

GIRL, FORGOTTEN

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KARIN
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Emily Vaughn frowned at the mirror. The dress was as beautiful as it had been in the store. Her body was the problem. She turned, then turned again, trying to find an angle that didn't make her look like she'd thrown herself onto the beach like a dying whale.

From the corner, Gram said, "Rose, you should stay away from the cookies."

Emily took a moment to recalibrate. Rose was Gram's sister who'd died of tuberculosis during the Great Depression. Emily's middle name was in honor of the girl.

"Gram." She pressed her hand to her stomach, telling her grandmother, "I don't think it's the cookies."

"Are you sure?" A sly smile rippled Gram's lips. "I was hoping you would share."

Emily gave her reflection another disapproving frown before forcing a smile onto her face. She knelt awkwardly in front of her grandmother's rocking chair. The old woman was knitting a sweater that would fit a child. Her fingers dipped in and out of the tiny, puckered collar like hummingbirds. The long sleeve of her Victorian-style dress had pulled back. Emily gently touched the deep purple bruise ringing her bony wrist.

"Clumsy-mumsy." Gram's tone had the sing-song quality of one thousand excuses. "Freddy, you must change out of that dress before Papa gets home."

Now Gram thought Emily was her uncle Fred. Dementia was nothing if not a stroll through the many skeletons lining the family closet.

Emily asked, "Would you like me to get you some cookies?"

"That would be wonderful." Gram continued to knit but her eyes, which never really focused on anything, suddenly became transfixed by Emily. Her lips curved into a smile. Her head tilted to the side as if she was studying the pearlescent lining of a seashell. "Look at your beautiful, smooth skin. You're so lovely."

"It runs in the family." Emily marveled at the almost tangible state of knowing that had transformed her grandmother's gaze. She was there again, as if a broom had swept the cobwebs from her cluttered brain.

Emily touched her crinkly cheek. "Hello, Gram."

"Hello, my sweet child." Her hands stopped knitting, but only to cup Emily's face between them. "When is your birthday?"

Emily knew to offer as much information as possible. "I'll be eighteen in two weeks, Grandmother."

"Two weeks." Gram's smile grew wider. "So wonderful to be young. So much promise. Your whole life a book that has yet to be written."

Emily steeled herself, creating an invisible fortress against a wave of emotion. She was not going to spoil this moment by crying. "Tell me a story from your book, Gram."

Gram looked delighted. She loved telling stories. "Have I told you about when I carried your father?"

"No," Emily said, though she'd heard the story dozens of times. "What was it like?"

"Miserable." She laughed to lighten the word. "I was sick morning and night. I could barely get out of bed to cook. The house was a mess. It was a scorcher outside, I can tell you that. I wanted desperately to cut my hair. It was so long, down to my waist, and when I washed it, the heat would spoil it before it could dry."

Emily wondered if Gram was confusing her life with "Bernice Bobs Her Hair". Fitzgerald and Hemingway often crossed into her memories. "How short did you cut your hair?"

"Oh, no, I did no such thing," Gram said. "Your grandfather wouldn't allow me."

Emily felt her lips part in surprise. That sounded more real life than short story.

“There was quite a rignarole. My father got involved. He and my mother came over to advocate on my behalf, but your grandfather refused to let them enter the house.”

Emily held tight to her grandmother’s trembling hands.

“I remember them arguing on the front porch. They were about to come to blows before my mother begged them to stop. She wanted to take me home and look after me until the baby came, but your grandfather refused.” She looked startled, as if something had just occurred to her. “Imagine how different my life would have been if they had taken me home that day.”

Emily didn’t have the capacity to imagine. She could only think about the realities of her own life. She had become just as trapped as her grandmother.

“Little lamb.” Gram’s gnarled finger caught Emily’s tears before they could fall. “Don’t be sad. You’ll get away. You’ll go to college. You’ll meet a boy who loves you. You’ll have children who adore you. You’ll live in a beautiful house.”

Emily felt tightness in her chest. She had lost the dream of that life.

“My treasure,” Gram said. “You must trust me on this. I am caught between the veil of life and death, which affords me a view of both the past and the future. I see nothing but happiness for you in the coming days.”

Emily felt her fortress cracking against the weight of impending grief. No matter what happened—good, bad or indifferent—her grandmother would not bear witness. “I love you so much.”

There was no response. The cobwebs had fractured Gram’s gaze into the familiar look of confusion. She was holding a stranger’s hands. Embarrassed, she took up the knitting needles, and continued the sweater.

Emily wiped away the last of her tears as she stood up. There was nothing worse than watching a stranger cry. The mirror beckoned, but she felt bad enough without staring at her reflection for a second longer. Besides, nothing was going to change.

Gram didn’t glance up as Emily grabbed her things and left her room.

She went to the top of the stairs and listened. Her mother’s strident tone was muffled by her closed office doors. Emily strained

for her father's deep baritone, but he was probably still at his faculty meeting. Still, Emily slid off her shoes before carefully picking her way down the stairs. The old house's creaks were as well-known to her as her parents' warring shouts.

Her hand was reaching for the front door when she remembered the cookies. The stately old grandfather clock was ticking up on five. Gram wouldn't remember the request, but nor would she be fed until well after six.

Emily placed her shoes by the door, then propped her small purse against the heels. She tiptoed past her mother's office to the kitchen.

"Where the hell do you think you're going dressed like that?" Her father's stink of cigars and stale beer filled the kitchen. His black suit jacket was thrown over one of the chairs. The sleeves of his white dress shirt were rolled up. An unopened can of Natty Boh was beside two crushed empties on the counter.

Emily watched a bead of condensation roll down the side of the can.

Her father snapped his fingers as if hastening one of his grad students to get on with it. "Answer me."

"I was just—"

"I know what you were *just*," he cut her off. "You're not content with the damage you've already caused this family? You're going to completely blow up our lives two days before the most important week of your mother's entire career?"

Emily's face burned with shame. "It's not about—"

"I don't give a glorious goddamn what you think it *is* and is *not* about." He pulled the ring off the can and threw it into the sink. "You can turn back around and get out of that hideous dress and stay in your room until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, sir." She opened the cabinet to retrieve the cookies for her grandmother. Emily's fingers had barely brushed the orange and white packaging on the Bergers when her father's hand clamped around her wrist. Her brain focused not on the pain, but on the memory of the handcuff-shaped bruise around her grandmother's frail wrist.

You'll get away. You'll go to college. You'll meet a boy who loves you . . .

“Dad, I—”

He squeezed harder, and the pain took her breath away. Emily was on her knees, eyes tightly shut, when the stench of his breath curled into her nostrils. “What did I tell you?”

“You—” She gasped as the bones inside her wrist started to quiver. “I’m sorry, I—”

“What did I tell you?”

“T-to go to my room.”

The vise of his hand released. The relief brought another gasp from deep inside Emily’s belly. She stood up. She closed the cabinet door. She walked out of the kitchen. She went back up the hallway. She placed her foot on the bottom stair, directly above the loudest creak, before putting her foot back on the floor.

Emily turned.

Her shoes were still beside the front door alongside her purse. They were all dyed a perfect shade of turquoise to match her satin dress. But the dress was too tight and she couldn’t get her pantyhose past her knees and her feet were painfully swollen so she bypassed the heels and grabbed her clutch on the way out the door.

A gentle spring breeze caressed her bare shoulders as she walked across the lawn. The grass tickled her feet. In the distance, she could smell the pungent salt of the ocean. The Atlantic was far too cold for the tourists who would flock to the boardwalk in the summer. For now, Longbill Beach belonged to the townies, who would never stand in a snaking line outside of Thrasher’s for a bucket of French fries or stare in wonder at the machines stretching colorful strings of taffy in the candy shop window.

Summer.

Only a few months away.

Clay and Nardo and Ricky and Blake were all preparing for graduation, about to start their adult lives, about to leave this stifling, pathetic beach town. Would they ever think of Emily again? Did they even think of her now? Maybe with pity. Probably with relief that they had finally excised the rot from their incestuous little circle.

Her outsidersness didn’t hurt now as much as it had in the beginning. Emily had finally accepted that she wasn’t a part of

their lives anymore. Contrary to what Gram had said, Emily was *not* going away. *Not* going to college. *Not* meeting a boy who loved her. She would end up shrieking her lifeguard whistle at obnoxious brats on the beach or passing out endless free samples from behind the counter at Salty Pete's Soft Serve.

The soles of her feet slapped against the warm asphalt as she turned the corner. She wanted to look back at the house, but she refrained from the dramatic gesture. Instead, she conjured the image of her mother pacing back and forth across her office, phone to her ear as she strategized. Her father would be draining the can of beer, possibly weighing the distance between the rest of the beer in the fridge and the Scotch in the library. Her grandmother would be finishing the tiny sweater, wondering what child she could've possibly started it for.

An approaching car made Emily move from the center of the road. She watched a two-tone Chevy Chevette glide by, then saw the bright red glow of the brake lights as the car squealed to a stop. Loud music pounded from the open windows. Bay City Rollers.

S-A-T-U-R-D-A-Y night!

Mr. Wexler's head swiveled from the rearview mirror to the side mirror. The lights blinked as he moved his foot from the brake to the gas, then back again. He was trying to decide whether or not to keep going.

Emily stepped back as the car reversed. She could smell the joint smoldering in his ashtray. She assumed that Dean was supposed to chaperone tonight, but his black suit was more appropriate for a funeral than a prom.

"Em," he said, shouting over the song. "What are you doing?"

She spread out her arms, indicating her billowing turquoise prom dress. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

His eyes flickered over her, then did another, slower take, which was the same way he had looked at Emily the first day she had walked into his classroom. In addition to teaching social studies, he was the track coach, so he'd been wearing burgundy polyester shorts and a white, short-sleeved polo—the same as the other coaches.

That was where the similarities had ended.

Dean Wexler was only six years older than his students, but he was worldly and wise in a way that none of them would ever be. Before college, he'd taken a gap year to backpack across Europe. He'd dug wells for villagers in Latin America. He drank herbal tea and grew his own weed. He had a thick, luxurious Magnum P.I. mustache. He was supposed to teach them about civics and government, but one class he was showing them an article about how DDT was still poisoning the groundwater and the next he was explaining how Reagan cut a secret deal with the Iranians on the hostages to swing the election.

Basically, they had all thought that Dean Wexler was the coolest teacher any of them had ever known.

"Em." He repeated the name like a sigh. The car gear went into neutral. The emergency brake raked up. He turned off the engine, cutting the song at *ni-i-i-ight*.

Dean got out of the car. He towered over her but, for once, his eyes were not unkind. "You can't go to the prom. What would people think? What are your parents going to say?"

"I don't care," she said, her voice going up at the end because she cared quite a lot.

"You need to anticipate the consequences of your actions." He reached out for her arms, then seemed to think better of it. "Your mother's being scrutinized at the highest levels right now."

"Really?" Emily asked, as if her mother hadn't been on the phone for so many hours that her ear had taken on the shape of the receiver. "Is she in trouble or something?"

His audible sigh was clearly meant to indicate he was being patient. "I think you're not considering how your actions could derail everything she's worked for."

Emily watched a seagull floating above a cluster of clouds. *Your actions. Your actions. Your actions.* She had heard Dean being condescending before, but never toward her.

He asked, "What if someone takes a photo of you? Or there's a journalist at the school? Think about how this will reflect on her."

A dawning realization put a smile on her lips. He was joking. Of course he was joking.

“Emily.” Dean clearly wasn’t joking. “You can’t—”

He turned into a mime, using his hands to create an aura around her body. Bare shoulders, too full breasts, too wide hips, the stretching seams at her waist as the satin turquoise failed to conceal the round swell of her belly.

This was why Gram was knitting the tiny sweater. This was why her father hadn’t let her leave the house for the last four months. This was why the principal had kicked her out of school. This was why she had been cleaved away from Clay and Nardo and Ricky and Blake.

She was pregnant.

Finally, Dean found words again. “What would your mother say?”

Emily hesitated, trying to wade through the torrent of shame being thrown at her, the same shame she had endured since word had gotten out that she was no longer the good girl with the promising life ahead of her but the bad girl who was going to pay a heavy price for her sins.

She asked, “Since when do you care so much about my mother? I thought she was a cog in a corrupt system?”

Her tone was sharper than she’d intended, but her anger was real. He sounded exactly like her parents. The principal. The other teachers. Her pastor. Her former friends. They were all right and Emily was always wrong, wrong, wrong.

She said the words that would hurt him most. “I believed in you.”

He snorted. “You’re too young to have a credible system of beliefs.”

Emily bit her bottom lip, struggling to rein in her anger. How had she not seen before that he was completely full of shit?

“Emily.” He gave another sad shake of his head, still trying to humiliate her into compliance. He didn’t care about her—not really. He didn’t want to have to deal with her. He certainly didn’t want to see her making a scene at the prom. “You look enormous. You’ll only make a fool of yourself. Go home.”

She wasn’t going to go home. “You said we should burn the world down. That’s what you said. Burn it all down. Start again. Build something—”

“You’re not building anything. You’re clearly planning some stunt in order to get your mother’s attention.” His arms were crossed. He looked at his watch. “Grow up, Emily. The time for selfishness has passed. You’ve got to think about—”

“What do I have to think about, Dean? What do you want me to think about?”

“Jesus, lower your voice.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” She felt her heart beating inside her throat. Her fists were clenched. “You said it yourself. I’m not a child. I’m nearly eighteen years old. And I’m sick and tired of people—men—telling me what to do.”

“So now I’m the patriarchy?”

“Are you, Dean? Are you part of the patriarchy? We’ll see how fast they circle the wagons when I tell my father what you did.”

Fire razed up into her arm, shot into her fingertips. Her feet left the ground as she was spun around and slammed into the side of the car. The metal was hot against her bare shoulder blades. She could hear the *tick* of the cooling engine. Dean’s hand was clamped around her wrist. His other hand covered her mouth. His face was so close to hers that she could see sweat seeping between the fine hairs of his mustache.

Emily struggled. He was hurting her. He was really hurting her.

“What lying bullshit are you going to say to your father?” he hissed. “Tell me.”

Something had cracked inside her wrist. She could feel the bones chattering like teeth.

“What are you going to say, Emily? Nothing? Is nothing what you’re going to say?”

Emily’s head moved up and down. She couldn’t tell if Dean’s sweaty hand was moving her face or if something deep inside of her, some survival instinct, had made her acquiesce.

He slowly peeled away his fingers. “What are you going to say?”

“N-nothing. I won’t—I won’t tell him anything.”

“Damn right. Because there’s nothing to tell.” He wiped his hand on his shirt as he stepped back. His eyes flickered down, not appraising, but calculating the price of her swollen wrist. He knew she wouldn’t tell her parents. They would only blame her

for being out of the house when they had ordered her to stay hidden. “Go home before something really bad happens to you.”

Emily moved out of the way so that he could get into the car. The engine chugged once, then twice, then caught. The radio sparked, the tape cassette coming back alive.

S-A-T-U-R . . .

Emily cradled her swollen wrist as the bald tires spun for traction. Dean left her in a fog of burned rubber. The smell was putrid, but she stayed in place, her bare feet stuck to the hot asphalt. Her left wrist throbbed along with her pulse. Her right hand went to her belly. She imagined the rapid pulses she had seen on the ultrasound keeping tempo with her own quick heartbeat.

She had taped all of the ultrasound photos on the mirror in her bathroom because that felt like something she was supposed to do. The images showed the tiny bean-shaped splotch slowly developing—sprouting eyes and a nose, then fingers and toes.

She was supposed to feel something, right?

A swell of emotion? An instant bond? A sense of awe and majesty?

Instead, she had felt dread. She had felt fear. She had felt the weight of responsibility, and finally, that responsibility had made her feel something tangible: a sense of purpose.

Emily knew what a bad parent looked like. Every day—often several times a day—she promised her child that the most important duties as a parent would be fulfilled.

Now, she said the words out loud as a reminder.

“I will protect you. No one will ever hurt you. You will always be safe.”

The walk into town took another half hour. Her bare feet felt scorched, then flayed, then finally numb as she traversed the white cedar of the boardwalk. The Atlantic was to her right, waves scratching at the sand as they were pulled back by the tide. The darkened shop windows on her left mirrored the sun as it crept over Delaware Bay. She imagined it passing over Annapolis, then Washington DC, then through the Shenandoah as it prepared for the journey out west—all while Emily trudged along the treadmill of the boardwalk, the same boardwalk she would probably be walking for the rest of her life.

This time last year, Emily was touring the Foggy Bottom Campus at George Washington University. Before everything had so magnificently gone off the rails. Before life as she knew it had irrevocably changed. Before she had lost the right to hope, let alone dream.

This had been the plan: As a legacy, her GWU acceptance would be a formality. She would spend her college years nestled between the White House and Kennedy Center. She would intern for a senator. She was going to follow her father's footsteps and study political science. She was going to follow her mother's footsteps into Harvard Law, then work five years at a white-shoe firm, then get a state judgeship, and eventually, possibly, a federal judgeship.

What would your mother say?

"Your life is over!" was what her mother had screamed when Emily's pregnancy had become apparent. "No one will ever respect you now!"

The funny thing was, looking back on the last few months, her mother had been right.

Emily left the boardwalk, cutting down the long, dark alley between the candy shop and the hot dog shack, crossing Beach Drive. She eventually found herself on Royal Cove Way. Several cars drove by, some of them slowing down to take a look at the bedraggled beachball in the bright turquoise prom dress. Emily rubbed her arms to fight the chill in the air. She shouldn't have gone with such a loud color. She shouldn't have chosen something strapless. She should've altered it to accommodate her growing body.

But she hadn't considered any of these good ideas until now, so her swollen breasts were spilling out of the top and her hips swung like a pendulum on the clock inside of a whorehouse.

"Hey, hot stuff!" a boy screamed from the open window of a Mustang. His friends were shoved into the back. Someone's leg was sticking out a window. She could smell beer and pot and sweat.

Emily's hand cradled her round belly as she walked across the school quad. She thought about the child growing inside. At first, it hadn't seemed real. And then it had felt like an anchor. Only lately had it felt like a human being.

Her human being.

“Emmie?”

She turned, surprised to find Blake hiding beneath the shadow of a tree. He was cupping a cigarette in one hand. Improbably, he was dressed for the prom. Since elementary school, they had all scoffed about how the dances and the proms were a Pageantry of Plebs clinging to what would probably be the best nights of their pathetic lives. Only Blake’s formal black tuxedo set him apart from the bright white and pastels she had seen the other boys wearing in passing cars.

She cleared her throat. “What are you doing here?”

He grinned. “We thought it would be fun to sneer at the plebs in person.”

She looked around for Clay and Nardo and Ricky, because they always traveled in a pack.

“They’re inside,” he said. “Except for Ricky. She’s running late.”

Emily didn’t know what to say. *Thanks* seemed wrong considering the last time Blake had talked to her, he’d called her a stupid bitch.

She started to walk away, offering only a stray, “See ya.”

“Em?”

She didn’t stop or turn around because, while he was right that she could be a bitch, Emily wasn’t stupid.

Music pulsed from the open doors of the gymnasium. Emily could feel the bass vibrating in her back teeth as she walked across the quad. The prom committee had apparently decided on the theme of “Romance by the Sea”, which was as sad as it was predictable. Paper fish in rainbow colors darted between rows of blue streamers. Not one of them was a longbill, which was the fish that the town was named after, but who was Emily to correct them? She wasn’t even a student here.

“Christ,” Nardo said. “You’ve got some balls showing up like this.”

He was standing off to the side of the entrance, exactly the kind of place she would expect Nardo to be lurking. Same black tux as Blake, but with an I SHOT J.R. button on the lapel to make it clear he was in on the joke. He offered Emily a sip from a half-filled bottle of Everclear and cherry Kool-Aid.

She shook her head. “I gave it up for Lent.”

He guffawed, shoving the bottle into his jacket pocket. She could see the stitching had already torn from the weight of the rotgut. A hand-rolled cigarette was tucked behind his ear. Emily remembered something her father had said about Nardo the first time he'd met him—

That kid's gonna end up in jail or on Wall Street, but not in that order.

“So.” He slipped the cigarette out and searched for his lighter. “What brings a bad girl like you to a nice place like this?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Where’s Clay?”

“Why, you got something to tell him?” He wagged his eyebrows as he stared pointedly at her belly.

Emily waited for his cigarette to catch. She used her good hand to rub her stomach like a witch with a crystal ball. “What if I have something to tell *you*, Nardo?”

“Shit,” he said, his eyes flickering nervously behind her. They had drawn a crowd. “That’s not funny, Emily.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Where’s Clay?”

“Fuck if I know.” He turned away from her, feigning interest in a white stretch limo pulling into the parking lot.

Emily headed into the gym, because she knew Clay would be somewhere near the stage, probably circled by a group of slim, beautiful girls. Her feet registered the drop in temperature as she walked across the polished wood floor. The seaside theme continued inside the building. Balloons bounced against the rafters of the high ceiling, ready to drop at the end of the night. Large, round tables were laid out with sea-themed centerpieces glued together with shells and bright pink peach blossoms.

“Look,” someone said. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“Damn.”

“The nerve.”

Emily kept her eyes trained straight ahead. The band was setting up on the stage, but someone had put on a record to fill the void. Her stomach rumbled when she passed the food tables. The sickly-sweet syrup that passed for punch. Finger sandwiches fat with meats and cheeses. Leftover taffy that last summer’s tourists hadn’t bought. Metal bins of limp French fries. Pigs in a blanket. Crab cakes. Bergers cookies and cakes.

Emily stopped her progress toward the stage. The din of the crowd had died down. All she could hear was the echo of Rick Springfield warning them not to talk to strangers.

People were staring at her. Not just people. Chaperones. Parents. Her art teacher who'd told her she showed remarkable skill. Her English teacher who'd written *I'm impressed!* on her Virginia Woolf paper. Her history teacher who had promised Emily she would be the lead prosecutor on this year's mock trial.

Until—

Emily kept her shoulders back as she walked toward the stage with her belly sticking out like the prow of an ocean liner. She had grown up in this town, attended the schools, gone to church, summer camp, field trips, hikes and sleepovers. These had been her classmates, her neighbors, her fellow Girl Scouts, her lab partners, her study buddies, her pals that she'd hung out with when Nardo took Clay to Italy with his family and Ricky and Blake were helping out their grandfather at the diner.

And now—

All of her used-to-be friends were backing away from her as if they were afraid what Emily had might be catching. They were such hypocrites. She had done the thing they all were either doing or wanted to do, but she'd had the bad fortune to get caught at it.

"Jesus," someone whispered.

"Outrageous," a parent said.

Their admonitions no longer stung. Dean Wexler in his shitty two-tone Chevy had peeled back the last layer of shame that Emily would ever feel about her pregnancy. The only thing that made it wrong was these judgmental assholes telling themselves it was wrong.

She blocked out their whispers, silently repeating her list of promises to her baby—

I will protect you. No one will ever hurt you. You will always be safe.

Clay was leaning against the stage. His arms were crossed as he waited for her. He was wearing the same black tux as Blake and Nardo. Or, more likely, they were wearing the same tux that Clay had picked out. That's how the boys had always been. Whatever Clay did, the rest of them followed.

He said nothing when Emily stopped in front of him, just raised an expectant eyebrow. She noticed that despite his derision of cheerleaders, he was surrounded by them. The rest of the group had probably told themselves they were attending the prom ironically. Only Clay would know that they were attending the prom so he could get laid.

Rhonda Stein, the head cheerleader, spoke when no one else would. "What is *she* doing here?"

She had looked at Emily but asked Clay the question.

Another cheerleader said, "Maybe it's a *Carrie* thing."

"Did anybody bring the pigs' blood?"

"Who's gonna crown her?"

There was nervous laughter, but they were all looking for Clay to set the tone.

He took a deep breath before slowly letting it go. Then one shoulder casually went up in a shrug. "Free world."

Emily's throat bristled against the dry air. When she had thought about how this night would go down, when she had delighted at the idea of their collective shock, she had reveled in the story she'd tell her child about her mother the radical, bohemian temptress who'd dared to dance at her senior prom, Emily had expected to feel every emotion but the one she was feeling now, which was exhaustion. Mentally, physically, she felt incapable of doing anything but turning around and walking back the way she'd come.

So she did.

The crowd was still parted, but the mood had turned decidedly toward pitchforks and scarlet 'A's. Boys gritted their teeth in anger. Girls literally turned their backs. She saw teachers and parents shaking their heads in disgust. *What was she doing here? Why was she wrecking the night for everyone else? Jezebel. Whore. She had made her bed. Who did she think she was? She was going to ruin some poor boy's life.*

Emily had not realized how stifling the air in the gymnasium was until she was safely outside. Nardo was no longer lurking by the doors. Blake had recessed into another shadow. Ricky was wherever she was in times like this, which was to say nowhere useful.

"Emily?"

She turned around, surprised to find Clay. He had followed her out of the gym. Clayton Morrow never followed anyone.

He asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Leaving," she said. "Go back inside with your friends."

"Those losers?" His lip was curled. He looked over her shoulder, his eyes following something that was moving too fast to be a human being. He loved watching birds. That was the secret nerd part of Clay. He read Henry James and he loved Edith Wharton and he was making straight 'A's in advanced calculus and he couldn't tell you what a free throw was or how to spiral a football but no one cared because he was so goddamn gorgeous.

Emily asked, "What do you want, Clay?"

"You're the one who showed up here looking for me."

She found it odd that Clay had assumed she was here for him. Emily hadn't expected to find any of them at the prom. She had wanted to mortify the rest of the school for ostracizing her. Frankly, she had hoped that Mr. Lampert, the principal, would call Chief Stilton and have her arrested. Then she'd have to be bailed out and her father would be furious and her mother—

"Crap," Emily muttered. Maybe this stunt was about her mother after all.

"Emily?" Clay asked. "Come on. Why are you here? What do you want from me?"

He didn't want an answer. He wanted absolution.

Emily wasn't his pastor. "Go back inside and enjoy yourself, Clay. Hook up with some cheerleaders. Go to college. Get a great job. Walk through all the doors that are always opened for you. Enjoy the rest of your life."

"Wait." His hand rested on her shoulder, a rudder turning her back in his direction. "You're not being fair."

She looked into his clear blue eyes. This moment was meaningless to him—an unpleasant interaction that would disappear from his memories like a puff of smoke. In twenty years, Emily would be nothing but a lingering source of uneasiness Clay felt when he opened his mailbox and found an invitation to their high school reunion.

"My *life* isn't fair," she told him. "You're fine, Clay. You're always fine. You're always going to *be* fine."

He gave a heavy sigh. “Don’t turn out to be one of those boring, bitter women, Emily. I would really hate that for you.”

“Don’t let Chief Stilton hear about what you’ve been doing behind half-closed doors, Clayton.” She raised herself on her toes so that she could see the fear in his eyes. “I would really hate that for you.”

One hand snaked out and grabbed her by the neck. The other reared back into a fist. Rage darkened his eyes. “You’re going to get yourself killed, you fucking cunt.”

Emily squeezed her eyes closed as she waited for the blow, but all she heard was nervous laughter.

Her eyes slitted open.

Clay released her. He wasn’t stupid enough to hurt her in front of witnesses.

That one will end up in the White House, her father had said the first time he’d met Clay. If he doesn’t end up swinging from a rope.

Emily had dropped her purse when he’d grabbed her. Clay retrieved it, wiping the dirt off the side of the satin clutch. He handed it to her as if he was being chivalrous.

She snatched it out of his hand.

This time, Clay didn’t follow Emily when she walked away. She passed by several clusters of prom-goers in varying shades of pastels and crinoline. Most of them only stopped to gawk at her, but she got a warm smile from Melody Brickel, her one-time friend from band practice, and that meant something.

Emily waited for the light to cross the street. There were no catcalls this time, though another car full of boys did an ominously slow drive-by.

“I will protect you,” she whispered to the small passenger growing inside of her. “No one will ever hurt you. You will always be safe.”

The light finally changed. The sun was dipping down, casting a long shadow at the end of the crosswalk. Emily had always felt comfortable being alone in town, but now, goosebumps prickled her arms. She was uneasy about cutting through the alley between the candy shop and the hot dog shack again. Her feet ached from the punishing walk. Her neck hurt where Clay

had grabbed her. Her wrist still throbbed like it was either broken or badly sprained. She shouldn't have come here. She should've stayed home and kept Gram company until the bell rang for dinner.

"Emmie?" It was Blake again, coming out from the darkened entrance of the hot dog shack like a vampire. "Are you okay?"

She felt some of her mettle break. No one ever asked her if she was okay anymore. "I need to get home."

"Em—" He wasn't going to let her walk away so easily. "I'm just—are you really okay? Because it's weird that you're here. It's weird that we're all here, but particularly because, well, your shoes. They seem to be missing."

They both looked down at her bare feet.

Emily barked a laugh that gonged through her body like the Liberty Bell. She laughed so hard that her stomach hurt. She laughed until she doubled over.

"Emmie?" Blake put his hand on her shoulder. He'd thought that she'd lost her mind. "Should I call your parents or—"

"No." She stood up, wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry. I just realized that I'm literally barefoot and pregnant."

Blake reluctantly smiled. "Was that on purpose?"

"No. Yes?"

She honestly didn't know. Maybe her subconscious was doing weird things. Maybe the baby was controlling her hormones. She would easily believe either explanation because the third option—that she was batshit crazy—would be an unwelcome development.

"I'm sorry," Blake said, but his apologies always rang hollow because he kept making the same mistakes over and over again. "What I said before. Not before, but way before. I shouldn't have said . . . I mean, it was wrong to say . . ."

She knew exactly what he was talking about. "That I should flush it down the toilet?"

He seemed almost as startled as Emily had been when he'd made the suggestion so many months ago.

"That—yes," he said. "That's what I should not have said."

"No, you shouldn't have." Emily felt her throat tighten, because the truth was, the decision had never been hers. Her parents had made it for her. "I need to—"

"Let's go somewhere and—"

“Shit!” She jerked her injured wrist away from his grasp. Her foot landed awkwardly on an uneven stretch of sidewalk. She started to fall, clutching uselessly at Blake’s tuxedo jacket before her tailbone cracked against the asphalt. The pain was excruciating. She rolled to her side. Something wet trickled between her legs.

The baby.

“Emily!” Blake fell to his knees beside her. “Are you okay?”

“Go away!” Emily pleaded, though she needed his help to stand up. Her purse had been crushed in the fall. The satin had ripped open. “Blake, please just go. You’re making things worse! Why do you always make things worse?”

Pain flashed in his eyes, but she couldn’t worry about him now. Her mind was buzzing with all of the ways that falling so hard could’ve hurt her child.

He said, “I didn’t mean—”

“Of course you didn’t mean it!” she yelled. He was the one who was still spreading rumors. He was the one pushing Ricky to be so cruel. “You never mean anything, do you? It’s never your fault, you never screw up, you’re never responsible. Well guess what? This is your fault. You got what you wanted. It’s all your damn fault.”

“Emily—”

She stumbled, catching herself against the corner of the candy shop. She heard Blake say something, but her ears were filled with a high-pitched screaming sound.

Was it her baby? Was it crying for help?

“Emmie?”

She shoved him away and stumbled down the alley. Hot liquid dribbled down the insides of her thighs. She pressed her palm against the rough brick as she tried to keep herself from falling to her knees. A sob choked her throat. She opened her mouth to gulp in a breath. Salt air burned her lungs. She was blinded by the sun bouncing off the boardwalk. She stepped back into the darkness, leaning against the wall at the base of the alleyway.

Emily looked back at the street. Blake had slunk off. No one could see her.

She bunched up her dress, using her injured arm to hold up the folds of satin. With her good hand, she reached between her

legs. She had expected to find blood on her fingers, but there was nothing. She leaned down and smelled her hand.

“Oh,” she whispered.

She’d wet herself.

Emily laughed again, but this time through tears. Relief made her weak in the knees. The brick pulled at her dress as she sank to the ground. Her tailbone ached, but she didn’t care. She was shockingly overjoyed that she had peed herself. The dark places her brain had gone to when she’d assumed that blood was gushing between her legs were more enlightening than any ultrasound she could tape to her bathroom mirror.

In that moment, Emily had desperately wanted her baby to be all right. Not out of duty. A child wasn’t only a responsibility. It was an opportunity to love someone the way that she had never been loved.

And for the first time in this whole shameful, humiliating, helpless process, Emily Vaughn knew without a doubt that she loved this baby.

“It looks like a girl,” the doctor had told her during her most recent exam.

At the time, Emily had catalogued the news as another step in the process, but now, the realization broke open the dam that had for so long held back her emotions.

Her girl.

Her tiny, precious little girl.

Emily’s hand went to her mouth. She was so weak with relief that she would’ve fallen over if she hadn’t already been sitting on the cold ground. Her head bent toward her knees. Big, fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Her mouth gaped wordlessly, her chest so filled with love that she couldn’t form sound. She pressed her palm to her belly and imagined a small hand pressing back. Her heart lurched as she thought about one day being able to kiss the tips of those precious fingers. Gram had said that each baby had a special smell that only their mother knew. Emily wanted to know that smell. She wanted to wake up in the night and listen to the quick in and out of the beautiful girl that she had grown inside of her body.

She wanted to make plans.

In two weeks, Emily would be eighteen years old. In another two months, she would be a mother. She would get a job. She would move out of her parents' house. Gram would understand, and what she didn't understand she would forget. Dean Wexler was right about one thing: Emily had to grow up. She had more than herself to think of now. She had to get away from Longbill Beach. She had to start planning her future instead of letting other people plan it for her. More importantly, she would give her baby girl everything that Emily had never had.

Kindness. Understanding. Security.

Emily closed her eyes. She conjured the image of her baby girl joyfully floating around inside of her body. She took a deep breath and started to recite the mantra, this time from a place of love rather than duty.

“I will protect—”

The sound of a loud snap made her eyes open.

Emily saw black leather shoes, black socks, the hem of a pair of black pants. She looked up. The sun flickered as a bat swung through the air.

Her heart clenched into a fist. She was suddenly, inescapably, filled with fear.

Not for herself—for her baby.

Emily curled inward, arms wrapped around her belly, legs pulled up tight, as she fell to the side. She was desperate for another moment, another breath, so that her last words to her little girl would not be a lie.

Someone had always planned to hurt them.

They had never been safe.