "We really needed this."

"Us too."

We make conversation about their drive as the girls squeal upstairs before Olivia calls down to ask if they can watch a movie.

"You're at the beach!" I look at Jason. "What is with these kids and their screens?"

"So is that a yes?" Olivia asks.

"That's a definite no," I reply.

Jason eyes the open bottle of wine on the counter and pours

himself a glass and shakes his head. “They live in a world of technology, Kate. We have to find the balance.”

“Well, if you find it, let me know.” I have a bad habit of always telling Liv how things were when I was young: hours of playing outside, climbing trees, and so much wandering. Now it’s rare to see kids outside doing the same these days.

The girls bound down the stairs. “Mama, can I help Ayana unpack?” Olivia has already changed into a bright-yellow long-sleeved shirt and green pants. I nod.

“Sure, *cariño*. Just don’t make a mess.”

“I love that you still incorporate Spanish into her life,” Jason says. “I’ve sucked so hardcore with Amharic.”

“Yeah, but you’re teaching her words like *hardcore*, so there’s got to be a silver lining, right?”

“Har har.” He tosses a pillow toward me, and I catch it with one hand and lob it back before refilling my glass.

“Are you still doing that Ethiopian group meetup?”

“Once a month, yes.” After the adoption, Jason discovered there was a robust network of individuals in Nashville who’d also adopted from Ethiopia. He’d traded grief groups for adoption meetups, always keeping himself busy.

“I think that’s great,” I say. “I always worry that I’m not exposing Liv to more of her culture.” While Michael’s entire family lives in Mexico City, a family that always embraced me like I was one of their own, Liv’s been there only a couple of times since the divorce. Michael’s cryptic texts flit through my mind, but it’s not the time to dissect them. “Now that she doesn’t see Michael as much, I feel like those traditions are dying.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. You’re doing the best you can. We all are.”

I know he’s right. Our girls are lovely, well-adjusted humans

who've dealt—and will continue to deal—with diversity issues. Because I'm not Mexican and Jason isn't Black, we are often looped into the same camp, as strangers assume we aren't the biological parents of our children. Even though Nashville is diverse, and our pocket of town is progressive, the amount of racism or ignorant questioning we receive makes me realize how much work we have yet to do.

"Is it bad I'm on my way to getting drunk after a glass of wine?"

"I think it's endearing," I say. Once Jason became a father, he cut way back on his drinking, wanting to present a good example for Ayana. I offer him a glass of water and get lost in easy conversation about our work. Upstairs, Liv bursts out laughing, followed closely by Ayana. My favorite sounds from my two favorite girls.

For the first time since we arrived, I begin to relax. And even though our conversation is light and easy, there's an undercurrent of something more—a charge that wasn't there before. I feel it and wonder if he feels it too. I sit beside him and my knee brushes his. He doesn't pull away and instead swirls his wine and smiles.

"You look gorgeous by the way," he says. "With your mermaid hair." He reaches out and tugs a strand of wavy hair, then tenderly tucks it behind my ear.

I swallow and search for what to say. "I'm wild at the beach," is all that slips out.

His eyes trail to my mouth, then back to my eyes. "Is that so?"

Is that so? What am I even saying? I shrug and stare into my glass. "I guess you'll have to wait and find out."

## THREE

I DON'T WAKE UNTIL LATE AFTERNOON.

Somehow I slept most of the day. I am both relieved and appalled, unsure of how my body didn't stir. I sit up, head throbbing, groggy and fatigued. I feel like my mouth has been stuffed with cotton. I blink into the bright room. My throat is parched, and I reach for my bottle of water on my nightstand. I search for my phone, wondering if I have any missed calls from the hospital or funeral home, before remembering I've lost it. My eyes finally adjust to the harsh light. I feel like I've aged a decade overnight.

*Her body.*

I think of Olivia, cold and lifeless, left in the raw black of the morgue while I slept in our vacation rental without her. The guilt is a vise. Before I can think of who I need to call first, someone pounds on the door downstairs. Then the doorbell chimes, a high, shrill succession of notes that makes my headache worse. I look at the clock and balk when I see that it's three in the afternoon.

It must be Jason. I scrub a hand over my face, realizing how heart-wrenching it will be to tell Ayana the news. She was so excited to vacation with her best friend for the first time, and now she will never

see her best friend again. I bury my face in my hands, wanting to curl up and sleep forever. But I can't.

I throw back the covers as fists continue to pound the door, pull on shorts and a tank top, and walk downstairs. The house is too quiet. Whenever Olivia stayed with my mom overnight, I would revel in the silence. I always joked she was loud enough for at least five children, which made me happy to just have one. Now the silence is a reminder of all that I've lost; her absence is the loudest thing in the room.

I open the front door. The sun is blinding. Jason and Ayana stare back, suitcases at their feet. Ayana is already wearing her bathing suit, a sunny hat shading her big, bold eyes. She holds a stuffed animal to her chest, and my spine stiffens as I look at them.

"Jesus, Kate, are you sick?" Jason asks.

"Where's Olivia?" Ayana asks at the same time. She peers behind me, smacking a huge wad of gum between her teeth.

Instead of answering, I stand, stoic and numb, and stare somewhere in the distance, at the house across the street, empty, waiting for someone to buy it. Somehow I channel the mother in me and tell Ayana to go upstairs for a second. She does as she's told, and I pull the door shut behind me, hoping I can get through this without collapsing.

"What's going on?" Jason steps forward and grips my elbow. "Is it Liv? Is she okay?"

I open my mouth to tell him what happened, but nothing comes out. I sink down on the front porch, and Jason gasps as though I've just fainted.

"Kate, please tell me what's going on. You're scaring me."

Jason's eyes are trained on mine, and I shake my head and begin to cry.

"Yesterday, when we got here, Liv wanted to swim in the ocean,"

I say. I realize, as I begin this story, that this will set the stage for just how many times I will have to keep telling and retelling it. This horror—*my* horror. This will be my new narrative, one I can't unclaim. He remains silent and waits for me to finish. "The current was strong, but other kids were in the water, so I thought it was okay. I looked away for just a second, and when I looked back, she was gone." My voice is hoarse and barely above a hushed whisper in case Ayana can hear.

"My God," Jason says. He crouches down beside me. "Is she . . ." He glances back at the house, then to me.

I shake my head and curl into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "She drowned." It's the first time I've said the words out loud, and they are sticky in my mouth, a betrayal, a nightmare.

"Oh, Kate. Oh my God." Jason pulls me into his arms, and I cling tighter to him than I ever have to anyone in my whole life. I grip his back, claw at him, pound on his chest. I let it all out as he ushers me back inside, though I'm afraid my reaction will scare Ayana.

He leads me to the blue-and-white-checked couch and rubs soothing circles on my back. He knows me well enough to understand there's nothing you can say in a situation like this. It's unspeakable.

When I feel wringed of tears, I wipe my face and look at him. "I don't know what to do. I lost my phone in the ocean. I haven't called anyone." I let out a shaky breath. "I wish it had been me."

He moves closer and threads his fingers through mine. "Oh, Kate. I know. I know."

Of course he does. Before Shelby died, she was as healthy as a horse. They had been together forever and were still wildly in love. The cancer came out of nowhere. Two months after her stage four diagnosis, she was gone. He hadn't had time to prepare. None of us had.

Still, this fact brings me no comfort. There is no getting through

this. There is only surviving and existing in a world without my child—a world I want no part of.

I lean into him, and together we breathe. After some time, my nervous system settles, and when I'm finally ready to speak, Ayana bounds down the stairs, wild-eyed and tear-streaked.

"Liv drowned?" Her chest bucks, and she heaves as if she might be sick.

I nod and open my arms, and she falls into them, crying hard. The only other time Ayana has cried in my arms was when she stepped on a spiky ball from our chestnut tree. She was inconsolable, and once I finally got her settled, I had to pluck out each of the tiny spikes with a pair of purple tweezers. It took an hour, and she has never gone barefoot in our backyard since.

I soothe her, my emotions cementing into place. I must be strong, for Ayana, for my mother, for Michael, for everyone who is going to hear the shocking, horrible news of Olivia's death.

*This is just the beginning*, I think. A new normal, as unfair as it is. I have joined the club of other mothers who've lost their daughters. They exist all around me, cautionary tales that walk among us, in perpetual, everlasting pain.

I take a breath and stroke her hair. There is no going back. Whether or not I like it, I am here. I hold Ayana until she cries herself to sleep while Jason helps make arrangements back home. Since I don't have a phone, Jason lets me use his to call my mother. The conversation is brief because I'm too upset to talk. When she insists on coming down, I tell her to wait.

After the call, I step outside onto the primary suite balcony, where a sliver of ocean dapples like jewels in the distance and dial Michael's cell.

"Jason?" Michael sounds perplexed.



“No, it’s Kate.”

He’s quiet for a beat. “Thank you for finally calling, *cariño*. I’ve missed your voice.”

His mother says something in Spanish in the background. I’m thrown by Lucia’s voice, as I realize Michael must be visiting home, in Mexico City. Lucia and I, who were once close, have drifted apart the last few years with all of Michael’s travels. We used to have monthly phone calls and would exchange the occasional handwritten letter, but all of that has evaporated as I’ve gotten busier with work and Michael has been overseas. She still sends cards to Liv on birthdays and holidays, but they haven’t seen each other in so very long.

I descend into a fresh wave of grief as I try to collect myself, but Michael can hear me crying. My silence extends long past comfortable, and finally, he clears his throat.

“Kate, my love, what is it? What happened?”

“When you texted me yesterday . . .” My voice is still hoarse and unsteady. I’m not sure how to continue. Answering his text is the reason Liv is not here. This tiny black seed, if not squashed, will continue to grow, so that in my darker moments, Michael will be the person I blame, not me. “Liv was in the water. She got pulled under.” My heart beats loudly in my ears. “She drowned.” The words sound hollow leaving my lips. Silence pounds between us, dark and unsteady.

Finally, there is a crack in the void as he inhales sharply. “Oh no, oh my sweet Liv. *Mi bebé*.” He must put the phone on speaker as Lucia’s deep, heavily accented voice asks me what’s wrong. I deliver the news again, each time a brand-new death, and she begins to openly wail. In a matter of seconds, it is one great, big cacophony of disbelief and ill-timed prayers for their sweet Olivia. Luckily they do not press me on exactly how this happened but instead ask what they can do to help. I tell Michael I will go to the funeral home later today

or tomorrow and keep him updated on when I'm heading back to Nashville so they can meet me there. He insists on flying in to be with me here, but I tell him it will be easier to meet in Nashville.

It is an incomprehensible conversation, one with too many moving pieces and parts. It's not until I've hung up that I realize Michael never even told me why he wanted me to call him in the first place.

*Does it really matter?*

I grip the balcony and stare at the life pulsing around me. The other rental houses dapple the short street, the stretch of packed shops just two blocks away. I can hear the joyful shouts from the ocean as people bob in the gently breaking waves. Such a beautiful day to spend with family. I close my eyes and clench the railing until I fear my hands might break.

I step back inside, my eyes struggling to adjust to the dimmer light. I don't want to be here. I don't want to deal with this.

Hurriedly I take the stairs down to the main level and tell Jason I need some air. He asks if I need company, but I shake my head, pull on my shoes, and leave, barely shutting the door behind me.

On the way to the beach, I pass my car, still in the parking lot, and realize it hasn't even been unpacked. All our snacks and supplements have been roasted by the sun. Everything that took so much time to pack and gather now seems insignificant.

*I just want my daughter back.*

The crush of young, sunburned bodies scatters across the white beach. I glimpse several children that remind me of Olivia and almost turn back to the house. Will I ever again see a little girl and not think of her? How in the world can I go on as if everything is normal?

I step over meticulously built sandcastles, abandoned beach toys, and chairs that have tipped on their sides due to the rapidly changing tide. I force my feet to move, my lungs to breathe. I don't stop or slow,

even when my legs tire. It's only when the sun sets and I glance at my watch that I realize I've been walking for over an hour.

The lights from Seaside twinkle ahead. My heart drops. It's always tradition that I take Liv to Seaside on the last day of vacation so she can go to Duckies toy store, then Sundog Books, then finally get two scoops of overpriced ice cream. The realization that I will never again treat her to *anything* buckles my legs. I collapse onto the sand before I can catch my breath and an elderly couple rushes over to see if I'm okay.

"I'm fine. Just got dizzy for a second." I almost tell them the truth, but I don't want the sympathy of strangers. I don't want to be defined by a tragedy that is ultimately my fault.

Jason told me he'd call our friends and Olivia's school principal tonight, which I appreciate. One less thing to do, one less round of conversations to cry through. I drop my head on my bent knees and sob into them, thankful for the cover of night as it descends upon me, the bright white moon nearly full in the sky above. I ease onto my back and ogle the stars when they appear, wondering if Olivia is aware of me, down here, while her body awaits transportation to the funeral home. Though I have no idea what Liv would want, earlier Michael and I briefly discussed cremation. At the hospital they told me if I choose to cremate, it can take anywhere from four to fourteen days to get the ashes back, though they would rush the process, considering I don't live here.

I close my eyes and pray for a sign—something to tell me she's here. When nothing comes, I allow the lull of the ocean to settle over me. I'm nearly asleep when someone gently calls my name.

"Hey, Kate. You awake?"

I blink into the darkness as a warm hand clutches my elbow. Jason hovers over me in the dark.

I sit up and brush sand from my hair. “What are you doing here?”

He scratches his neck. “We followed you since there’s no other way to reach you without your phone. We didn’t think you should be alone.” He attempts a joke. “However, I didn’t think this would be a ten-mile round trip or I would have worn shoes.” He points to his bare feet.

“Where’s Ayana?”

He motions behind him, where Ayana offers a tentative wave. She’s wearing her headlamp, and my heart kicks. She and Liv were excited to search for crabs at night. Besides the bright light, Ayana’s dark skin blends into the night so that she becomes a part of it. I want to fold her in my arms and tell her how sorry I am for taking her best friend away. I attempt a smile or some simple offering, but my lips won’t work. Instead, I lean against Jason as he situates closer to me. We could easily pass for a couple watching the stars and not two friends grieving the loss of an irreplaceable human.

“Kate, I know this goes without saying, but I am just so sorry. When Shelby died, everyone kept saying that, but this is different. This is your child.”

I remember how deep the pain was when we lost Shelby. She was my closest female friend. I told her everything. When I moved to Nashville, our long-distance friendship became local. I loved having someone to have coffee with, go to yoga with, go shopping with. When she died, her absence nearly killed both of us. But Jason is right, this is a different loss entirely; it is deeper than any agony I could have imagined.

And while I’ve heard people say that they are sorry for someone’s loss—I’ve even said that to people on occasion—now I know how it actually feels to be on the receiving end. How little it helps. “This is my fault.”

“No, it isn’t.” He grips my forearm firmly. “It was an accident.”

“Agree to disagree.” I shake my arm loose, find Jason’s eyes in the dark, and study the outline of his face: the strong jaw, the piercing eyes, the sturdy shoulders and thick neck. The brief thought about what might happen between us on vacation seems so insignificant now. My birthday. My plans. My life. All ruined.

I imagine reworking my life without Olivia; imagine walking into our home in Nashville, clearing out Olivia’s room, boxing all her belongings, staring every day at her swing set, trampoline, climbing dome, and tree swing Michael built for her as a surprise years ago. It’s just not possible.

“I can’t do this, J. I feel like I’m dying.”

“Hey, *shh*. I know. Come here.” He tucks me back into his side, his limbs warm against mine. “Breathe with me. In for three, out for six. Slow.”

Back when we first met, Jason was obsessed with breathing before it was trendy, and instead of pushing him away, I let him guide me. I breathe as he instructs until my heart rate slows and I feel calmer. I watch Ayana while I breathe as she scoops to collect seashells and search for tiny translucent crabs. Liv should be here with her, gathering a bucket of shells that they would then spread out on the monstrous dining room table to sort through. The image punctures the calm, and my heart breaks all over again.

Ayana approaches and, sensing the mood, drops down beside me and takes my hand in hers. She squeezes it and I squeeze back, a game Liv and I used to play. We’d make up codes for squeezes: one for *yes*, two for *no*, three for *I love you*. We shared the system with Ayana when she was nervous about her first day of school. She squeezes my hand three times, and I squeeze back.

“Thank you both for being here,” I finally say. “You are my family too.”

Ayana scoots in closer, and I breathe her in—the smell of Buttah Skin and remnants of sunscreen.

“We love you, Kate.”

“I love you too.” I remind myself that Jason survived losing Shelby. He’s here now, with a daughter and a life. He rebuilt his entire world without the woman he loved.

“In my experience, it doesn’t necessarily get better, but you will eventually adjust to the pain. You’ll learn to walk with it, not against it.”

We did learn to walk with the pain after Shelby’s death, but this is my own flesh and blood. *My baby*. How do you ever walk in peace with that?

“I don’t want to go back.” I’m not sure if I’m talking about Nashville or the rental.

“Then let’s keep walking.”

I clap the sand from my clothes and let him tug me down the beach, his hand in my right, Ayana’s in my left. We walk several miles toward Gulf Place. Ayana doesn’t complain even once, and I am grateful for her grace. We dodge other kids hunting for crabs, bright flashlights and headlamps cocked at all angles, blinding us. My mind is numb, scrubbed of any true emotion other than this black hole of bottomless grief.

We walk almost the entire way in silence before he tells me to wait at the public beach entrance. He runs across the street to the liquor store. Jason knows I’m not much for spirits—wine is my vice—but tonight is an exception. I swing Ayana’s hand in my own, and we stare at each other. There is so much depth to her, so much soul. She has been through so much too. Losing her own family at three

due to a chemical village raid. She was badly injured, suffering from second-degree burns on her back and chest. She was buried beneath her mother, father, and baby brother, who all died. She was found days later, singed and barely breathing, and became an orphan overnight.

While most people didn't want to adopt a four-year-old, Jason had already been on the list for a year so he flew out to meet Ayana after she'd been put into the system. He's told the story so many times, I feel like I was there. Him, crossing the threshold of the foster home and waving hello. He'd learned a bit of the language so she'd feel more comfortable, though he'd prepared himself for her to be afraid. He didn't know if she'd ever even seen a white man before and figured some stranger coming to adopt her might be terrifying. Instead, she'd walked right up to him and put both hands on his face, which had immediately made him cry.

"Hello," she said in English, the only word she knew.

Jason said it was like they recognized something in each other—as though they knew each other from a different life. And it wasn't just him. Ayana had trusted him almost implicitly. It didn't matter that he was white, or that she didn't speak English, or that he knew so little Amharic. Together, they figured it out.

Years later, she continues to flex her bravery, facing a world that doesn't often reflect her own culture or people. Her *otherness* is always on display, much like Liv's. But they navigated it together. Now she will be alone, other than the kids in her support group and the Black and Brown friends that Jason offers up to her as some sort of consolation prize for not having any blood relatives in her life.

"We were going to have a sandcastle contest," she says. "And make forts in the bunk bed room."

I smooth her braids and cup her tiny face in my palm. "I'm so sorry that I couldn't save her." I begin to cry and take her in my arms.

She stands rigid beneath me, accustomed to grief this close. She'd been forced to become acquainted with it because it had almost killed her too. She allows me to breathe her in, to hold her—a substitute for Liv—even though we both know she's not.

She doesn't tell me it's okay, because it isn't. But she doesn't pull away either. Jason returns, hesitating as he takes us in, and reluctantly I release her. She stumbles back in the sand. Was I holding her too tight? I pat her arm in an apology. Wordlessly, Jason offers me a bottle of Jameson. The liquid burns the back of my throat and lights my chest on fire.

"Let's talk about her," he finally says. He looks to Ayana for approval. "Yes?" She nods and sinks into the sand until we both follow suit. The grains are cool beneath my legs. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that when people die, we stop talking about them. It's uncomfortable. It's too painful. It's too soon, blah, blah, blah. Before you know it, years have passed, and you walk around as though your loved one is a secret just for you. But they're not. Olivia is not. She's a *force*. Tell me your favorite thing about her."

He's right. Do all the lovable details about her disappear just because she's no longer here? I know it's not the big stuff that will be the starkest reminder of her loss. It's the little things. The sound of her toothbrush tapping against the sink after she brushes her teeth for exactly twenty-three seconds instead of the requisite two minutes. The heat from her body when she first wakes up. The slam of the door as she heads outside to swing and listen to music. The scratch of her markers on paper. Her voice, her laugh, the *greatness* of her, occupying every square inch of space. *Who am I without her and how will I ever find my way?* I flounder for what to say, and clocking the panic on my face, Jason butts in.

"Ayana, you first."



I'm grateful I don't yet have to speak. Already my throat is tight and dry, and I'm on the verge of tears.

"I have more than one," Ayana says, scooping up handfuls of sand and letting the grains sift through her fingers. The headlamp is beside her, and she absentmindedly clicks it off and on, illuminating a smooth patch of sea. She still has a network of scars on her left hand, where the flesh crisscrosses in a baby-pink web of skin. Liv used to rub lotion on it for her when it hurt. "She got me to try things. When I was afraid of the diving board, she went first. When I was afraid to ice skate, she got me a bucket."

I nod because it's true.

"And she's always there when I'm sad, to give me a hug or just to listen." Ayana continues to list all of Liv's best traits: how helpful she is, how she has always been willing to share or even give away her most prized possessions, how she can make anyone laugh . . .

"Her big heart," I finally say. "No matter what kind of day I'm having or if I snap at her, she always forgives me, always says she understands and asks me about my day. She gives me head massages and wants to talk about my problems. Just last week, after a stressful day, she made a pallet on the floor and put teddy bears on my belly and talked me through breathing before giving me a shoulder rub." I close my eyes and can feel her little hands on my shoulders, the sweep of her breath across my cheeks. "She's also the most loving person I've ever met." I don't talk about her in the past tense; I can't do that yet.

"What else?" Jason takes the bottle, and we pass it back and forth until my head is fuzzy and I am telling hilarious stories about Olivia: the time she spotted a woman she could swear was Captain Underpants and actually begged for her autograph; the time she was being chased by a boy named Kale and she stood up to him, telling him boys who were named after leafy greens really shouldn't

be chasing anyone; when I talked about the possible promotion at work, she'd looked at me and in a southern twang said, "Life changes, honey. Life changes"; how, in the mornings, when she made fried eggs and poked at the yolks, she would exclaim, "Mama! Mama! Look! Someone peed in the pool!"

As I talk, some of the pain shrinks. My relationship with my daughter goes so far beyond the physical; it's in my thoughts about her, the memories I have of her, the way I want to preserve her legacy.

Before long, I'm drunk. Jason helps me stand and walk the short way home. At the house, once Ayana is inside, I take his hand and pull him to me.

"I love you." This is something we say to each other, something we've said for years, but I mean the words now more than ever.

"I love you more, Kate." He sighs heavily into my neck before telling me to drink some water and get some sleep.

Inside, the beach house is cold and quiet. I can't walk up those stairs with Ayana and Jason, can't pass Liv's room, can't crawl into bed with my own grief, as crippling as a death sentence. Instead, I curl up on the couch and stare at the ceiling until the sun comes up, not wanting to face what comes next.