

How To
Bury Your
Brother

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PROLOGUE

Tuesday really would be the perfect day to die.

I tick through the other days as warmth spreads toward my knees and elbows, out to my fingers and toes like sunlight dancing on the river where I played as a child. It's the feeling I used to get listening to "Here Comes the Sun."

Saturday and Sunday, I never considered—why ruin anyone's weekend? Mondays are bad enough already. On Thursdays, my mother plays bridge, always has, a respite she'll need, especially this week, so that's out. Wednesdays—blah—something about the middle of the week, and that's when the band practices.

My life's most significant events seem, by default, to occur on Tuesdays. My own birth. My sister's. Several other happenings, less positive.

The record scratches and silences its melody. Bad timing—a problem I'm doomed to repeat in death as I have since birth, when I knocked on the world's door during an epic hailstorm that flooded Atlanta, only to draw out the labor, as my mother always liked to remind me, more than twenty-four hours. Maybe I was waiting for the Tuesday. Today, too, the Tuesdayness made me linger, gave this cosmic game of chicken more weight, and I stared too long at the pill bottle.

When I woke up from "the game" these past few times, I wasn't

sure if I'd won or lost, but now God has handed me this answer, this sign. I reach into my shirt pocket, retrieve another pill, and swallow it with what is now gin-flavored, half-melted ice.

I flick my eyes to the record player spinning silently, and it makes me want to cry, just thinking of how, even with YouTube and the internet where anyone can make a record like this one, we still haven't found another Queen or Nirvana or David Bowie.

My hand grips the glass where it rests on the chair's arm. The condensation will leave a stain on the leather. *Sorry, Lila*. I smile, in case this Tuesday really is as significant as it feels. I don't need another thing to apologize for. If today she finds this worn-down body, I want her to see me smiling, without a tear streak on my face.

Pulsing starts in my chest, edging out the warmth. The tempo enters slowly, like "Hotel California," then progresses to "Beat It." When the banging in my chest hits Metallica range, I know. This is it.

A wave of anxiety rises in my throat—or is that something else? *Is this what winning feels like?* I swallow it down, along with the fear.

I look back to where I know the letters are and sing Nirvana's "All Apologies" in my head, the song that would be playing were it not for my shitty timing. The shitty timing that will no longer scar anyone I love. Not anymore.

I picture my letters, floating into the universe, down the streets I've walked so many times, into the nooks and crannies of my childhood. I picture the black ink of my words finding them, all the people I've let down, all the apologies I need to make, all the wrongs I need to make right.

But most of all, her.

Alice.

My life doesn't qualify me for a last wish or request, I know. But if it did, I would ask that those letters surround her like a shield, that she'd feel that protection, like I can feel her presence now.

She's calling me.

She says it's okay to go. She doesn't blame me for leaving. Not this time.

So I close my eyes,
and let go.

SUMMER 2007

The Funeral

CHAPTER ONE

Alice studied her brother's mourners through the window of the church. The large Gothic structure in the middle of Atlanta cast a shadow over them as they shuffled in their shined shoes, their black kitten heels framing hosiery that disappeared under tasteful black dresses despite the thick summer heat. Tears pooled at the corners of Alice's eyes while she watched them chatting with one another on the way to the door, as if they were heading into any other church service, rather than a funeral. None of them cared about her brother. Alice doubted they remembered his name. She blinked rapidly to stop tears from falling.

"Alice," her mother said. "Put it—"

"In a box in your mind," she finished.

Her mother nodded, pleased.

"Maura, give her a break," her father said. "I mean, look at her."

Alice removed her hand from her pregnant belly and accepted his offer of a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes.

"Now is *not* the time," her mother said.

She was right. Alice had allowed herself seventy-two hours to mourn her brother, and those hours were up—she glanced at the blue plastic sports watch her mother had asked her not to wear—two hours ago, conveniently timed to end before the funeral, so she could smile at all her mother's friends. The ones who hadn't

considered the existence of Maura's runaway son in decades, who were only here to build up a type of social capital, so they could ensure that the same people would brave the downtown chaos when the ghost of death came for them. It was time to get the funeral over with, to say a final goodbye to the person she'd already spent a lifetime saying goodbye to, and then to move on with her life.

"Showtime!" said Jamie, in a faded gray suit and a cheerful purple tie. Her father's best friend helped Alice up from the window ledge, and she trudged over to where her mother had positioned herself in a type of receiving line by the door, ready for the sea of supposed mourners.

Before the first stranger entered the church, Alice rubbed her neck and prepared to straighten up into a posture her mother had forced her to perfect during her teenage years with a knuckle to her vertebrae. Lack of sleep wasn't helping her meet her mother's standards for looking presentable. Instead of sleeping, Alice had spent the previous nights cycling through familiar dreams of her brother, which all ended the same: "Please," she would beg. "Don't go." But he always did, slinging his guitar and duffel over his shoulder, the way he had the last time she saw him, and taking her childhood with him.

Closest to the door, Maura hugged the first couple. "Most people don't know how pretty a hand-cut diamond can look," she said, still holding the woman's wrist. "Have you lost weight?" she said to a man with a salt-and-pepper mustache.

Alice's father, Richard, offered each man, woman, and child a handshake. To his only living cousin, he volunteered "Harold" and a nod before his eyes returned to his shoes.

Jamie lingered behind, waiting for Maura to invite him into the family's line. Though he was close enough to the family that everyone at the church had forgotten he wasn't actually Richard's younger brother, Maura turned her cheek in refusal to his silent question. Instead, he trapped men in a conversation about his latest hobby—online gaming—as they finished talking to Alice. "These kids, you would not believe," he said, lifting his arms. He curled his fingers and darted his thumbs up and down in demonstration.

Her brother would have despised this scene. If he were here, he would have led her to the narrow staircase and up to the sanctuary's balcony, like he always did as a child on Sundays. They would invent fake nonsense conversations as they watched the people in their fancy outfits, Alice laughing so loudly their mother would give a stern look from below. Or they would talk, the scratchy carpet itching the back of Alice's legs, exposed in one of the ruffled dresses her mother always made her wear to Sunday school.

"What do you think heaven's like?" he had asked her once, as they tried to count the ceiling's intricate tiled diamonds. He couldn't have been older than twelve.

"Angels and singing," she said with a child's confidence. "And lots of animals. With wings."

"In heaven, I want to live in a high, high building where I can play guitar on the roof and look out at earth. And you can live next door in a tree house over the forest. And we'll see each other all the time."

She hoped he was there now, but the larger, practical part of her brain doubted. Doubted that vision of heaven was real, maybe that heaven existed at all. And even if it did, doubted that her brother had made it there. She let herself slump and allowed her mind to rest inside the familiar blanket of Jamie's chatter, ignoring her mother's spirited small talk.

Her father shifted toward her. "The eulogy. It means a lot, to your mother."

Alice nodded, and he reached a hand out, as if to lay it reassuringly on her shoulder, but pulled back at the last second and formed a fist at his side.

"He could never fight his demons," her father said. "It's better this way. For the family."

She stepped back an inch, as if off-balance.

Before Alice could reply, the cheek of her nine-year-old daughter thumped onto her stomach. Her father looked at Caitlin, then turned away.

Alice reached down to stroke her daughter's hair as her husband, Walker, strode through the crowd, standing six inches above even the tallest men, though they were all shrunken from age.

It's better this way. For the family.

Could that really be true?

"She's still pretty sensitive," Walker said to Alice, with no explanation for his lateness or the dirty Converse on Caitlin's feet that Maura was already eyeing. She tried to read his expression as Caitlin buried her head deeper into Alice's dress. Though her daughter had never met her uncle, his dying had launched the concept of death into the air, as if she had only realized this week that it existed.

Two old men stood trapped between Richard's handshake and Alice's side hug in an awkward limbo. She gestured at Jamie, and he danced over to take Alice's place in the line.

"You're not going to die next, are you?"

"No, honey, I'm *never* going to die. You can't get rid of me."

Caitlin wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, leaving pink streaks down her cheeks. "Promise?"

"Well, we'll die sometime," Walker said, leaning down to her level. "When we're old."

"But you're old now!"

Alice gave her husband a face that said *Let me handle this, idiot* but remembering what was to come, she mustered her last reserves of patience and morphed her expression into the same fake smile she'd used with the mourners. Better to hang onto what she expected would be their last hour of marital (somewhat) peace for weeks.

Alice leaned down to her daughter. "We won't die for a very, very, *very* long time. Okay?"

Caitlin nodded, and the family stepped forward to greet the next mourner. The receiving line continued.

"How did he die?" one of the mourners asked Maura, the question petering out at the end. Alice raised an eyebrow and awaited the reply.

"Heart failure. *So* unexpected."

Her mother always lied with a smile.

She would never tell the mourners the words that rattled in Alice's skull now. Like the game of Pong her brother had been so happy to get for Christmas one year, the two words bounced in an endless loop: *overdose*, *OxyContin*, and back again. They were

the only words Alice had retained after her mother delivered the news to her in the church parking lot on Sunday, saying simply, “Rob is dead. Heart failure.”

Then, to the only question Alice dared to ask: “His heart stopped beating when he overdosed on OxyContin. Is that what you want to hear?”

When, finally, the last mourner entered the church, Alice stepped away from Walker and her mother, now cheerfully introducing Caitlin to her Thursday bridge group. She walked past dozens of cross-shaped flower arrangements that threatened to collapse into the crowd—all addressed to her mother—until she reached a table usually cluttered with church flyers.

Her mother had decorated it with a row of pictures that showed the two Tate children growing up. At various stages of childhood, they climbed their tree house, canoed on the river, hugged a golden retriever, or squeezed into the driver’s seat of one of their father’s eighteen-wheelers with *Tate Trucking* in block letters across the side. Alice’s cheeks burned with anger as she looked at their smiling faces. She longed to reach into the photo and pin him down there, to keep him from leaving, from dying.

Her eyes skipped over a photo of the young family in front of her parents’ house, a place she hadn’t been in years and hoped never to see again. She was sure her mother had brought the photo to torment her, as if her brother’s death and the tension with Walker were just shy of far enough.

The next photo showed the family’s annual trip to Amelia

Island, the trip the year before her brother left. Five years younger, Alice was small enough to perch on his shoulders. Her legs dangled down over his strong arms, and she wore jean shorts and the T-shirt she'd received a few weeks earlier at her fourth-grade field day. She looked right into the camera, caught in mid-laugh. His neck and smile hid his other features as he tipped his face to look up at her.

She remembered thinking a day at the beach with her brother was the most fun she'd ever had, the most special she'd ever felt, his eyes focused on her as if he wore blinders to the rest of the world, while her father would barely look up from his newspaper when she talked, and her mother would only correct her grammar.

Was the family better off with him dead, as her father suggested? No. The only better reality would have been for him not to have existed at all, to erase these happy memories from her consciousness. Pretending her brother never existed, that's how she'd chosen to live with Walker for the last decade, after all. The loss and loneliness of the years after her brother left were painful only because she had experienced the other reality, with him, the reality that had flooded back to her anew in each hour since his death.

Jamie sidled up to her in front of the photos. "He was such a cute kid."

She nodded. Paused. "Daddy said that even though it's hard right now, it's best for the family. That he could never"—she made air quotes—"fight his demons.' Do you really think that's true?"

"Look at it from his point of view: Your dad, he'd been sent away to that terrible school, barely survived Korea. I shouldn't speak ill of your grandfather—Lord knows he saved me when I had nowhere else to go—but he was a real son of a bitch. I never saw him crack

a smile in the five years I lived with them. You and your brother, when you were growing up, you had everything. Good parents, nice house, plenty of money. Your brother had all that, a perfect life, people who loved him, who adored him, and look what he did with it.” Jamie spread his arms toward the pictures and the mourners.

It was true. Yet Rob had taken the pills to numb something inside, numb something Alice would never understand or know. When he took off, not bothering to call, not caring enough to worry about her, Alice assumed he was busy having the time of his life in Paris or London or Los Angeles. And she hated him for it. The pills, though, they introduced a new tinge to her many conflicting thoughts about her brother: guilt.

“Maybe I could have done something, found him or helped him in some way,” Alice said, but even to her, the words felt hollow.

“He was so stubborn, that boy,” Jamie said with the overly mature air he used when talking about “the kids,” even though by age, he was thrown in between her father and her brother, truly belonging to neither generation. “He chose not to be part of this family anymore. He didn’t care about you or Richard or Maura. He wasn’t exactly—”

“There you are!” Alice’s best friend and former college roommate, Meredith, kissed Alice on both cheeks before wrapping her in a long, tight hug, interrupting Jamie. Alice felt the threat of tears, so she stepped back and rubbed her hands on her belly, trying to ground herself.

“Are you feeling better about the eulogy?” Meredith asked with a look at Jamie, who met her eyes before walking away. Alice had always been jealous of Meredith’s ability to dismiss someone with a look.

“No, I wish”—*Wish what? So many things*—“wish I *knew* who he really was.”

“Well—” Meredith started, to contradict her, comfort her, assure her, but Alice didn’t want to be comforted. She cut her off.

“I’m just glad it will be over soon.”

Meredith shut her mouth.

Alice sat down on one of the benches that lined the church’s hallway, and they sat, shoulders touching, for a few minutes in a silence her friend knew enough not to interrupt. Alice rested her head on Meredith’s shoulder. She could close her eyes and sleep here for hours, just feeling her friend breathing and the baby squirming.

“I’m going to name the baby Robbie, after him,” Alice finally said, raising her head.

She had been so scared that breathing a name into existence, as she had three other times, would cause the baby to disappear from her womb. She felt now that she would be able to give Caitlin a sibling as the universe yanked away her own childhood hero, a Faustian bargain.

“What did Walker say?”

“He said he doesn’t understand why I’d want to and why I’m so upset, since Rob and I weren’t close.” *Pregnancy hormones* is what he’d actually said, accompanied only the first time by a small laugh.

Not close. Like a second cousin or long-lost aunt. Not that Alice could fault Walker. She’d said it herself at their first date, to dismiss further questions about her brother. “One brother. We’re not close.” Had barely brought up her brother while she and Walker had been together.

But she never believed it was really true, only knew that if she

hadn't said those words—*not close*—she wouldn't have been able to smile up at Walker on their wedding day. She wouldn't have been able to laugh with him on the couch as their spoons went to war over the few remaining pieces of cookie dough in the ice cream. She wouldn't have been able to scream “She says keep holding on!” as he let go of Caitlin's bike.

To create those memories, she had to bury those of her brother, had to raise the stakes not to go back to the dark place of her young adulthood, not to go back to being consumed by someone who couldn't even pick up the phone to let her know where he'd gone. But, she knew she'd never be able to explain that to Walker.

Already, she could see the word *liar* floating between them. She'd felt the accusation from the moment Walker hugged her lightly when she told him the news of her brother's passing, gasping like an asthma patient and blasting snot onto his church clothes. His hands had tensed around her shoulders with the knowledge that he was missing some essential bit of information.

But had it been a lie? Alice wondered in the hours she spent alone, erasing and rewriting the eulogy, avoiding her husband and all the questions he had never known to ask, all the stories she had never told. *What makes someone close?*

Is it that you talk every day or every week or every year, or is it that their favorite sayings, the way they watched a sunset, how they licked their lips while concentrating on a book, or sang to you when you were scared, are coiled around your DNA like any other molecule that defines you?

The funeral director rounded up Maura, Richard, Jamie, Alice, Walker, and Caitlin and led them to another side room while guests filled the chapel. Her family squashed the room's new silence with anything but talk of the deceased. Maura summarized the plot of *Cats* for Caitlin, which they had tickets to for Saturday night at the Fox Theater. Avoiding Alice, Walker struggled for a conversation with Richard and Jamie.

"Hot today," Walker said.

"Grass is dying," her father said. The three of them stood with their hands in their pockets. "How's yours, James?"

Alice stared through the stained-glass window into the sanctuary. Through the lightest-colored glass, she could make out the brown casket with its regal gold trim in front of the white marble altar. Alice had gone with Maura to pick it out yesterday, trailing her at the funeral home while her mother scrutinized the various features of each, exactly as she would a new car. After Maura ran her hand along the cream silk inside one, she pronounced it "perfect" and ordered three, one for her, one for her husband, and one for her son.

"Don't you want one?" Maura asked.

"No."

"We'll all be matching. You'll be left out."

Alice shook her head.

"You'll regret it later," her mother had said before turning back to the funeral home's director without missing a beat: "So, you'll get these and coordinate with the home in New Orleans?"

"Yes, ma'am."

New Orleans, where her brother died on Tuesday, according to the funeral director. More questions Alice didn't want to ask. She was too afraid of what the answers would be.

A church usher led the family to the front pew as the organ began “How Great Thou Art,” her brother’s favorite hymn, at least when she knew him.

Sweat glistened on the pastor’s forehead as he approached the podium. The same pastor who her brother had spent so much time imitating to her in church, laughing under their breath until Maura shushed them. The man had been old back then. *It should be him in the coffin*, Alice thought, before regretting it. She apologized in her head as he began with ten minutes of listing the family’s résumé in the church: Bible groups Maura led, fundraisers she organized, instruction she gave at Vacation Bible School, how “we wouldn’t have expected any less from a pastor’s daughter.” The pastor pronounced Richard a “true servant of God,” mainly because of the checks he signed, Alice imagined.

The pastor launched into a generic speech about “trusting God’s plan.” Alice sighed too loudly, and her mother shot her a look. She’d heard the same speech three times before at other church funerals. It had prompted her to volunteer to give the eulogy in the first place, so that her brother could have something personal. No matter what her words would cost her.

She tuned out and memorized the funeral pamphlet in her lap. Her brother stared at her from the photo as a teenager, holding the acoustic guitar she couldn’t separate from him in her memories. Underneath, *July 16, 1968–August 27, 2007* stood out in cursive writing with his full name: *Robinson Wesley Tate*. He hated being called Robinson. Their mother named both him and Alice after literary classics, but he got the worst of it. Not that anyone would dare tease him in school.

“Now,” the pastor said. “Robinson’s sister, Alice, would like to say a few words. Alice...”

She scooted out of the row past her mother. The preacher placed his hand on Alice’s back and guided her to the podium, as if she might double over in grief, exhaustion, birth pains, or a mixture of all three. She straightened her dress, the largest of her maternity clothes, which had been stored in the deepest entrails of her house where they couldn’t mock her with the inadequacy of her misshapen uterus. The fabric smelled like attic with a hint of squirrel droppings.

“Thank you for that beautiful service, Pastor Perry,” Alice read from her paper. “On behalf of my family, I’d like to thank all of you for coming today and honoring my brother’s life.”

She skipped over the next line, which she’d found in a eulogy template online: *Rob was a son, a brother...* The list was supposed to go on...a chef or a father or a neighbor or a committed member of his community. “A child of God,” the website suggested, but that, she had no idea.

“Rob was my older brother. I was always the deputy and conspirator in his adventures. In the summers, we spent a lot of time at our father’s warehouse, building things with all the empty boxes. Rob would start planning at Christmas. He would draw up a blueprint using butcher paper he took from school. Our friends would help, but he always put me in charge of the most important section. One year, we made Atlantis. Another year, the White House. They never looked much like the real thing, but we always had a lot of fun crawling through our creations.”

Alice chuckled awkwardly, remembering the seriousness he’d brought to the project, the tingling in her stomach as he assigned

the roles, fearful for a second that he would forget her, and the swelling of pride when he assigned her the biggest part, like always.

Alice's eyes found Walker watching her carefully from the second row, questioning. *Was this the same brother Alice acted like wasn't worth mentioning? The one she said she wasn't close to?*

A second too late, Meredith joined in with her own laughter to break the room's silence. Alice looked back at her paper.

"Rob was creative and smart like that. When he was still in elementary school, our mother ordered a set of encyclopedias so that we could look things up for school. Rob would start a volume and read it like a book. One year, he read the entire *B* volume. It seemed like he knew about everything: how baseballs were made, bullets, Brazil, bees. I was young at the time and didn't realize the pattern until he had moved on to *D*."

She paused and attempted to make eye contact with a few people in the audience, like she'd learned in college in a required public speaking class. A lady from her mother's tennis group gave her an encouraging smile from the third row. A man near the back snoozed with his head resting on the pew and his mouth wide open.

"I always felt safe with him, no matter how crazy his adventures got. In the house where we grew up, our closets were connected by a crawl space that I was small enough to go through. I got scared at night and would open the door and crawl through to find Rob in his own closet, reading or silently moving his fingers on his guitar with nothing but a flashlight. He let me sleep in his bed, staying with me until I fell asleep."

She could still summon it, the sense of security she felt as she

drifted off in Rob's bed, her older brother still on the closet floor, quietly turning pages, the dog a few feet away.

She looked at her parents. Her father stared at his shoes. Her mother looked straight at her, not really seeing anything, with her head held a bit too high, probably regretting not pushing harder in her request to edit Alice's speech. Maybe not letting her mother help had been a mistake, but she knew what would have happened if she had accepted the help. Rob would become Robinson; her real memories would be turned into the version her mother wanted to present to the world, the one that had never existed. Alice looked over the rest of the audience and willed one person to cry, so she wouldn't have to.

"I had to take a lot of biology classes, and one of the first things you have to do is Punnett squares. A Punnett square determines the traits of offspring. For example, my parents both have brown eyes, but each have a recessive blue eye gene, so Rob got blue and I got brown. Since we learned of my brother's passing, I've thought often about those squares. The truth is, I wouldn't be who I am today—the ecologist, the mother, the friend—without him. My mother gave me her industriousness. My father gave me his levelheadedness. But I have Rob to thank for my passion, and for just a pinch of his rebellion."

She laughed again nervously at the reference to how the audience probably perceived Rob—as a teenage troublemaker with uncut hair.

Without trying, her eyes bounced to Walker again. He stared at her, and she could read his face clearly, as she could when he was caught off guard. Their eyes met, and in an instant, he checked his expression, wiped it clear. But, she had seen it—hurt. Betrayal. She could see him realizing: Alice *had* been close to Rob.

And she hadn't told him any of the stories, any of this chapter of her life. She could see him deciding that the tension between them during the last week was more than pregnancy hormones and bad communication; it was the exposing of a decade-long lie.

In an effort to get away from Walker, her eyes found the casket's polished wood. She opened her mouth to begin her next story, about how her brother took over the school speakers with his high school band to sing her "Happy Birthday" in the style of the Beatles. But she couldn't make out the words.

She pictured the adult inside the casket, resting on the flawless silk, the adult she couldn't tell one story about, the one she shared blood with, had thought she shared a mind with for so long.

We weren't close.

He was my everything.

Weren't they both true? The tears came, unstoppable. She blurted out "Thank you" and stepped away from the podium. As she walked to her seat, regretting not getting the casket and thinking her mother was always right, she noticed someone she didn't recognize lurking by the doorway. He was tall, and large, someone she would remember if she had seen him before.

When she plopped herself into her seat, Walker's knees shot toward Caitlin's and away from Alice's as if she were made of lava. She turned away from him to watch the stranger. *Who is he? Did he know the adult Rob?*

After the pastor read a few more generic Bible verses, Alice popped up from her seat next to Walker to go after the stranger. She half waddled, moving as quickly as she could, and dodged several of her mother's friends as they tried to praise her speech or tell her that she looked like she was "about to pop!" She reached

the doorway and followed it to the side lot as an old minivan pulled out and drove away.

She stood in the open doorway, watching the space where the van had been, until Walker exited the front door with Caitlin on the other side of the parking lot. Though he didn't know he was being watched, he spun to look behind several times as he fast-walked to the car, pulling Caitlin by the hand. The earlier ease was gone from his stride, replaced by hardness and anger. Though his shoulders slumped from a level of sadness appropriate for a funeral, Alice knew grief over the dead had nothing to do with it.

She breathed deeply, filling the parts of her stomach and chest that already felt close to bursting, and thought of little Robbie. When he came, Walker would forget about today. The memory of her brother and his secrets would once again be hers alone to bare.

As the mourners filed out of the church, Alice found her mother in the bathroom. Crying.

"Are you okay? Mama, I think the service was great." Alice stared at her, unsure what to do. She reached her hand toward her mother's shoulder, but Maura shuddered away from the touch.

"It's the damn flower company!" Maura said, suddenly straightening up. "I said *no* orchids. And what do I get? Orchids! Of course." She scooped the flowers out of the vase and threw them in the trash can. Alice reached to stop the crystal from falling as her mother flung open the door.

Alice remembered seeing her mother cry only twice. The last time was two mornings after Rob left. Alice woke up to the

sound of her mother ripping band posters off his bedroom wall, sobbing.

The first time was when Alice was about six. She remembered running around the house with Rob, chasing the dog, which—along with opening the decorative books on the shelf, doing crafts on the kitchen table, and the word *fart*—was forbidden in the Tate household. They ran around the main floor's loop, all three panting and giggling, until the dog froze at the sound of the garage door. Both Rob and Alice barreled into the dog, and the tangled group rolled into a vintage bookcase, knocking two delicate plates off their stands.

Maura ran in to survey the damage. When she saw the broken china, her face crumpled as tears ran down her red cheeks, bringing her mascara with them.

“Those were wedding presents! I *told you* not to run in the *house!*”

The dog ran off, but Alice and Rob froze, barefoot in the middle of a minefield, waiting to be dug out by the unfriendly forces.

When Richard saw the mess, he crunched in to retrieve Alice. Rob waited until their father left to find the dustpan before struggling out of the wreckage. As Alice trailed Rob up the stairs, watching blood from his left foot drip toward the carpet, they heard their father say, “That’s why we shouldn’t have all these damn antiques. Children need to be able to play in their own house.”

But growing up in that house, the antiques were the least of their problems.

WINTER 2016

*8½ years
after the funeral*

CHAPTER TWO

Alice stood barefoot in the kitchen, stirring a gigantic pot of chili. The smell of freshly cut cilantro from her garden, still resting next to her on a wooden cutting board, mixed with tomatoes and the smooth air of a mild Georgia winter that flowed through the open windows.

She breathed it all in, trying to settle her stomach before dinner. She had barely eaten since a lawyer rang their doorbell a few days ago with the contract her mother had signed last spring, selling the house where Alice grew up and slating it for demolition two weeks from tomorrow. She didn't fear the wrecking ball. In fact, Alice had imagined it gliding into the too-quiet brick colonial like an eagle in flight, exploding the pain and loneliness of her childhood along with the Corinthian columns out front. Picturing herself stepping inside her parents' house, though—that's how she thought of it, never *her* house or "home"—sent her back to the fridge to pour another glass of wine.

She had entered the house less than a dozen times since graduating from the University of Georgia at twenty-two, and never beyond her mother's elegant parlor off the foyer. Since her mother left, the house had ticked as an unavoidable bomb in Alice's mind, one that she'd wanted to evade for another few months. "Procrastinating," Walker had called it.

Alice moved around the kitchen island, picking the last chili ingredients from among the scattered papers, mail, outdated report cards, dog treats, energy bars, pens, and spare change. As she walked past her open shelving crowded with knickknacks and frames filled with mismatched art, Alice prepared herself for tomorrow by mentally walking through the house of her childhood, with its pristine antiques and silver frames from Tiffany's.

The sound of a car on the driveway cut through the neighborhood's quiet, the reverent hush Walker had used to convince Alice they should buy the house, even though the stone facade and gated neighborhood were grander than she'd envisioned for the house where she would raise her children. She restacked items in one corner of the island, turned down the music, and switched it from Johnny Cash to REM.

Normally, she valued the quiet time to mince, stir, and drink wine before the family piled in, especially since she was never alone at work anymore. In the last few years, her tiny cabin on the lake had become a full-fledged research and outreach center, complete with donors to impress, research assistants to coach, and staff meetings to call. The Georgia Creekside Center was a dream of hers, a success, yet she couldn't help but miss the glorious early years as the founder and only employee, wading through the water with a teetering Caitlin. Today, though, Alice was eager for the family's noise.

"*Who's that?*" she said to Buddy. She walked to the door as the golden retriever slipped on the hardwoods with his enthusiasm.

"How was your day?" Alice asked her husband. But when he leaned in to kiss her, she couldn't stomach acting like normal, not today, and turned the other way as if to check the simmering pot.

In answer to the rejection, Walker ignored her question. “Isn’t it a little cold for the windows to be open?” He walked over to shut them without waiting for an answer.

Without another word, he stopped at the fridge to grab a beer and went to sit on the gray suede couch in the living room. His tennis shoes, still muddy from running up and down the sides at Robbie’s game, clunked to the floor, and the television flipped on.

After a hug from Alice, Robbie sat on the hardwood floor with the back of his too-clean soccer jersey against the dark island cabinets and Buddy propped under his thighs. He retrieved a cursive practice sheet from his backpack and started to draw the letters carefully.

Alice dialed Caitlin and struggled to balance the phone on her shoulder while opening a bag of shredded cheese.

“Where are you? I made chili. Weren’t you going to come home earlier tonight so we could have Sunday family dinner?”

“I’m at Chelsea’s. Maybe it’s better if I eat here.”

Alice sighed. “I feel like I haven’t seen you.” Since the day Caitlin announced she would apply to NYU and Walker forbade it, her waking hours at the house had dwindled to near zero.

“Will you come if I tell him not to bring it up?”

“Fine. Be home soon.”

Finally, a crisis Alice knew how to solve.

Alice retrieved a beer from the fridge as a bargaining chip and walked to the family room. “If you keep this up,” she said to Walker, “she’s going to be living at Chelsea’s pretty soon.”

“We’re not letting her live at her girlfriend’s house.” He turned his eyes away from *Mad Money*. “The farthest I’m willing to go is Duke. It was good enough for us, right?”

She handed him the beer, and he twisted off the cap.

“Promise me you’ll drop it for tonight.”

He nodded and looked back at the TV.

When Caitlin came in ten minutes later, she and Robbie set the table as he explained the intricacies of his teacher’s post-marriage name change: “She was Miss Smith, but now we’re supposed to call her Mrs. Hersch. Isn’t that weird? Last week, she changed the name on her desk and everything.”

Caitlin nodded. “Very weird.”

The family sat at a dinged-up six-seater wooden table in the kitchen with Buddy at Alice’s feet. Like most of the house, the room felt homey but a few years too worn, the walls a warm yellow that was no longer in style and made the entire room look dark. For years, Alice had put off Walker’s pleas to work with a decorator to mimic the magazine decor of his colleagues. And since Walker’s promotion to partner at a top Atlanta law firm a few months ago, he insisted a complete remodel was the only solution. She imagined her plants in their mismatched pots and the children’s artwork gone in favor of stylized accessories, and her stomach twisted again, remembering what tomorrow held.

Alice and Walker joined hands, but Caitlin lingered before she grabbed her father’s hand. He squeezed and smiled at her. Caitlin closed her eyes.

“Dear God, Our Father,” Walker said, and on cue the family bowed their heads. “We thank you for the gifts we are about—” The telephone rang, and Caitlin hopped up to grab it.

“It’s Mimi,” she said, bringing the still-ringing phone over to Alice. Alice considered not answering, but clicked the phone on for the last ring: “Hello?”

“Hello? With whom am I speaking?” her mother said, voice dripping honey, as if she had dialed a friend and a sweet-voiced child answered instead.

“It’s Alice. Your daughter.” She tried to mimic her mother’s sweetness.

“What?” her mother said too loudly.

In the background, a nurse said: “Your daughter, Alice. You wanted to call and talk to her, Mrs. Tate.”

“Yes. Robinson is going to check you out after third period. We’re leaving for Florida at 2:00 p.m. sharp. I’ll hold you both accountable if you’re late, and we’ll go on to the beach without you. Is that understood?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

Alice closed her eyes and tried to gather her patience. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good girl.” Maura hung up.

Her mother had returned them both to this moment—the last shred of normalcy before everything with Rob fell apart—more and more frequently in the last months, as if Maura’s brain was a speeding train that knew it was about to hit a wall, as if deep inside her subconscious, she remembered about the house and its sale and demolition, as if she remembered Alice would finally be forced to go inside. But the call was only another lapse in memory, even if it felt like a victory lap to the decades-long battle of stubbornness that Alice and Maura had fought over the house.

The battle over the house intensified every year. First, when Alice came to pick up her mother from the house, she would take longer getting ready as Alice waited in the driveway, to see if she

would come inside to fetch her. When that didn't work, Maura doubled her standards for Christmas every year in a silent plea for relocation to her own home. The silver and lace tablecloth, tall burning candles, and crystal wineglasses waged war with Alice's scratched leather-backed dining chairs, but neither Maura nor Alice voiced the battle out loud. At times like those, Richard had always acted as the buffer between Alice and her mother. He died five years ago, but she still missed him.

"How was she?" Caitlin asked, while Walker spooned sour cream into his chili.

"Sounded like a bad day."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, forgetting the unsaid prayer. Robbie raised a full spoon above his bowl and let the chili splash back down.

"You know the rules," Walker said to him. "Eat or you're not leaving this table."

Robbie rested his chin on the table and eyed the full bowl.

"If you need me tomorrow, call my cell, instead of the Center. I'll be at Mimi's house all day."

"Why?" Robbie said.

"Since she's living at her apartment now"—that's what she and Walker called the nursing home—"I'm going to get all of her stuff out, so they can build a new house there."

"Why?"

"Because Mimi's house is old," Walker said.

"How long will it take?"

"Only a week." Alice hoped, although she had two before the demolition, if she needed more time to figure out what to do with her mother's endless collections and antiques. She had left

Grace, the Center's assistant director, with dozens of tabbed folders and lists of what would need to be done while she was gone. The winter months were always the slowest because fewer school groups traveled to stay at the on-campus aquatic camp. But Alice wanted to prepare for their busiest months in the spring when the professors she worked with would rush to analyze the year's data in time for grant deadlines. She planned to call to check in every day, even though she promised Grace she wouldn't.

"Mom, can I please be excused?" Robbie asked.

Alice nodded, and he stood up from the table. "But don't let Buddy come," he said. "He'll walk all over my puzzle again."

She placed her foot on Buddy's fur to keep him steady.

They ate quietly for a couple more minutes before Caitlin and Walker started into a heated discussion about something happening in the Middle East. "If people would stop blowing themselves up," Walker said. Alice stopped listening.

She supposed forty-two was a little old to fear a house so much, to avoid a whole section of her life. But dwelling on memories of her time there created a sinking feeling in her chest as if her heart was a hole with gravity strong enough to suck in her other organs. She pictured the house—and the tree house where she and Rob would play—alone on the empty street, lots cleared of old houses, a vortex that inhaled the mailbox and bugs and their childhood pets and her mother's hatpin collection, and finally, inhaled the family itself, with only Alice left holding onto the edge—

"*Mom*, he's doing it."

"Doing *what*?" Walker threw his hands up in the air.

"Let's not fight tonight. We all agreed not to talk about NYU, right?"

“It wasn’t about NYU,” Walker said.

“I said I think I want to major in English or creative writing and minor in women’s studies, wherever I go, but probably at NYU, and he said—”

“I said I didn’t think the job opportunities would be good for that, but even with that degree, she could still go to law school later. I really don’t think the minor is a good idea; she shouldn’t be broadcasting *it*.”

“What’s that supposed to—”

“I work in the corporate world. I know—”

“Ready, Dad, say it with me.” Caitlin brought her hands in front of her chest. “Les”—*clap*—“bi”—*clap*—“an.”

“No!” He glanced behind him to the wall, as if they were in a public restaurant. “No, that’s not what I meant. I guarantee no one at my firm took women’s studies. That’s all I’m saying. Plus, I am paying for this crap, if you remember.”

It wasn’t completely true, but Alice didn’t contradict him. Meanwhile, Walker reached for a piece of corn bread and took a large bite.

“Forget it.” She turned to Alice. “I need to work on some stuff anyway.”

“Love you so much, honey!” Walker called as the sound of Caitlin’s combat boots on the stairs echoed through the house. He turned to Alice with a smile, as if the last thing he said was all that mattered. Upstairs, the music for the play Caitlin was directing at school seeped bass beats and electric notes down the stairs. Alice prayed the premiere on Saturday would be the end of the house-shaking vibrations.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Alice said.

“Guess not.” He stood up, carrying his beer to the basement. Alice sat surrounded by half-eaten bowls of homemade chili.

As Alice brought the bowls to the sink, she attempted to convince herself that going to the house was a positive, as she always did with the things she dreaded most. Maybe it was coming at a good time since she could use some alone time to think. She could run over the other item on her procrastination list—her marriage—instead of looping again through a conversation with Maura from last Sunday’s visit to “her apartment.” She’d spent so much time with her mother in her head in the last week that Alice gave herself a pass for today’s weekly visit.

That day, her mother was in one of Alice’s favorite forms: a friendly stranger, not stuck in the past or unhappy at her confusion.

“Why would a young lady like you come talk to an old lady like me?” her mother said—teasing, friendly.

“Same reason you would want to talk to me.”

“And why do you think that is?”

“It’s nice to have someone to talk to. So you don’t get lonely.”

“Is that why you think old people like to talk to young people? Bless your heart! I’m not lonely. I have myself, and I’m the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Alice laughed. Her mother was charming, something Alice could see easily now that had eluded her when they lived in the same house.

“We like to talk to young people to share our wisdom. It

makes us feel like all our pain was worth it, if only the next generation could learn from it. Of course, young people are always too stupid to listen. I was the same way. What problem could you use an old lady's pain and wisdom on?"

Did she dare?

"Well, one," Alice began, monitoring her mother's face for any switch in mood. "I found out yesterday my husband has been having an affair. He doesn't know I know. I..." She guessed her mother wouldn't understand texting or the subtext of an eggplant, then donut emoji, not to mention all the creative synonyms for what Alice had only heard her mother refer to as *it*. Alice pushed the words from her mind. "I found letters they wrote to each other."

Her mother clucked her tongue. "Difficult, but nothing you can't handle," Maura said.

Alice looked at her mother, hoping for a second that she knew to whom she was speaking, if only to have the confidence her mother had in her.

"Are you satisfying him?"

"Mam-ura!" Alice said, attempting to change to her mother's name mid-exclamation.

"At least you haven't gotten fat. What color is that lipstick though? It does nothing for you."

"It's ChapStick."

"Exactly." Maura smiled, as if her point had been proven. "What will you do?"

Alice shifted in her chair, crossing her legs the other way.

She knew suddenly why she had chosen her mother, an unlikely confidante for this secret: her mother's generation saw marriage as a

logical piece of machinery, a system of levers and pulleys that, with a quick repair, could run smoothly. Success was measured only in that the machine kept running; happiness was inconsequential.

“I don’t know.” Wasn’t it a sign that she’d let that view of marriage seep into her own thinking, that she could utter these words—“I don’t know”—so levelheadedly? That after seeing the texts, she had promptly left the room to take Buddy out and continue with her morning?

“Are there children?”

“Two. Caitlin is seventeen and Robbie is eight.”

“Put it in a box in your mind, lock the box, and put it on the highest shelf.” Maura looked directly at Alice, as if wondering if she had formed the right words to reflect the sentiment. “You understand what I am trying to say, don’t you?”

Alice nodded. It was the advice she knew her mother would give, but why then had she wanted to hear it so badly?

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“I like that name, Robbie. Is it short for anything?”

She watched her mother carefully. “No. Just...Robbie.”

“How nice.”

Alice started the dishwasher, and her mind came back to the empty, now clean(ish) kitchen. The memory of Walker’s texts lingered though; the memory of reading them at the island joined the rest of the room’s chaos and to-do’s. She grabbed her house key and went to the garage to stare at Walker’s pristine (leased) Audi, sitting innocently in the garage with its buffed shine.

She knew what she was *supposed* to feel as she constantly replayed the conversation with her mother: hurt, enough to burst into tears, or even better, rage. Like the kind she had seen last summer at the neighborhood pool when a wife, whom she recognized from the women's events she forced herself to go to for fundraising contacts, had marched over to her own husband, smoking cigars with a group of fathers and drinking a beer, slapped him in the face, and told him he deserved to be castrated. Alice wanted to summon that feeling, but instead, she felt nothing.

At first, she thought the feeling of rage would come once the news sank in. Yet, eight days had passed, and she still felt, if not *nothing*, then annoyance only for how utterly predictable Walker had turned out to be. As soon as she read that text from Brittani—"Still sore after last night! ;-)"—she knew what the rest would say, right down to the punctuation (or lack thereof). She knew where he would meet Brittani, how he'd conceal the affair. She could guess when and how the texts started, so accurately that she'd grown tired of reading after a few screens, not even feeling the need to scroll all the way to the top of the message thread.

She couldn't blame him completely for that, though, for his predictability was exactly why she had married him. Knowing what to expect meant comfort, safety, had allowed her to dive into him and blend herself effortlessly into his life without him asking questions about who she really was, about her past, or why this life would be appealing.

She circled the car once, the key heavy in her hand. One scratch down the door, the kind another car could do if parked too close—maybe that would free the anger and hurt, allow it to fill her. Maybe that's what would help her move to the next step,

the action, the what next, not working long hours at the Center or spending extra time in her garden or walking Buddy, as she had since she'd read the texts.

She stood next to the car, miming opening a door, trying to map where the scratch would happen, how long it would be, how wide it would be, all the while imagining Walker's face when he saw it, how he'd first squint at a distance, wonder if it was just his Lasik acting up again. He'd gallop to the car, lick his thumb and furiously rub the mark, the beating in his chest growing thicker in his ears as he felt the indentation from Alice's key.

It was sad, really. Pathetic.

As she could play his reaction to the car, she could also play her remaining years with Walker in her mind like a movie. She knew that Walker would never divorce her, no matter what he told Brittani—"when her mother improves." Another thing that would never happen. Eventually, when Brittani grew tired of Walker's games and ended the affair, he would book an expensive Caribbean trip for Alice and him. He would make quick friends with another perfectly chiseled father of two. She would read research papers on the beach in her black bikini. They would settle back into their lives.

Caitlin would find a job. Robbie would go to college. Alice would continue to grow the Center, withdrawing further into the lake's serenity. Walker would retire, making a full-time job of watching sports, badgering his stockbroker, and playing golf. They would retreat to separate corners of the large house they shared as roommates.

Alice saw only two options in front of her: say nothing and let the comfortable, predictable future play out or tell him she knew

and dare to ask the questions about what came next. Divorce, but what after? Her view of that path was hazy, foggy, and a sense of panic seized her chest as she thought of the blank space ahead.

She reached the key toward the paint, resting it there, feeling a type of reassuring power through her body at the pain she knew it would cause him. Just as she pressed in, ready to drag the key along the slope she'd mapped out in her mind, the door to the garage flew open and she jumped.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

She straightened. Caitlin stood in the doorway with a bright-green face mask globbed onto her skin, holding Alice's old hiking boots with the leather trim.

"Nothing, just... Nothing."

"Okay... Can I wear these to school tomorrow?"

Where had she even found those? "Sure."

Caitlin disappeared back inside, and Alice followed. It was 9:00 p.m. She should go up and make sure Robbie was asleep.

She shut the door to the garage.

She would use the alone time cleaning out her parents' house to let the choices settle in her mind and percolate. She trusted that by the time the wrecking ball swung, she would know what to do.