

CHAPTER 1

The house aches with silence.

All I can do is stand there until I remember to lock the front door behind me, dropping my keys on the console table and inching through the darkness. Numbly, I climb the stairs, fingers tickling plaster walls to remind me that I still have nerve endings. That I can still *feel*.

Mom stayed behind at the hospital. She needed to deal with insurance and morgue and cremation stuff. Things you wish could be put off but can't. While she handled it, she insisted that I come home. To rest, to shower, to get the hospital stench off my skin. Maybe I'll burn my clothes too, but when I walk past my parents' bedroom door, I completely lose track of all purpose.

A thousand seconds tick by.

Because I guess this is it. This is what the rest of my life is going to be, walking into a house with no wisecracking,

slipper-wearing, grunge rock-loving dad. *No. Dad.* But their bedroom is still full of his smell, his things, and right now I need to be close to what's left of him. I push the door open and tiptoe across the carpet and into my parents' bed. Which is weird, maybe? Hiding under their covers at seventeen? I curl up on a dead man's pillow anyway. The memory foam still smells of him. Still remembers him. Cedar and sunblock. It spins my heart into a long, thin thread.

For a while I lie here, sobs avalanching off me in the darkness. Crying's never been my thing, and now I remember why. It's brutal to convulse like this, ache like this, all while I'm trying to catalog the past fifteen hours. The fact that *I woke up with a dad.* Said goodbye to him from behind the Pop-Tart between my teeth. Drove to school thinking about how it was T-minus five days till summer vacation. Physics, calculus. My English teacher doling out summer reading syllabi. Right around seventh period, *that* is when a pain so sharp and vicious crept up my father's left arm. Blue eyes bulging while his chest cramped. Keeling over. An unexpected heart attack called in by a terrified receptionist.

Mom was in hysterics when I got to the hospital, dousing me in our new misery like a bucket of water. Together we sat in the waiting room for three hours. Hands intertwined, forming a closeness we hadn't had for years. We didn't talk or move or breathe. But in the end, it was the end. Just like on TV, the way weary surgeons slink into the waiting room to deliver bad news, the doctor's eyes apologizing before their lips. Because not even miracle hands could save him.

My tears soak clean through Dad's pillow.

I shudder and stretch, feet banging against something hard and unexpected at the foot of the bed. When I sit up, my head throbs, dehydration tugging at my temples. The lights are still off but my eyes have adjusted, aided by a waning moon through the skylight. Dad's suitcase, that's what I kicked. Which is weird because he didn't say anything about a trip, although his accounting firm would occasionally send him to regional conferences.

I force myself off the bed, reaching for the lamp on Dad's nightstand, *click-click-clicking* the switch till light stings my eyes and the room feels real. I want to cry all over again but I force a swallow, hauling the suitcase toward me. I've barely unzipped it when I spot an even bigger suitcase on the floor. And then a garment bag and a box by the door.

Hold on, *what?*

With skinny breath and weak fingers, I reach for Dad's dresser, sliding open the drawers, one by one. Empty, empty, empty. My eyes ping-pong around the room. His bathrobe missing from the hook behind the door; no bird-watching books or laundry pile or mounds of electronics. The room wobbles as I soak in its lopsidedness. Mom's late-for-work clutter, rumpled clothes and coffee mugs and stacks of half-read novels. The only traces left are of her, nothing of him. I choke on my own spit when it hits me.

Holy shit—was my dad moving *out?*

I'm still gasping, rubbing swollen eyes, trying to steady my

breath while my brain tornadoes inside my head. Because, I know you're not supposed to jump to conclusions, especially when you're in the throes of grief or whatever . . . but give me a break. He packed *everything*. *My dad was leaving us*. There is no other explanation.

And I'm finding out now. Like *this*.

I start to pace around the room, sorting more than a day's worth of memories. The evolution of their silence, occasional fights. Mom whisper-shouting behind closed doors about another woman's perfume on his clothes. I mean, there was a time I thought *divorce* . . . but it kept not happening. As if a scab formed over their discontent. Which—okay, fine—I rallied around. With half the kids in Santa Fe bouncing from mom's to dad's and back again, I'll admit to *wanting* them to work through it. Parents don't always stay married but *mine* were supposed to. At least, that's what I wanted. Maybe it's what Mom wanted too, and now she's devastated and filling out paperwork at the hospital, crying into a nurse's arms, thinking she just lost the love of her life, but . . .

I cringe when it hits me.

She doesn't know.

My poor, wrecked mother must have no idea. There's no way. We can't stand each other sometimes, but she wouldn't *intentionally* send me home from the hospital alone to find *this*.

Jesus, my brain is on fire. Like, what could have pushed him over the edge? Why *now*? And why did he leave his bags? Was he planning to break the news over dinner? *These are excellent*

enchiladas, Rita. By the way, I'm leaving you. And then what—divorce? The thought of it shouldn't crush me, but I can't have the ground pulled out from under me. Not after today.

Neither can she.

Pretty soon Mom will be home. She will walk through the front door as I did, exhausted as I was, and stumble up the stairs with the intention of wrapping herself in her dead husband's sweaters in order to feel him all over her and smell his cedar scent, only . . .

Silent sobs bend me in half and break my insides. It's bleak as hell, imagining her finding out this way. As much as I literally *cannot* stand her naggy, criticizing bullshit, no one deserves *this*. And, sorry for the realness but, like, what would this truth do to *our* relationship? Like, if she were to not only be grieving but also reeling from this development? I mean . . .

She can't find out. I can't let her.