

INVITATION

Please join us for Katelyn's birthday party.
There'll be lots to drink and the food will be hearty.

Everything starts on the dot of 7.
We know the babysitters leave by 11.

Winter Wonderland is the theme.
Dress in silver and white if you want to be seen.

Please let us know if you can come.
May 27 for tremendous fun.

PROLOGUE

Saturday Night, May 27, 11:15 p.m.

A champagne bottle lies on its side on a trestle table covered in a snow-white cloth, pale-yellow liquid dribbling out onto the rug below, a dark puddle forming.

Against one wall, a silver banner hangs listlessly, pulled from the wall and half folded. Black letters, *HAPPY BIRTHDAY K* visible.

Bright lights seek out the chaos and mess in the room, scattered chip crumbs on every surface, plastic cups stacked up, tiny amounts of lurid pink-colored liquid swimming in the bottom of each one.

Silver snowflakes that sparkled in the low light reveal themselves as cheap plastic, along with the silver tinsel that is looped around tables and along the walls. The fairy lights hanging from the ceiling no longer blink little white shiny stars.

The Winter Wonderland has disappeared; only the detritus of four hours of festivities remains.

Most of the guests have gone home. Only the brokenhearted, the hurt, and the angry are left.

“Look what you’ve done, look at this mess,” she screams.

“Me?” he answers. “Me?” Fury in his voice. “What about what you’ve done, what about what you did?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What are you talking about?”

“How drunk are you?” he spits.

“Look at this mess,” she repeats.

“Are you crazy?” he asks. “Are you crazy, or just trying to drive me crazy?”

“What do you mean? Look at this mess.”

“Stop yelling at me. This is your fault.”

“What are you talking about?” she screams, frustration bringing tears. Around and around they go, confusion and despair on both sides.

In the corner, leaning against the wall with her arms folded, she waits for them to finish, waits for it to be her turn to speak, her turn to ask questions. Stepping forward, she stands the bottle of champagne upright, stares down at the mess on the rug, and then moves away, letting the puddle spread and stain, a small smile on her face.

This is what I wanted, she thinks.

This is exactly what I wanted.

ONE

KATELYN

Monday, 3 a.m.—Two Days After the Party

Turning on her side because there's a slight twinge in her back, Katelyn opens her eyes and is surprised to see Toby slumped in a chair next to the bed, his eyes closed and his head tilted. He looks really uncomfortable. She doesn't recognize the chair he's sitting in. Blinking rapidly in case this is a dream, she stretches out her leg, feeling her foot move against rough sheets. She's definitely awake.

"What are you doing?" she asks him, and he lifts his head and sighs.

"I was just getting some sleep," he says, rubbing at his brown eyes under his glasses and then running his hands through his messy brown curls. The room is dim with light coming in from outside. Unfamiliar shapes loom in corners and she can hear someone speaking and then the sound of a phone ringing somewhere.

Toby leans forward and switches on a lamp sitting on a side table next to her. She doesn't recognize the lamp, so despite feeling wide awake this must be a dream. It has the vividly real

feeling of some of her dreams, the ones that leave her with a racing heart and dry mouth, the ones that she is always relieved to wake up from. But those dreams are usually ones in which she is being chased, or driving a car without brakes, or has lost sight of Harper. They don't involve her husband sitting in an unfamiliar chair next to an unfamiliar bed.

"Why don't you just get into bed?" says Katelyn, and then she takes a good look around the room, feels the scratchy sheets again and catches a strange, sharp, chemical scent of something.

This is not their bedroom and she is not in their bed.

"Where are we?" she asks and Toby sighs again, slumping forward on the chair and dropping his head into his hands. "Read the piece of paper in your hand, Kate," he says, the words heavy with exhaustion, and only then does she notice that she is clutching a piece of blue notebook paper, softly scrunched from her hands. She sits up in the bed she is lying in, listening to the crackle of something plastic beneath her, and takes a look at the note while Toby hangs his head.

You are in a hospital.

Harper is fine and with my mum.

You've lost your memory.

You haven't had a stroke.

You've had an MRI and ECG and everything is fine.

You have something called Transient Global Amnesia.

Your lost hours of memory have shown up on the MRI as a black dot.

You aren't able to form new memories so you keep forgetting things I've told you.

Today is Sunday.

This should be temporary.

Katelyn looks at Toby and then she reads the words again. The words *black dot* and *amnesia* jumping out at her. Toby lifts his head and watches her read the note. Katelyn feels her lips moving as she reads. She reaches up to her head, touching the back of her skull, expecting to find something there, expecting to be able to feel the black dot. She reads the words again.

"Technically, I suppose, it's Monday now so I should change that last one," he says, sounding defeated. Why does he sound like that?

Katelyn reads the list one more time. "I don't understand," she says. She is obviously in a hospital bed in a hospital room and something has happened to her. Inside her, panic rises up from her toes, shooting through her body and causing her heart to race and her head to pound. "I don't understand," she says again.

"Read the list, Kate," says Toby, staring at the wall next to her bed, his voice robotic as though saying this bores or irritates him; or as though he has repeated these same words many, many times.

"I've read the list, Toby," she replies, shouting now, "and I know what it says. How long have I been here?"

"What does it say?" he asks, finally looking at her, cocking his head to the side and examining her. "Without looking at it again, tell me what it says."

"It says that I've lost my memory and that Harper is with your mum and that it's Sunday, although you told me that, technically, it's Monday so it must be early Monday morning because it's dark outside. I know what the list says, Toby," she snaps, exasperated at the feeling of disorientation swirling around her. She wants to

wipe her eyes to get rid of the fog in front of her but she knows that her eyes are fine.

“Let me get the doctor,” says Toby excitedly, jumping up from his chair. He is wearing his smart black jeans and the bright white shirt she bought for him for his birthday. “It will be nice to wear to a party,” she remembers telling him when he opened it. The silver accents on the sleeves looked good against his honey-colored skin. The shirt is rumpled, the sleeves rolled up. It looks like he’s slept in his clothes.

“What’s the time?” she asks, checking around her for her phone. “Where’s my phone?”

“It’s 3 a.m. on Monday morning,” says Toby.

“I doubt there’s going to be a doctor around now,” she says.

“So, you know where you are?” he asks excitedly.

“Toby, I’m not an idiot,” she says. “Why are you talking to me like I am one?”

At the door to the room, Toby stops and looks back at her. “Can you tell me what the list said, Kate, I mean without looking at it again?” And now his voice is filled with desperate hope. She has no idea what’s going on but her disorientation rumbles itself into pure irritation.

Katelyn scrunches up the list and throws the ball of blue paper across the room, frustrated at being asked the same questions over and over again. She has already answered him. “Your list, and I know you wrote it because I recognize your handwriting, says that I have lost my memory and that Harper is with your mum and if it’s Monday I hope she has her backpack because it’s a preschool day.” Is he making fun of her, is that what this is? Is this some kind of colossal joke?

“I’ll get someone,” says Toby with a wide smile and he leaves before Katelyn can ask him anything else.

Katelyn looks around the room, where white slatted blinds are closed against the night. There is a television bolted high up on the wall and a door that must lead to a bathroom. She hopes it

does because she is suddenly in desperate need of a toilet. Getting out of bed, she moves slowly, gingerly at first in case something is injured, but then more quickly as she feels her body move just the way she is used to. There is no pain anywhere. She is wearing a hospital gown and underwear that feels like it's made of paper. Where are her clothes? What was she wearing when she got here?

In the bathroom she can see that her face is clean of makeup, only a slight smudge of black under her eyes that she wipes at with her fingers. Her highlighted brown hair is a tangled mess. She runs her fingers through it as she stares at her shadowed green eyes, squinting against the bright light of the bathroom at the wrinkles she always catalogs in the morning. What exactly has happened to her? She lifts the gown and looks at her body in the mirror, turning around and searching for a bruise or a cut or something to tell her that she's had some kind of accident, but she looks exactly the same as always. "You need to start exercising," she tells herself, just like she does every morning.

She climbs back into the bed, sits up, and looks around for the remote for the television, remembering a television series where a man wakes from a coma to discover that the whole world had been overtaken by zombies. Where is Toby and what happens if he doesn't come back? "Don't be ridiculous," she mutters. Harper wouldn't be with Toby's mother if the world had been overtaken by zombies. Maybe she banged her head? Reaching up, she uses both hands to forcefully examine her skull again for bruising but there's nothing, although there is a headache taking hold.

It seems possible that the entire world has changed and she hasn't been there to watch it. Everything feels terribly wrong . . . off. Aside from her pounding head and some nausea, she thinks she's okay. Is she?

The door opens and Toby returns with a nurse dressed in blue scrubs, her short blond hair slicked back and a smile on her face. Katelyn takes a deep relieved breath. At least he came back. No zombies then.

“Hello, Katelyn. I’m Amanda. I’ve been looking after you for the past few hours.” The nurse stands next to the bed and grasps Katelyn’s wrist with her fingers, glancing briefly at the round face of a watch pinned to her uniform.

“Hi . . . look, I read the list Toby made and I understand what’s happened, I mean I don’t understand but I know what it says. I don’t know how I got here or why I’m here, I don’t . . .” She shakes her head, afraid that she might cry as her eyes grow hot with tears. “Can you tell me what’s going on?” The more she tries to think, the more intense the pounding becomes and she briefly fears a brain tumor, but the list said she’s had an MRI and another kind of test and she’s fine, fine except for the black dot of lost memory. What does that mean? Amnesia. The list said she had amnesia but she knows who she is and who Toby is and Harper. Don’t people with amnesia forget everything including their own names?

“Don’t you worry, love, it’s okay and I’m going to explain it all,” the nurse says. She pats Katelyn reassuringly on her hand.

“I think she’s back,” says Toby. “Do you think she’s back?”

“Where did I go?” asks Katelyn. “Where have I been?”

TWO

LEAH

Monday, 3 a.m.—Two Days After the Party

It's after three in the morning when Leah hears the ping on her phone, alerting her to an incoming text message. She's waiting for news, asleep in her queen-sized bed, which takes up almost the whole bedroom in her small apartment, but not really asleep. She has drifted in and out of strange dreams involving Katelyn and Toby and Harper, one in which Harper asked her why her mummy was dead. She shakes her head at the terrible idea of having to explain to a three-year-old what happened to her mother.

It looks like she's back, like it's over, reads the message and she quickly replies, *Thank God.* There's no point in asking any more questions now. Toby will be speaking to Katelyn and probably a doctor will be called. She can go back to sleep and speak to him in the morning, but she's wide awake now, her heart racing slightly, and she doesn't know if it's from relief or if it's panic at what might happen now.

She pictures her best friend in a hospital bed asking the same questions again and again, every few minutes, and shudders. The whole thing felt surreal and impossible and at one point she was

sure that Katelyn must just be playing an elaborate practical joke on all of them, although she wasn't the kind of person to do such a thing.

Will all her memory return now? Will she remember the party and everything that happened at the party?

Climbing out of bed, she angles her body so that she can move around to the closet to grab a sweater. It's cold in the apartment without the heater on. In her living room she switches on the small electric heater, not thinking about the cost and not thinking about why she has to worry about money at the moment.

The strange urge to call Aaron and tell him what has happened overwhelms her and she reminds herself again that he is not hers to call anymore. He doesn't deserve to know what has happened to Katelyn anyway. He doesn't deserve to hear from any of them ever again.

The party feels like it was weeks ago, months ago even. So much happened. By midnight she had been sure that her friendship with Katelyn was over, that her whole life had changed forever and then Katelyn just, sort of, blanked. It's the only way Leah can think to describe it to herself. Katelyn blanked.

She had been holding her hands up at the time. "I don't understand what you're saying," she said to Toby as Leah watched. They were all in the living room, it was after eleven, and they were surrounded by the sad remains of the party, all the guests having left to get home to babysitters. All their friends were in their late thirties and early forties, burdened with large mortgages and young children as they worked toward Instagrammable lives. Parties were always over by 11 p.m., despite everyone vowing to keep going until the early hours of the morning as they all used to do in their twenties.

She and Katelyn and Toby were standing in the living room, where silver and white plastic bowls, filled with the remains of salsa, guacamole, chips, and peanuts, littered every surface. The vivid chunky red of salsa and brown-green of avocado exposed

to air turned Leah's stomach because she had definitely had too much to drink. It was seeing Aaron that had done it.

"Please, I don't understand," Katelyn said and then she stepped back, her foot landing on a plastic cup lying on the dark wood floor, empty and on its side.

The crack of the cup snapping in half was loud in the silence of the room and Katelyn blinked once and stopped speaking.

Leah sits on the sofa with her phone in her hand rereading the text Toby sent at three o'clock on Sunday morning, after Katelyn had been admitted and Toby had told Leah to go home because only one person was allowed to stay with Katelyn.

*They don't think it's a stroke but they are going to do some tests.
They've taken blood and they wanted to know how much she
had to drink.*

Leah had wondered how Toby had answered that question. She had no idea how much any of them had had to drink. It was a party and it was meant to be a lovely celebration. Maybe Katelyn had way too much to drink and that triggered something in her brain, but she hadn't seemed that drunk. Leah knew what she looked like when she was drunk. It never took much to push her over the limit and then she usually got very friendly and, quickly, very sleepy. She had seemed perfectly sober, just unable to remember anything for more than a minute and very confused.

What will happen now? Toby has not left Katelyn's side since he took her to the hospital early Sunday morning. He has remained the steadfast loyal husband, sitting next to his wife's bedside as she asked over and again what was happening and why she was in the hospital.

Leah had wanted to go and sit with her during the day on Sunday but Toby told her not to come.

It's too upsetting and they keep taking her away for tests and things. I'll let you know when there's any news.

Yesterday afternoon—Sunday afternoon—there had been news.

They think it's something called transient global amnesia. Apparently, it's caused by stress sometimes. It will resolve itself but she may never remember the party.

Leah wonders what Katelyn will remember, if she ever does, and what will happen now that she seems to have come out of whatever has been going on with her brain.

She's looked up what this is, read stories from people who have suffered from it, and it is caused by stress, or by the shock of the body getting into very cold water, or even by orgasm. It's caused by a lot of things and there isn't much that can be done about the missing memories. For more than twenty-four hours Katelyn has been unable to form new memories or to remember the party. She has, effectively, lost more than a whole day. She has probably lost much more than just time, a lot more. But she doesn't know that.

She had seemed perfectly fine during the party, talking to people, having a good time. She had been fine when they blew out her birthday candles on the three-tier chocolate cake filled with decadent whipped cream. She had seemed fine until everything was over and the three of them were in the living room, tempers frayed and feelings hurt. More than hurt. Destroyed.

Leah will not know how much comes back until she sees Katelyn and only then will she know what she has to do.