

PROLOGUE

I dream of you sometimes.

Erratic and impulsive, just like in life, I never know when you might show up. When I might close my eyes, attempt to lose myself in the merciful black, only for your face to click into existence like an intrusive thought. Like an unwelcome visitor, your foot wedged in the door, coercing your way inside my mind the way you always did.

The dream, though. It's always the same. Walking into the bathroom at night, bare feet cold on the slick white tile. All the lights off as I stare at my reflection in the vanity mirror—only it's you I see, not me. It's you: haunted, strange, features murky like old bathwater, rippled by time and the lukewarm memories. Eyes like sea glass, foggy and unfocused. The kind we used to collect at the beach. You're eighteen in my dream, the age you were when you disappeared. Forever young, eternally perfect, preserved in amber like an ancient relic. No matter when you come to me, though, always, every time, you stare at me and I stare back. Always, every

time, I see your face instead of my own. Every tilt of the head, every twist of the neck, like the mirror is glass and you're right there, right in front of me. Twenty-two years spent trapped on the other side.

Mocking me, miming my movements. Unattainable yet somehow still within reach.

I just wish I knew what you were thinking. I wish I had access to that beautiful brain of yours so I could wade through the folds of it and finally understand.

So I could dissect it, dissect you: Natalie Campbell, my beguiling big sister.

Instead, in my dream, I extend my fingers and you extend them right back. I reach out to touch you, to prove to myself that you're still real, but before I can get to you, before I can feel your skin on mine, you turn to fog in my grip and waft away like the wind.

CHAPTER 1

Sounds of the city slither into the dark bubble of my apartment: cars coughing awake, the impatient honk of a rush-hour horn. I'm listening in the way one might listen to a late-night siren shrieking down the street, a neighbor's angry whispers seeping through the walls. Detached, distant, just barely conscious enough to register that it's early evening, I think, judging by the string of orange light leaking through the crack in my curtains. The overwhelming smell of garlic that permeates my apartment whenever the Chinese restaurant beneath my building gets their dinner rush.

My phone is buzzing across the coffee table again and I try to ignore it but the sound is incessant, pesky as a mosquito, so I roll over on my couch and glance at the screen, a cascade of text messages staring straight back.

Helloooo? Claire?

Are you alive?

I gaze at the words, guilt licking the back of my neck for ignoring Ryan like this. I don't really want to talk to him right now, I don't want to talk to anyone, but at the same time, I know I owe him a response. He didn't do anything wrong.

No

I type at last, flipping onto my back before dropping the phone on my chest.

That's too bad

he promptly replies.

I was just starting to like you.

Despite my mood, it elicits a smile.

Where are you?

he asks as I glance around my living room, wincing at the take-out cartons and cloudy glasses. I hadn't noticed it before, but it's starting to smell a little sour in here. Like old laundry and self-loathing. I should probably take out the trash.

Home

I say, watching as an ellipsis appears and disappears. Ryan, apparently, trying to decide how to respond.

So you're not coming?

I stare at the screen, attempting to decipher what exactly he means when the sting of understanding shoots through my chest followed by a deep wave of shame.

“Shit,” I mutter, finally realizing why he’s been calling, texting, no doubt waiting for my arrival at the bar down the street. It’s Saturday, which means his party is tonight. A party to celebrate his recent promotion.

A party that’s been planned for over a month now, one I promised I’d attend.

I sigh, pushing the heels of my palms into my eyes. Then I reach for my phone again, ready to tap out some half-hearted excuse when it buzzes in anticipation, beating me to it.

It would mean a lot if you did.

I bite the inside of my lip, gnawing hard on a chunk of raised flesh. Then I sit up, head swimming from the sudden movement.

Of course I’m coming

I finally respond.

Getting in the shower now.

Studying my toes, dirt and hot water swirling fast down the drain, it’s hard not to reflect on the irony of it all. On my attempted rinsing of sins, that frenzied cleansing. Ten whole years spent clawing my way into the investigative unit at *The New York Journal*—a form of atonement, no doubt; a therapist’s dream—and the fact that it took ten seconds for me to flush it all away.

All that progress just suddenly gone, slipped straight through my fingers before vanishing completely like the water beneath me.

I'm on the sidewalk thirty minutes later, a cotton dress grazing my knees and strands of wet hair still stuck to my neck. My skin feels slick, a thin film of sweat dampening everything. Growing up in the South, you'd think I'd be used to the summer heat, the general state of discomfort for six months of each year, but July in New York is its own brand of unbearable. I keep my head down as I walk, eyes on my feet as I sidestep the drunken stumblers, the glammed-up girls heading out for a night of indulgence. Narrow heels navigating the sidewalk grates enveloped in clouds of lavender deodorant and honey perfume.

I pass a few bars bulging at the seams, restaurants with diners sitting close over quivering wicks, before finally ducking into the dark entrance of Vern's, a grungy little tavern I know Ryan only picked due to its proximity to my apartment, the minimal effort it would require for me to come.

Which, of course, makes me feel infinitely worse for forgetting.

I step inside, feeling my eyes adjust to the dark before I take a deep breath, the sour smell of spilt beer mixing with the stink of too many people in too small of a space. Then I scan the room slowly, taking in the cheap fluorescent lights hanging from strings on the ceiling, wet napkins stuck to the wood of the bar. There are dollar bills tacked to every inch of the wall, edges curling from the eternal damp. This isn't Ryan's usual scene, a nonchalance so deliberate it feels manufactured.

Like this whole party is his attempt at downplaying it all, the promotion I had been working toward for years being handed to him instead of to me.

I wander in further, ignoring the prying eyes of all my old colleagues. I return a couple sad smiles, keeping my chin parallel to the ground, before finally catching a glimpse of him from across the room, rolled-up sleeves revealing the veins in his forearms. His shirt is untucked, collar yawning wide enough to expose the nominal

hair on his chest, and I let myself simply watch for a second. Watch the way he rests his weight onto the edge of the bar, fingers in the air as he attempts to get the bartender's attention.

The way he dips his other hand into his pocket and checks his phone, the subtle disappointment as he slips it back in.

I run a hand through my hair, a half-hearted attempt at composing myself before sidling up beside him and sliding my way onto the stool by his side.

"Hey," I say, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "Sorry I'm late."

Ryan turns toward me, finally, relief and surprise in equal measure. He didn't actually think I'd show up.

"There she is," he says, a pep in his voice as I avert my eyes, pulling my own phone out of my pocket and placing it face up on the bar. There's a moment of silence between us, a handful of seconds when both of us are clearly trying to decide what to say next.

"Thank you for coming," he says at last, and I watch as he starts to pick at a coaster, the cheap cardboard kind that begins to disintegrate once it gets wet.

"Wouldn't miss it," I respond, even though, half an hour ago, that's exactly what I was trying to do.

The bartender appears with a bottle of beer and Ryan pulls it toward himself, ordering another one for me. Then he turns in my direction again, a new expression in his eyes like he's about to come clean with something important, something he's been steeling himself to say, but just as his lips begin to part, a headline uncurls across a grid of TVs. Our noses turning like a pack of bloodhounds picking up scent.

BOYFRIEND FOUND GUILTY IN MURDER OF EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL

I hear a *whoop* from across the room before vaguely registering a second body as it appears beside us, the slap of a hand against

Ryan's broad shoulder. Then there's a murmur of cheers, a round of shots, and I attempt to smile through it all, attempt to soften the perpetually sharp lines of my face, though I'm sure he can tell my expression is strained.

"So, regale me with tales about the life of the liberated," he says at last, turning toward me once we're alone again. "Still everything you hoped it would be?"

"Everything and more," I lie, nodding at the bartender once she arrives with my drink. "Hours are good, the flexibility is nice."

"No more meddling cubemates and cold pot coffee."

"Yeah, that last guy was a real prick."

Ryan chuckles, shakes his head.

"Working on anything interesting?"

I chew on my lip, not sure how to reveal that I've been working on absolutely nothing since the last time we talked. That after putting in a whole decade at *The Journal* only to be passed over for a promotion I was sure would be mine, I had quit in favor of freelance and was secretly starting to think I'd made a mistake. A few weeks of reflection had made me realize I had done it in haste, a bitter distaste for my boss mixing with a profound exhaustion at having spent the last ten years working the police blotter. My stories amounting to nothing more than a summarization of the most mundane murders, the way they usually are.

Another gas station robbery, another pistol-whipped kid just trying to buy drugs.

"I have a few leads," I say, tearing at the beer label with my right hand. I leave out the fact that none of them have gotten back to me; that practically every email I've sent in recent memory has been met with a smothering silence.

"That's great," he says. "One of them is bound to pan out eventually."

I smile, hating the pity in his tone. The fact that we both know it's not true.

"Listen, Claire. I know you're having a hard time with this."

I twist my neck, still distracted by the glimmer of the TVs. There's a mug shot on the screen now, a twenty-something-year-old man dressed in orange, and I watch as the image flips to a truck, police tape wound around the doors as I start to imagine how it might look inside.

Scratch marks on the leather and fingerprints on the dash. Bloodstains like a Pollock painting, luminol everywhere.

"My promotion," Ryan adds, drawing me back. "Everyone here knows it should have been yours."

"Oh," I say, the knot in my chest loosening once I understand what he means. He thinks I'm jealous, and while that is partially true, the particulars are infinitely more complicated than that. "No, Ryan. I'm happy for you."

"Are you sure?" he asks. "Because these last few months, you've been different. Distant."

"Positive," I say. "You deserve it."

He nods, though he doesn't seem convinced.

"Then what is it?" he asks as he twists the glass neck of the bottle between his fingers, a rhythmic *whoosh* on the bar like the blood in my ears.

"What is what?" I ask, playing dumb, though he simply arches an eyebrow, refusing to indulge in my meager attempt at denial.

I stare at him now, trying to decide how to respond as the entirety of our friendship stretches out before me. Ten whole years of misty mornings and red-rimmed eyes, nothing but a particleboard partition between us, until one day I blinked and realized he was the closest thing to a friend I had in the world. It leads to an inevitable intimacy, doing what we do. Surrounding ourselves with stories of death . . . but still, even Ryan doesn't know everything about me.

He knows very little, in fact, when it comes to my past.

I exhale, an oily guilt slipping through my stomach, because no matter how hard I try to justify it all, a lie by omission *is* still a lie. I've known that for a long time.

I open my mouth, my tongue teetering on the edge of another excuse, when I hear the buzz of my phone against the bar top. The glow of the screen drawing both our eyes down.

"You can get that," he says, although his words barely register as I stare at the display. A name I haven't seen in a long, long time.

"It's fine," I mutter, everything suddenly Novocain-numb as I search my mind for the date, for anything else I should have remembered, trying to figure out why I'm getting this call.

My hands stay stuck by my sides, unwilling to move, until the ringing finally stops. Only then do I flex my fingers, wrap them around the bottle to give them something to do.

"If it's important, he'll call back."

Ryan nods, turning toward his beer, but immediately after my phone stops ringing, I watch as the screen lights up again. That grating noise against the old, stripped wood like the sharp chatter of teeth.

"Looks like it's important."

I swallow, watching the device dance across the table as Ryan starts to turn back in my direction, his eyes drilling into the side of my face. I can practically feel his confusion, a climbing curiosity about why I'm refusing to answer the phone, so I force myself to pick it up, hitting Accept before lifting it slowly up to my ear.

"Hello?" I ask, trying to stay calm as I listen to the sound of slow breath through the receiver. There's an uncomfortable stillness between us, thick like two strangers on opposite sides of a door. "Dad, are you there?"

"Hi, Claire."

I exhale at the sound, although his voice sounds different, distant, like he can't quite believe he's calling me, either.

“What is it?” I ask, the alarm continuing to spike in my chest because my father and I do not do small talk; there has to be a reason why he’s calling, and whatever it is, I already know it’s not good. “Is everything okay?”

I hear him sigh, a long, defeated sound, as I imagine his face on the other side of the line. Fingers massaging his eyes like this conversation is a migraine he’s trying to fight off.

“Claire, it’s your mother,” he says at last. “There’s been an accident.”