

# PROLOGUE



1983

A FAINT BUT UNDENIABLE EAR of corn lived on my left calf. I was born with it, a six-and-a-half-inch birthmark filled with alternating light-dark-light-dark pigmentation, which created a pattern that can only be described as corncob-like.

“It won’t come off, Mama,” I said, scrubbing.

Mama was having none of it. “Now, we’ve talked about this, Janie Marie Willow. This is a part of you.” She touched my shoulder and sat down next to me and Strawberry Shortcake on my bed. “This is who you are.”

“But the kids at school call me Corn Cob.” I scrubbed some more, the hot washcloth rubbing my skin raw.

Mama took the rag from my hand and looked at my leg. “You know what they call birthmarks in Italy?”

I just squinted at her.

“*Voglie*. And in Spanish, *antojos*.” Mama patted my leg. “But no

matter the language, Janie, the translation of the word ‘birthmark’ always means the same thing—‘wish.’” She tucked my blond hair behind my ear. “A birthmark is a mother’s secret wish for her child,” she said, smiling. “Your daddy and I wanted you so badly, and you are marked with that love.” She traced her index finger around my birthmark. “You are our hope. Our dream.”

But why mark me with corn? I was already surrounded by it. Did Mama think I was going to somehow run out?

She kissed my forehead like a mother does, walked over to my bedroom door, and said one last thing before going downstairs to make supper. “Never forget where you come from, Janie Willow. It’s the surest way to get lost in this world.”

No way. I would always be surrounded by cornfields, because I was never going to leave. This was home. This was where I belonged.

I glanced up at the picture hanging on my bedroom wall, a framed poster with the word “Iowa” spelled out in bold block letters at the top. The center of the poster featured Des Moines and the state capital building surrounded by other midwestern fare—a John Deere combine, grain silos, farmhouses dotting the hills, a fiery sun disappearing into endless cornfields—but my favorite part of the picture, the part I would remember for the rest of my life, was the miniscule depiction of the rest of the world. On the outskirts of the poster, small versions of larger-than-life world landmarks—the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, the Acropolis—juttied out like mere cartoon afterthoughts, leaving my truth in the middle of the poster, in the middle of the heartland: Iowa was the center of the world.

# CHAPTER ONE



*Present Day*

I'M IN A DARK room with James Bond again. The interloping morning sun tries to peek through my thick office blinds. To be clear, I'm on a couch and Mr. Bond is on a projection screen, but we are sharing something together. This scene, the one I watch more than I should, is both the best and the worst of life, a scene that saves me from my daylight.

A tuxedoed Bond smiles at his newlywed wife in her gown, white chiffon scarf blowing in the wind. They talk of a sunny future while the Aston Martin, adorned with pink and white wedding roses, hums down the ocean-side highway. Bond pulls to the side of the road to remove the flowers from the hood and kiss her. Just then, his arch enemy drives by and sprays the car with machine gun bullets before it continues down the road. James Bond remains unscathed, as he does, but not Tracy—no, not Tracy.

The broken Bond holds his slain bride and kisses her dress. When

he speaks, I speak. “She’s simply resting,” he tells the policeman, and my chest tightens as fate plays out on screen. I pause when Bond pauses. His past is too much to run from. It is his fault and he knows it. Like I always do, I let him carry the guilt. “There’s no hurry now,” he says. “We have all the time in the world.”

I close my eyes while the credits creep by.

“Jane, are you done yet?” And then knocking.

Damn.

In a practiced maneuver, I turn off the projector, turn on the lights, open the blinds, and let in the harsh LA sunshine. I sit down in my father’s old oak desk, a sturdy reminder of where I come from. I look out the window at the clear view of the Hollywood hills in the distance. Humanity exists, somewhere, ten floors down, but the closest I can get to it are the faces staring at me when I swivel my chair back around to see four framed movie posters—*Moonraker*, *Big Fish*, *Magnolia*, *The Wizard of Oz*—hanging on my office wall.

I glance over at the fifth movie poster resting on the floor, propped up against the wall in the corner of my office. A birthday gift from my parents five years ago. Every time I try to hang it up, I can’t. Some stories need to be earned, and I am not worthy of this one. Maybe someday I will be able to watch that film again, hear the proverbial ringing bell and the stars talking to one another, sorting out the logistics of a lost soul. But for now, when loneliness wears me down, I look at them, Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, smiling, grateful, surrounded by children and love, and I am struck by the impossibility of a second chance at life.

Sidney knocks again.

“Coming,” I stall. I put James Bond back in his DVD case, erasing

all traces of nostalgia, an unsavory notion in the world of critics. By now, the whole city is reading what I think of Hollywood's recent indie-breakout-film-turned-Oscar-buzz-worthy hit, *The Hole of Schmidt*, an in-depth drama about a man and his hole.

I finally let in Sidney Parker, my editor for the last ten years. He walks into my office sporting jet lag and a serious tan, even for LA. He's returning from the longest vacation he's ever taken, and the trepidation over what he might have missed while he was gone shows on his face. He takes the newspaper tucked under his arm and places it, along with a to-go coffee cup, on my desk. When he stretches out his arms, I go in for a welcome-home hug, but I know what he wants. He wants to know that it's all going to be okay. All editors force small talk, pretend to be casual, but what they really want to know, to hear, is that you've not only met a deadline, but that you've done so without making enemies in Hollywood, the epicenter of all things movies.

"So...finished? In the paper today, right?" Sidney says, brow raised, a smile pending the right answer. "Tell me you didn't call the most anticipated film of the year a piece of crap or something." His almost-smile fades, replaced by panic. "Jane?"

"Not exactly."

When I wrote the review last week, my diction changed with each breath. At first, I'd typed *uninspired*, then backspaced, typed *soulless*, backspaced again, then whispered to no one, "It is what it is," and retyped the harsh truth: *excrement*. But the words ended up evolving, sentence by sentence, becoming more accurate, really. So accurate, in fact, they became the title of my review. Incessant revision is a habit I've inherited from my father, who has always believed nothing is ever a final draft, even one's words. I save the

act of reviewing, reliving, and revising to the only place it works: on the page.

Sidney buries his face in his hands. He stands before me in his tweed-for-Tuesday vest, always expensive and always tailored, looking a bit like a deranged Gregory Peck prepared to kill his beloved mockingbird who sometimes sings songs he doesn't like. He runs his hand over his dark hair, a gesture that tells me he doesn't know what to do next. Sid has an affinity for anything classic and prefers the good old-fashioned newspaper print to the ever-ready online world, so when he opens the newspaper rather than grab his phone, I'm not surprised.

I try not to cringe as he rifles through the paper, page by page, toward the film reviews. He stops. His finger traces an invisible line from Cinegirl's caricature in the top left of the page to the headline title of my review.

Wait for it.

“What a Schmidt Hole?” he screams. He shakes the newspaper at me. “What a Schmidt Hole?” he screams again, like he doesn't believe his own voice. “I'm only gone six days and I come home to this shit storm?”

“Schmidt storm,” I correct him, feeling out the revision as the words hang in the air.

“You called the most anticipated film of the year a piece of crap.”

“Excrement, actually,” I say, “and then Schmidt Hole, but never—”

“Listen, Jane.” Sidney takes a breath, tries to calm himself. “Remember?” he says as he points to the Gotham Award hanging on my wall. “Let me remind you what they said about you. ‘Jane Willow's prose’”—his hands frame an imaginary headline—“straddles both auteur and blockbuster films...her writing is

startling, explosive, sophisticated.” Sidney softens. “Cinegirl is the most widely read... Would it kill you to throw Nick a bone?”

“I don’t write for Nick, or any other director, Sid. He’ll get over it. I loved his last film.” I swipe my bangs away from my face. “I just really hate this one.”

I really do hate this film. I don’t tell Sidney that it reminds me of the giant hole in my life. I don’t tell him that I hate that this Schmidt character thinks he can dig his way to redemption. I don’t tell him that I hate this film because it has the audacity to find hope amid dismal circumstances.

I glance at the framed picture of my parents placed on the farthest corner of my desk. My dad, the only lawyer in my hometown of True City, Iowa, was considered our unofficial judge by popular opinion and can smell the faintest hint of horse crap long before the closing argument. He has English and law degrees from the University of Iowa, but his no-nonsense sensibility makes him well loved by his coffee shop friends, some who didn’t even graduate high school. I begin to mimic my dad’s voice, which captures Bobby Knight’s intensity, a convincing tone booming from each word. “People want the truth, kid. You’re a bullshit detector...” I say, just like Dad says all the time. “You get that from me.”

Sidney, who has listened to stories about my dad over the years, leans forward in his chair, probably his way of acknowledging my hereditary predisposition for detecting excrement. “But this is an art house film, Jane.” Speaking of bullshit, I smell it as Sidney continues. “It’s got some really cutting-edge scenes, like...”

“Like the nine-minute scene featuring”—I drum roll on my desk with two pencils—“the many nuances of dirt! Very avant-garde. And *Hole of Schmidt*? Really?”

“It’s a double meaning. *Whole* of Schmidt. I think.” He gestures a rough outline of a person and then shrugs. A shrug from Sidney means defeat. “The whole man. You know...”

I do know. When I’m watching movies, talking about movies, thinking about movies, I feel whole. I’m no expert on life, but I know movies. They are sacred to me. Once, when I got into an intellectual scuffle with a who’s-who producer, I ended up having to see a therapist because the owner of the *Times*, Sid’s boss’s boss, demanded that a professional try to diagnose why I didn’t “play well with others.” The therapist said I was clinically fine but socially detached, likely from some sort of emotional trauma, which shut the big-times up for a while. What all of these idiots don’t know is that I don’t see life like them, through simple, rudimentary visual cues. I see everything like a cinematographer in perpetual record mode, comparing each image to scenes from films I hold dear. The problem is, real life never holds up.

“He’s digging a hole to end world hunger, Sid.” I throw up my hands. “World hunger should never be in the same sentence as a man’s hole.”

“So, you didn’t feel even a little—”

“I felt hungry, Sid!” I snorted. “Alert the morality police. I felt hungry in a movie about world hunger.” I raised my pointer finger. “Okay, first of all, it was forty-five minutes too long, and second”—I raised another finger—“it somehow managed to be a heartless film about a heartrending topic.” I raised only my third, middle finger in the universal fuck-off position. “It was a self-indulgent, masturbatory romp, and Nick Wrightman should strangle himself with his own film. God knows there should be loads of it on the cutting room floor, because he’ll never work again.”



“You’re kind of scary when you talk,” Sid said.

I pucker my lips into a pout, but deep down I know I’m right. Nick Wrightman will never work again—he’s used up his chance. I used to believe in second chances. But that was Before. The Before Jane thought about things like that, believed in things like that. I’m After Jane, linguistically tidy but caustic and jaded, like an honest, brazen film review. Eloquent yet unforgivable.

“No, Jane, I mean it,” Sidney says, demanding eye contact. “In print, you’re formidable, but when you speak...you destroy people.”

I wait a beat and say, “Get the sand out of your vagina, Sidney Poitier Parker.”

Sidney’s parents, third-generation Los Angelenos who loved their city and who loved movies, named Sidney after one of the greatest actors of their time. When I want to ask Sidney to catch a bite to eat, I ask in my most convincing tone, “Guess who’s coming to dinner?” He always says yes, because that’s what self-appointed father figures do.

In my assessment, the most accurate reduction of a person’s personality is finding out their favorite movie. If someone asks Sid what his favorite movie is, he’ll say *Citizen Kane* because it’s a respectable answer for an editor of serious film criticism, but Sid’s real, secret favorite movie is *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. I happen to know this. I also happen to know that deep down, he is a lovable outlaw masquerading in the City of Angels, secretly defying his destiny. Heart over art sometimes. We all have our secrets.

Instead of a rebuttal, Sidney looks up on the wall at the framed first-run edition of my weekly column, *Cinegirl*, featuring a cartoon-drawing likeness of me: Bridget Bardot meets Debbie Harry, my

pronounced upturned nose further exaggerated. I wonder if Sidney is comparing us, me and Cinegirl, with our sixties-inspired mascara and wild hair. The only difference between us is Cinegirl's perma-smile and seemingly perky attitude.

In my least perky voice, I say, "Hey, let's call Nick, tell him his movie's a piece of crap, and then order pizza. There's a marathon showing of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It'll cheer us up."

Sidney's eyes widen. "Who *are* you?"

I greet him like I greet everyone: Bond style. "Willow," I say, hand outstretched. "Jane Willow."

"No, seriously, what happened to you as a child?" Sidney's brow furrows. "Mean imaginary friend? Lead paint? I thought midwesterners were polite."

I nod. "Pathologically polite. Something in the corn, maybe." I pause, glance up at my wall of accomplishment, proof of solid midwestern work ethic, and think of my mother. "Every bedtime, my mother made me repeat her down-home mantra: Work hard. Be nice."

Sidney takes that in. "Well, one out of two isn't bad."

I walk to the window and stare out at the hilly, Los Angeles sprawl. "Look, Sid, America doesn't care that I was a film studies major. They don't care that I know that the awful nine-minute dirt scene employed nonsynchronous sound and that the denouement was one big *deus ex machina*. They don't care that one of the perks of Cinegirl's remarkable popularity is this beautiful office. They don't care that I say inappropriate things at inappropriate times. They don't care what I look like, and they sure as hell don't care if I'm socially pleasant. My guess is they have better things to do than ponder the motivations of a film critic."

I turn to him. “They love me because I tell them the truth. Like the Master.” I point at my shrine to film critic legend Pauline Kael on my desk, which includes a small sign—*WWPKS* (What Would Pauline Kael Say)—propped up on a miniature easel, along with a classic photo of the famous, late film critic draped in a writerly scarf. “Now, she was a woman with balls.”

Sidney nods, uncrosses his legs, and focuses his attention on the photo of my parents. Sidney knows it’s home I’m avoiding, not my parents, but nevertheless, I tread lightly.

“My parents were just here two months ago, Sid. I took them to Grauman’s Chinese Theater, even let them sleep in my bed. They can fly here whenever they want.”

My parents are getting older and I should try harder to see them. It’s difficult for them to travel, even if Dad does have his own plane—Hawkeye, his single-engine dream. But they’ll have to come to me. I don’t go home. Ever. I can’t.

“And I haven’t told you the news.” I put my shoulders back, proud, and turn toward Sidney to see his face. “I’m planning a surprise trip for them—five-star treatment.” I pause. “Red carpet treatment.”

“Really.” Sidney sits up a little straighter.

“Yes. My dates for the Oscars—Mom and Pop. I’ll have to tell Mom that she can’t wear her housecoat and cardigan, and Dad will probably give several A-listers unsolicited legal advice.” I take a deep breath in preparation for the real news. “But the tickets to the Oscars is the small surprise, Sid. This is the big surprise.”

I pull up a photo on my phone from the Century 21 website of a townhome in the heart of Studio City with a *Sold* banner. “No more Iowa winters for Mom and Pop,” I say, showing him my parents’ new home away from home. “What it really means is that

they can come to me rather than me going to see them, that I can see them whenever I want instead of once a year.”

Sid stares for a moment, and his voice breaks a little when he says, “So this is what you’ve been saving for.” He doesn’t look up, just keeps staring at the photo. “Well, that’s really something.”

When he finally looks up, he sees me scowling at some sort of children’s party invitation on the top of my mail pile. It is adorned with a big, pink heart. When I pick it up, he says, “Ah, you really do have a heart, Jane Willow.”

“Shut up, Sid,” I say, cringing at the thought of attending a kid’s party.

“And it’s gone again.” Sid nods and leans against my desk.

The pink-hearted envelope features balloons, and the inside invitation has a birthday cake with seven candles.

To: Ms. Jane Willow  
From: María Pacheco  
What: Felicia’s Birthday Party  
When: Saturday, 11 a.m.

My assistant, Maria, has also attached a Post-it Note to the bottom of the invitation. *Please know this will be totally lame...nothing like your usual fancy events...money’s tight lately. Anyway, for some reason, Felicia wants you to come. Don’t feel obligated.*

I stare at the note, lingering on “for some reason.” Three small words can pack quite a punch. Maria probably thinks I don’t know Felicia exists. I’ve never bothered to tell Maria that sometimes, when Maria’s sitter gets flaky and she brings Felicia to the office with her, Felicia and I hang out. When she’s supposed to be in

the conference room coloring until she dies of boredom, I sneak her into my office and teach her things every little girl needs to know, like why it's imperative that producers stop overusing gerunds in movie titles. *Finding Forrester*, *Drowning Mona*, *Being John Malkovich*—okay, I really do love that one—but come on already, and I teach Felicia the harsh truth: people who don't know their favorite movie when asked are just plain dumb. When she tells me she thinks *Frozen* is silly and how she loves animals even more than she loves cupcakes, we watch *Born Free* together, and I introduce her to the “other” Elsa. Lions are her favorite.

“Have you told your parents about the house yet?” Sid asks.

“I'm gonna call them tonight,” I say. “Mom's gonna cry”—I smile—“and Dad's gonna tell me I spent too goddamned much money, but then he'll tell all of his friends about it and be secretly proud.”

Sid gazes out the window. “Why do you never go there?” He pauses before he says the next word. “Home.”

My stomach twists and knots up.

Ah, home. We leave home to truly know it. If that isn't a load of crap. I left home because I needed to forget who I was. To me, this is as clear as a midwestern sky full of the brightest stars in space. Truth is, I tried so many times to go home. Whenever I got close to going back, got brave enough to confront my past, a new movie emerged, new characters' arcs that came full circle without me having to. Eventually, today became tomorrow, tomorrow became someday, and someday never came.

Answering the question isn't an option.

It's time to bring him out, the spy who loves me in my dreams, so I say, “We have all the time in the world.”

Sidney has one last question. “Was that *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* playing in here earlier?”

I shrug his question away.

“You say you’re all about truth, Jane, but...” He stopped. “Secrets are dangerous things.”

“Okay.” I nod with purpose. “You want the truth?” I blurt, then I soften. “Truth: I tear up when Wilson floats away in *Castaway*. David Lynch films put me to sleep better than Ambien. And I love James Bond films because my dad and I... They remind me of happy times.” I look out the window, a break from the truth.

“Jane.” Sidney lowers his head. “I shouldn’t have—”

“No, you’re right. My past is complicated.” The truth begins to unravel. I head in a different direction. “Sid, you grew up here.” I stretch my arms toward the window. “It’s exciting here. Botox gone wrong, fashionable cults, Mercury in retrograde, Steven Soderbergh at Whole Foods. Life here is one big, fantastical Tim Burton movie. We live in a city that nobody wants to leave.” Fred Allen was right. Hollywood is a place where people from Iowa mistake one another for stars.

I sigh. “Life in Iowa is a rom-com cliché. Predictable dialogue. Incessant talk about the weather. Slurpees. Bad casseroles. Crying in sentimental movies, and using ‘cute’ as a definitive, stand-alone film critique. It’s abysmal. And don’t even get me started on the overwrought, over-referenced: *It’s not heaven, it’s Iowa* bullshit. Middling movie. Middling, saccharine, vapid drivel—they’re just fields, trust me; I’ve detassled them. No dreams, no heaven. You think it’s some storybook landscape that can heal with its good old-fashioned horse sense, but there are as many broken people there as there are in your city of broken dreams.”

*Time stops where I come from*, I want to say. *No twist ending there*, I want to say. And let's face it, we're all holding out for the twist. Even though the secret I bear is evidence of the contrary, I say, "Nothing happens there."

Before Sidney can respond, my phone rings. "Willow," I say. "Jane Willow." I smile at Sidney. "Is this Cheryl from Century 21? All the paperwork's ready. I just have to fax—" I stop to listen. It isn't a woman's voice. I smile again. "Who is this? Did my parents put you up to this?" I cover the mouthpiece and playfully whisper to Sidney, "Apparently my parents are dead, Sid, so I'll finally be planning a trip home."

For a moment, I smile wide.

And then I drop the phone on the floor.





## CHAPTER TWO



**S**IDNEY'S FACE LOSES ALL expression for a moment and then worry settles in his brow as he picks the phone off the floor and hands it to me.

The policeman on the phone is still talking, but all I can hear is what he said just seconds ago.

*Plane crash.*

My whole body goes numb. “Uh-huh,” I say, barely audible, followed by “I understand.” But I don’t understand. Not really. I only heard the words: *Plane crash. Dad at the helm. They were together.*

“Yes. No,” I choke out. I clench my hand, my nails digging deep into my own flesh. “I understand.”

The truth seeps through to my insides, and my body betrays me. My posture sinks into submission. My vision is blurred with emotions so foreign, I have to reintroduce myself to them.

*Shock. Nice to meet you. Anger. How are you? Pissed off, I presume.*

*Loss.*

*It's been a while.*

The policeman's kind voice softens as he tells me how he had known my parents. How everyone knew them. How as police chief he looked up to my dad. How True City would feel this loss. How they were real gems.

I drift between present and past. I stare hard at the clock, willing it to slow. But it doesn't listen. The second hand moves in a perfect cadence, a mean metronome reminding me of what was, what will never be again.

Time does not stop. It keeps *tick-tick-ticking* away from things that should've been: heartfelt phone calls, refused trips home, red-carpet dreams.

"Was it my dad's fault?" I clear my throat and squeeze the phone to calm my trembling hand. "Was there anything he could've done?" I can tell Sidney thinks this question is odd, but making things right, proper revision, would have been important to Dad.

The policeman on the phone tells me there'd been an engine malfunction, and as I often do, I say the worst thing possible. "Thank God. If he hadn't done everything he could to right that plane, that would've killed him."

Sidney closes his eyes for a few seconds, then opens them, as if to blink away my unfortunate phrasing.

I search for the right words.

Words are not permanent.

"He believed in making things right." I swallow away the lump in my throat.

I hang up the phone, stare, in shock.

"My dad," I finally say, unable to look at Sidney. "He thought

life was one giant rough draft.” My voice breaks, and I try to disguise a hiccup-breath, the kind of breath one takes midsob.

“Jane.” Sidney rises to his feet, walks to where I stand, touches my shoulder.

I look out the window, avoid my own reflection, and think of Dad’s words. “He’d say, ‘We all screw up at some point. Try not to let it be you. But if it is you...’” I turn to Sidney, as if always-sunny Los Angeles were unworthy of my father’s words. “That is to say, if it is you, if you screw up, just make it right, kid.”

But how can I make anything right? My parents are dead. I can hear my father’s voice, as if we are both sitting on the porch together again, searching for the right words.

Dead.

Deceased.

That is to say, gone.

A full-body chill takes hold, a harsh reminder that I may never be warm again. Sidney’s questions keep coming. *What can I do to help? Do you want me to have Maria clear your schedule? Are you okay?*

I can’t answer a single one.

Instead, flashbacks arrive with haunting speed, faster than any director could ever storyboard. No time to recover. Mom and Dad holding my hand as we walk into *Star Wars*, my first time in a theater. Mom singing “Madam Librarian” while watching *The Music Man*. Fresh watermelon picnics under the big willow tree. Dad taking the training wheels off. Restoring the Aston Martin. Mom laying out patterns for Bond Girl-inspired prom dresses.

Cornfields and unconditional love...everywhere.

Sidney reminds me this is real. “This is... God, I’m so sorry, Jane. I don’t even know what to say.”

“I know.”

Sid reluctantly leaves after I convince him I need a moment, and the second he does, the tears unleash.

This.

This is the moment I’ve dreaded my whole life, the moment I thought wouldn’t come for another twenty years. They will go to their graves not knowing what happened to me, what I did, why I couldn’t come home for all these years, what kind of person I really am. For this, I am grateful. They deserve at least that.

But they will also go to their graves never knowing the truth, never knowing that because I am weak, because I couldn’t bear to face what I’d done, I let the magnitude of my secret and my shame outshine my love for them, and for that I will never forgive myself. Who could?

I should say something to someone, but my words are not my own. I am somewhere else, with someone else’s words. I close my eyes and imagine us together once last time. My parents and I take off, flying through the air in Dad’s single-engine dream. Dad clears his throat to temper his vulnerability and tells Mom, “Darlin’, you’re outta this world.” She knows this is his version of “I love you,” and she prefers it. She avoids looking at the impossibly blue sky ahead and at the tiny squares of land below, and instead looks at Dad.

This imaginary flight with my parents is the biggest montage of my life, and the screenplay in my mind writes itself, flowing out of me with the beauty of a perfect, backward glance.

I write how the sky had been their playground, how two people, husband and wife for forty years, courted each other in the clouds. I write how the big, blue Iowa sky—the only place

Dad would ever sing—was their heaven. On the ground, they were servants to the ordinary, but up there? Up there they were ambassadors to the moon.

But if I think about what they saw in the last minutes before they died, if I think about how they loved it when the cornfields caught the golden sunlight of their crisp, autumn Iowa sky, I will have to remember other things.

I sniff away the moment, the day, everything that hurts, and look around my office at the life I've created for myself. The language of it all overwhelms me. Words. Words everywhere. For a woman who judges people by their actions, the irony is right there, right there in the pile of papers on my desk, in the framed awards on my wall, in a decade's worth of reviews—a barren wasteland of words is what remains—a bittersweet consolation to a parentless child.

I feel the bitter part come through. It is yesterday. And the day before that. Any day that isn't today. Any day in my past. Any day when a girl could bury a secret part of herself in a soil so rich, so fertile, it's hard to imagine anything unable to survive there.

But that was yesterday. And today is today. So I will push the inevitable onto tomorrow.

After all, there is all the time in the world.

And tomorrow, I will finally go home.



## CHAPTER THREE



*J* SLUMP INTO MY RECYCLED bamboo chair at the Crossroads Café, the least crowded restaurant on my way home from work. Sid had begged me to come to his house, to drink away my sorrow with him, but I am finally going home tomorrow, and I have work to do.

A young, gum-chomping waitress fueled by organic food and blind optimism bounces over to my table, her extra-small T-shirt proudly displaying a button that reads *Real food has mud, not blood*.

Her voice smiles. “And how are *you* today?”

I muster a nod. *My parents are dead*, I want to say, but she seems really, really happy.

“Hi, I’m Clara,” comes out in a singsong cadence. “I’ll be helping you today,” she says with a wide smile and teeth so white it hurts my eyes.

*You can’t help me.*

“Can I get you started with an alkaline water or a shot of wheatgrass or maybe—”

“Bourbon.” True bourbon is made from at least fifty-one percent corn, and since I’m heading back home where endless cornfields blanket the horizon, maybe this will help me acclimate.

“Aw,” she says with an apologetic pout. “We don’t serve alcohol here. Rough day?”

When I don’t answer, she nervously glances up at the poster hanging next to my booth, and with my eyes, I dare her to try to cheer me up and invoke its message: *Give Peas a Chance*.

*Do it, Clara. I’ve got nothing to lose.*

There are no follow-up questions, because she doesn’t really want to know how I am. Nobody out here does. Not really.

I am suddenly aware that I am far away from my home, that I have been far away for a long time, and I’ve never been so alone. Two other sets of silverware stare back at me, two-for-one meal specials scream out in loud fonts, and laughter from happy tables for two, three, and four fills the room.

I imagine if Mom and Dad were here. How Mom would tell Clara the waitress that she has lovely blue eyes and ask her if she got them from her mother, and how she’d listen for an answer, really listen without interrupting, like people here do just so they can talk about themselves. And then Dad would say, “Jesus Christ, Mary. Ya can’t ask a thing like that. Maybe her mother’s dead!” That last part, the morbid stuff-you-shouldn’t-say-out-loud part, would somehow be louder than the rest of the sentence and attract a roomful of disapproving glares. But that wouldn’t matter, you see, because somehow, Clara would find this all charming, and before Dad could finish his free iced tea refill, they all would’ve exchanged numbers, and she would have plans to stay on our farm on her way out East. She would love



my parents because they are as real and bright as a giant, Iowa harvest moon.

Were. Were real. Were bright.

My eyes well up, and I turn toward the peaceful peas on the wall so nobody will see.

Clara wants to take my order, wants to get as far away from me as possible, whichever comes first. “What can I start you off with?”

I snuffle my almost-tears away like they’re summer allergies, and before I can order a sensible low-carb garden salad, some long-ago craving unearths itself, and I suddenly feel the urge to feed it.

“I’ll take a steak,” I say, and after hearing my mother’s reminder about manners in my head, add, “please.”

“Super! Do you want the charred tofu, the seitan steak, or the sautéed mushroom steak?” Clara says as she points to a menu photo of a colossal mushroom the size of California held hostage between two gluten-free buns.

“A real steak.” And then I whisper, “Made from an animal,” like we’re involved in some sort of carnivorous espionage. “And some mashed potatoes, with, like, a stick of butter,” I add, my grief-induced state temporarily forcing me to be someone I used to be.

The look of horror on Clara’s face says she can’t decide what’s worse, bovine homicide or a week’s worth of carbs in one dollop of potatoes, the latest item to be vilified in the land of no-fun food.

When Clara returns fifteen minutes later with the best she could do—sweet potato fries and a veggie burger between two sad pieces of lettuce—I am struck by a new realization: perhaps my surly attitude isn’t so much because I’m a total bitch, but that I’ve been chronically deprived of carbohydrates for years and

have subsequently depleted my brain of serotonin and all things happy.

A skittish and covert Clara places the bill on the table and starts to turn away. “Wait. Here,” I say, calling her back. Along with the bill, I give her a hundred-dollar tip, my apology for being a pain in the ass. When she softens, stops to give me a smile, I feel an undeniable longing for some sort of humanity, like this scene needs a more meaningful, cinematic resolution. So I ask her the only question that really matters.

I wait until our eyes lock and then with a smile ask, “Hey, what’s your favorite movie?”

Clara readjusts a half-full glass of water perched on two dirty plates. She grins, confused. “What?”

“Your favorite movie, what is it?” I repeat, now noticing her nametag that reads: *Clara D.*

She stops, painfully in thought, but then loses her focus and glances out the window. A convertible on the street outside hums by, blaring Randy Newman’s “I Love LA.” Clara ponders for a few more seconds, and I prepare for the moment I’ve been waiting for, when a movie unites two random people scurrying through this thing called life.

“I don’t watch movies,” she says and darts away.

Now I am left alone to talk about movies all I want. All day. To nobody.

So there it is. A moment of clarity with Clara D.

I look down at the small bag sticking out of my purse, holding the DVD I’ve just bought Felicia for her birthday. I had planned on dropping it at the office in the morning for my perfect plan. No party. No people. No problem.

*Hey, Happy Birthday, Felicia. Sorry I chose not to spend time with you on your special day. Here's a movie instead!*

Must revise. Right now.

“Thank you, Clara D.,” I say to myself and dial the number of my first of three accomplices.

“Sean,” I say. “It’s Jane Willow. You owe me a favor.”



The next day I wake up, pack for my short trip home, and swallow away the lump in my throat that forms every time I look for texts from my parents.

But there is one thing I need to do, want to do, before I leave.

When I show up on the tree-lined street in Burbank, the whole affair looks less like a birthday party and more like a neighborhood barbecue. Seven pink balloons are tethered to the mailbox out front, and a small *Happy Birthday* sign sticks out of the tiny lawn. *Felicia* is written in with a black Sharpie.

Neighbors mill about, mingling amongst the aroma of meat on the grill and Maria’s beautiful flower garden lining the sidewalk leading up to the small, modest home. Before I even have a chance to ring the doorbell, Felicia bounds out the front door and hugs me around the waist.

“I knew you’d come!” she says. “I’m really sorry about your mommy and daddy,” she adds, taking my hand like a child does, followed by a heartfelt moment of solidarity. “I hate airplanes.”

Maria is close behind and greets me like one greets her boss who has come to her daughter’s birthday party when she should be planning a funeral.

“Jane...” She stops in front of me, trying to conceal her shock, partly that I showed up at all, but mostly that I showed up after yesterday’s news. “How are you... I can’t believe you...”

“You only turn seven once, right?” I say, handing her Felicia’s gift—*Born Free* on Blu-ray and a Blu-ray player in case they didn’t have one. I urge them to open it later, and tell Felicia to go have fun. We all walk to the backyard together, and sometime between my first and second trip to the adult beverage station (a must at any birthday party if you want return guests the following year) it happens.

It begins with the sweet part, the procession of caterers in baking smocks carrying tray after tray of cupcakes, each adorned with *Felicia* written in fancy-chocolate-cursive goodness. They walk past the small card table strewn with a few mismatched paper plates and napkins, and unfold a large industrial table. They attract some attention from the party-goers as they begin to stack the cupcakes on a four-foot-tall wire frame in the shape of a giant number seven. Store-bought cupcakes will probably not taste as good as Maria’s homemade sheet cake, but it is quite a sight—a giant mountain of Felicias, larger than life, ready to take on the world with love and luck on her side.

Before Maria can make her way over to the caterers to ask who sent them, if there’s been some mistake, the real show begins. Two trucks, both with the LA Zoo sign and logo on the side, pull into the side driveway that leads to the backyard. Sean’s nephew, the animal caretaker and outreach program director who brings his animals to the late-night talk shows, steps out of the truck. He and three other handlers wave to the party-goers, now brimming with excitement, and completely ignore me as instructed. One

handler carries a giant blue and gold macaw on his forearm, while another mingles with the guests, showing off a baby orangutan who is clinging to her like a baby clings to its mother.

Then comes the best part, the climactic scene when Felicia, holding her own mother's hand, sees the cinematic moment of the day: Sean's nephew holding the newest addition to the LA Zoo family of cats: a baby lion cub.

"Mama, it's Elsa!" Felicia belts out, but then softens, careful not to scare the baby animal.

By now the crowd is overflowing with oohs and aahs, and I can't take my eyes off Felicia, who is beaming with wonder. "Do you guys know Elsa?" she says to the crowd. "She's from *Born Free*. That's my favorite movie!"

Every good woman knows her favorite movie. "Atta girl," I whisper to no one.

I almost don't notice a slow-moving cloud as it blocks the sun for a moment, because the scene here is so euphoric. I take one last close-up shot of Felicia, petting her Elsa, and look for my exit.

As I sneak out amidst the bustling excitement, I hear Maria pleading with one of the animal handlers. "No, seriously, who set this up?" I can hear a slight fear in her question, a concern about the cost, so I call Sean's nephew over to the side of the house, out of view.

"Remember what I said, right? She won this, courtesy of the LA Zoo Outreach Program... God knows my donation should keep it up and running for quite some time."

He smiles. "Whatever you say, Ms. Willow—I hear you're a real ball breaker."

I shrug. “Hey, don’t let anyone get mauled today, all right? I don’t wanna see this end up on Dateline.”

I drive away from Burbank toward the unknown, my long trip home a long shot in a finished scene, and as the wind blows through my hair, I feel the weight of being free.