

one

When I first got here—when they brought me here—a man with blue pants and a matching shirt, both of which looked like they were made of paper, asked me questions. He took notes when I answered, balancing a clipboard against his left hip and holding a pen in his right hand. I'm left-handed, so that's something we didn't have in common.

“What's your name?” he asked.

I considered saying: *What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*

I was sitting; he was standing. The clipboard was level with my forehead, and when he cocked his hip, the clipboard swayed dangerously close to my face. He smiled tightly. His teeth were yellow and crooked. He said, “Don't be difficult.”

Do you find Shakespeare difficult?

“What's your name?” he repeated.

I closed my eyes. I suppose your name is the first thing that ever really belongs to you, but when you think about it, it's not *yours* at all. Your parents chose it. A million people might

have had it before you. Maybe even a specific person, if you were named after someone. My name begins with an *H* for my mom's late aunt Hilda because that's something Jewish people do, carrying the dead around with us almost from the instant we're born. Plenty of people name their children after a relative who's passed away, but as far as I know, we're the only ones who *require* it. And my mother told me we're absolutely not supposed to name our children after someone who's still alive, though I've never actually seen her go to temple so I don't imagine she's an expert on the rules. Nonetheless, Mom insisted I be named in honor of Hilda, who died while my mom was pregnant, and to whom my mother was apparently really close. Mom told me once that she never considered actually calling me *Hilda*. She thought the name sounded too old.

So: *Hannah*.

A sweet name. A good girl's name. Even more traditional and old-fashioned than Hilda, when you think about it. I mean, I don't think there's a *Hilda* in the Bible.

Hannah is nothing like *Agnes*.

Hannah wanted to play games that *Agnes* thought we were getting too old for.

No, not getting too old, *Agnes* said. *We've been too old for these games for years now. We're going to be seniors in a couple months!* But she was laughing, so I knew I'd be able to make her play.

Back to the man with the clipboard.

We both knew he didn't really need me to tell him my name. Someone must have told him before I got here. He scribbled

something on my file. The corner of the board dug into his belly, and I wondered if it hurt or if he was numb beneath his paper clothes. I couldn't see what he was writing, but I guessed he wasn't smudging the letters because he wasn't a lefty.

Maybe left-handed people should be taught to write right to left instead of left to right. (And in languages that already read right to left, right-handed people would get to write in the opposite direction, too.) It'd be more fair that way. In kindergarten, my lowest grades were always in "penmanship"—not that they were real grades back then. Where I go to school you don't get A's and B's and C's until seventh grade. Anyhow, comparing my penmanship to the right-handed kindergarteners wasn't remotely fair when you think about it. I was the only lefty in my class. My teacher had to procure special left-handed scissors for me, but I could never make them work. I ended up using the right-handed scissors instead. I read somewhere that every year, twenty-five left-handed people die using products designed for right-handed people.

Maybe even scissors.

The man with the clipboard led me up the stairs (two flights) and down a hall to this room. I wanted to ask about Agnes. I wanted to know whether Jonah was with her. She'd been in the hospital for nearly a week by the time they brought me here, plenty of time for Jonah to come. Maybe he was holding her hand. Maybe he'd lean over and kiss her forehead. I never saw them *really* kiss. Jonah said Agnes was shy about doing stuff like that in front of me, even though we were roommates and best friends.

Agnes's parents arrived less than forty-eight hours after Agnes was admitted to the hospital. I was sitting by her bed when they got there. After that, the doctors wouldn't let me back into her room because I wasn't *family*. At the time, I assumed that since her real family had arrived to sit at her bedside, the doctors didn't feel the need to bend whatever rules they'd bent so that Agnes wouldn't be alone. Though she was in a coma, so it was impossible to say whether or not she knew she wasn't alone. Agnes was still in the ICU when her parents arrived, and the hospital only allowed visitors into the ICU two at a time, and Agnes's parents almost never left her.

With Agnes gone, I spent a few nights by myself in our dorm room, where we'd been living together since the summer program started nearly two months before. I took taxis back and forth to the hospital each day. (I considered checking into a hotel closer to the hospital, maybe the same hotel where Agnes's parents were staying, then decided against it.) But they never let me back into Agnes's room.

I can still picture how she looked the last time I saw her—that is, before her parents arrived: one tube going down her throat, tape over her lips to hold it in place. An IV stuck into her left arm that was attached to a plastic bag full of liquid (medication? fluids? nutrients?) hanging on a hook above her bed. She'd told me once that she hated needles; at least she'd been unconscious when they stuck her this time. Her blond hair was only a shade or two darker than the white sheets on her bed. By the time they sent me here, Agnes was out of the ICU, but she was still in a

coma, still had that tube taped to her mouth. They said it wasn't safe to move her to a hospital closer to home in her condition.

When the doctors asked me what happened, I told them. Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board. Never Have I Ever. Truth or Dare. Agnes's parents asked me what happened when they arrived, so I told them, too. And of course, I told the police when they asked.

Agnes's mother had never heard of Light as a Feather so I had to explain how the game worked: One person lies on the ground while everyone else gathers around, putting their fingers beneath her and chanting *light as a feather, stiff as a board* until the girl (or boy, but in this case, girl) in the middle levitates. Mrs. Smith looked so alarmed that you'd have thought she actually believed the game was some sort of satanic ritual that caused its players to float through the air.

I explained that you can't really play Light as a Feather with only two people. That of course no one really *levitates*—the group simply lifts someone and sets her back down. I told Mrs. Smith that wasn't what had happened to Agnes. I said we switched to Never Have I Ever—each of us trying to trick the other into confessing a secret—but that got boring, so eventually we started playing Truth or Dare.

I explained how Truth or Dare worked, in case Mrs. Smith didn't know that either. (You take turns asking each other *truth* or *dare*. If you pick *truth*, you have to honestly answer whatever question you're asked. If you pick *dare*, you have to do whatever task you're given.)

The day after that, they brought me here.

I didn't put up a fight, didn't kick and scream and protest my innocence like people do in the movies. I came calmly and quietly because I knew this was all a misunderstanding that would get sorted out once Agnes's parents had some time to calm down. They were probably still in shock, too upset to see straight. After all, their daughter had just fallen out of a window two floors off the ground. But soon they'd realize that if I'd actually done anything wrong, I'd hardly have been sitting at Agnes's bedside (more accurately, in the hospital waiting room, since they wouldn't let me in to see her anymore), where it would be easy to find me. They needed someone to blame, and I was the only available scapegoat. Their daughter was my best friend. Playing the scapegoat was the least I could do under the circumstances.

This room is eight feet by seven feet. I don't mean feet as in twelve inches, I mean the number of steps it takes me to get from one end of the room to the other. I've had plenty of time to count. Maybe I should've been counting the days instead of my steps, so I'd know how long I've been here, but it's hard to keep track when every day is almost exactly like the one before it. The only furniture is the narrow bed where I sleep and another bed on the opposite wall. The only light, other than the fluorescent beams overhead, comes from a tiny, square-shaped window on the wall opposite the door. The window is off-center, so it's slightly closer to the bed I sleep in. At night, a tiny strip of light comes in under the door because the lights in the hallway stay on twenty-four hours a day. The overhead lights must work on a timer. I don't know exactly what times they go on and off, but

suffice it to say, they let me know when to wake in the morning and when to go to sleep at night.

The walls in here are made of oversized bricks. Not tile, and not rocks or stone, but some kind of manufactured material, complete with fake divots and imperfections like someone thought it would look less institutional that way, like that would help whoever was stuck in this room forget what kind of place this is.

Someone—maybe the same someone who picked the oversized bricks—thought it was a good idea to paint the walls green. Maybe they thought this place would feel more natural that way, but the only natural way for a wall to be green is if it's covered in ivy or moss, and ivy and moss don't grow here and even if they did, they aren't *this* color green, this industrial vomit green that vaguely reminds me of the never-used classrooms in the basement of my school where they supposedly discovered asbestos in the walls. The classrooms we actually use are above-ground and asbestos-free, painted yellow and blue and even purple because someone's parent read that the color purple was good for your brain.

There's fog here, but it never rains. I stand on my tiptoes to look out my small window and wait for the few plants and trees I can see to dry out and die.

t w o

Too old for these games. Too old for these games. Too old for these games.

I hear the words over and over, like a song I can't get out of my head. It's Agnes's voice I hear, not my own. Like she's in the room with me. I can practically see her flipping her long blond hair over one shoulder. Her hair is thinner than mine, but less unruly. Plus, mine is brown. So much more ordinary than Agnes's hair. At least, that's how Jonah must've seen it.

On the other hand, Jonah said once that my brown hair paired with my light green eyes made me pretty in a *striking* sort of way. He didn't say it like it was a good thing. More like it was merely something he'd noticed.

Too old for these games.

You're never really too old for games. The games just change. You'd think someone with a name as grown-up as Agnes would've understood that.

Come on, Agnes. It'll be fun.

I'm not sure we have the same idea of fun, Agnes said. But she was smiling, so she must have been having at least a little fun.

Light as a feather, stiff as a board. Light as a feather, stiff as a board. Light as a feather. . .

When I say the words out loud, they echo off the ugly brick walls like a beacon, bringing Dr. Lightfoot along with them. That's not her real name. Her real name is Priya Charan (she introduced herself to me when we met, obviously), but I call her Lightfoot because she wears ballet slippers, and they *tap tap tap* across the linoleum floor with every step she takes. And I don't mean stylish ballet flats, the kind you can get at J. Crew, the sort that Audrey Hepburn made famous and fashionable. I mean, this doctor literally wears ballet shoes. They're not even nice ballet shoes, like the kind professional dancers wear. These are the sort of plain slippers parents give to little kids taking their first ballet class.

These slippers have no laces and no soles. They have no sharp or heavy parts. They can't be used as weapons. Dr. Lightfoot wears them because they make her feel safe around girls like me.

Which, I have to tell you, is absurd. Not because I wouldn't try anything (I can't make any promises—who knows what being trapped in a room could drive a person to do?), but because Dr. Lightfoot always brings a clipboard with my file clipped to it and a pen with her, just like the man who asked my name when I arrived here. Maybe it's the same clipboard. I asked to see my file the first time she came to see me, and she held it out in front of her so I could only see the first page.

Now *those* items—the clipboard, the pen, even the heavy file—could be useful, if you were interested in that sort of thing.

Which is why Dr. Lightfoot never comes to see me alone.

“Who’s that?” I asked on the first day. Or maybe it was the fifth day. Or the tenth. Like I said, I haven’t been keeping track. Anyway, it was the first time Dr. Lightfoot made an appearance, so I’m guessing it was at the beginning of all of this.

“That’s my colleague Stephen,” she answered, gesturing to the enormous man standing in the doorway with his arms crossed like a bouncer at the hottest club back home in the city. When Dr. Lightfoot is here, the door stays open, but Stephen is so big that he blocks any light that might come in from the hallway, along with any chance of seeing my fellow inmates (patients? prisoners?) who might be walking in the hallway. Or any chance of them seeing me.

“What’s he doing here?”

“Observing,” Dr. Lightfoot answered. “He’s a student.”

I sighed. It’s not like I thought they’d have the best doctors in the world at a place like this, but I’m surprised they put someone as incompetent as Lightfoot in charge of my case. It’s bad enough that she keeps me locked in this room all day, which definitely wouldn’t be good for my sanity if I were actually mentally ill. But even I know that doctors like her are supposed to gain their patients’ trust. Which is pretty hard to do when her answer to one of the first questions I ever asked was a bald-faced-lie.

It was true that Stephen was observing, but it was a lie that he was here to learn something. He was here to keep an eye on me. He was here so Dr. Lightfoot wouldn’t have to be alone with me.

Because I’ve been labeled *a danger to herself and others*.

Another phrase that floats through my head. Though not in Agnes's voice. Agnes wouldn't have said that because no one ever said that about me before they brought me here. And by the time they brought me here, Agnes had a tube stuck down her throat, so she couldn't have said anything anyway.

I don't hear this particular phrase in anyone's voice because I never heard it at all. I saw it written on the first page of my file when Lightfoot held it out to me.

My name was typed at the top of the page: *Hannah Gold*.

Beneath that was my date of birth, my address in New York, my medical history (strep throat at eleven, tonsillitis at thirteen).

And beneath that were two bullet points:

- Hold for observation.
- Patient may pose a danger to herself and others.

"So that's why I'm stuck in this room?" I asked. "Because you think I'm dangerous?"

"You're in this room for your own safety." I was already sick of Lightfoot's dull, monotonous voice.

"And the safety of others," I added. Lightfoot didn't respond.

Patient may pose a danger to herself and others.

I always hated when people said *maybe, maybe not* in answer to a question. What an absurdly redundant, completely unnecessary expression. *Maybe is maybe not*. There's no reason to say both. Saying I *may* pose a danger to myself and others is also saying that I *may not*.

I sigh and pace the room in perpendicular lines. Just because I'm stuck in here is no reason to forgo exercise. I will not get fat. My muscles will not atrophy down to nothing. They will not keep me still and pump me full of food like they do to the girls with eating disorders down the hall. Or anyway, the girls I imagine are down the hall. I haven't actually seen any other patients yet, but sometimes I hear doors opening and closing, hear muffled female voices rising and falling as they approach then pass the door. More than once, I've heard one girl or another yelling, though the walls are too thick for me to make out exactly what they're yelling about. Maybe they don't want to take their medication. Or maybe they're complaining about the locks on the doors. (I assume all the doors have locks like mine.) Or maybe they're protesting being here at all. They didn't come here calmly and quietly like I did. Of course, the other patients are here because there's actually something wrong with them. I'm only here because of a misunderstanding, so there's no need for me to panic.

Anyway, the sounds I hear make it clear that at least some of the other patients here (all girls, judging by their voices) aren't kept locked in their rooms like I am. I stand between the beds and do a few sun salutations. When I was little, Mom used to bring me to the yoga classes she frequented to help keep her belly flat.

Maybe being stuck indoors will be good for my skin. Maybe when all this is over, I'll emerge with a preternaturally youthful complexion, like those kidnapping victims who are kept in underground bunkers for half their lives and emerge with non-sun-damaged skin after their rescue. Maybe my perfect

skin will be a sign of my survival, a show of solidarity with those kidnapped girls, like a uniform—we were all held indoors against our will.

Not that I intend to be here that long. Like I said, this is all just a misunderstanding.

Eight steps. Turn. Seven Steps. Turn. I'd prefer to keep to the walls and circle the room like it's a tiny little track, but the beds get in the way.

Dr. Lightfoot never uses the second bed. I don't mean *uses* like sleeps in it or anything, but when she comes in here to talk, she brings a plastic folding chair with her and sits in the center of the room with her back to the vacant second bed while I sit on the first, the one in which I sleep. Maybe Lightfoot doesn't sit on the bed because she doesn't want to make our interactions feel too casual. After all, we're not two friends catching up. We're not roommates in a college dorm. She's not my new Agnes.

Agnes never knew that I was hooking up with Jonah. Don't let the biblical name fool you. *Two* biblical names: Hannah and Jonah. We were doing some pretty non-biblical things. Or actually, completely biblical things, when you think about it.

I gaze out the window. Dusk and dawn look the same here. The fog is rolling through. There are redwood trees as far as I can see, and when the fog gets thick, it condenses on the needlelike leaves and drips onto the roof. It sounds like rain, but it isn't.

It's not true that I can only see a few plants from here. We're actually in the middle of a forest.

I was lying before.