

# SECRETS *SO* DEEP

GINNY MYERS SAIN





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*Dedication*

*t.k. in 1st pass—author*



Lord, we know what we are, but not what we may be.

**-OPHELIA**

*HAMLET* BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



**SECRETS**  
*so*  
**DEEP**





## ACT ONE: SCENE 1

I was five years old the night stars fell from the sky. They tore loose somehow and came down like rain. I remember the heavy, dull sound of them hitting the water.

*Plop.*

*Plop. Plop.*

*Plop.*

I'm watching—waiting for them to do that act again—but tonight they stay pinned to the vast blackness above us. Where they're supposed to be. Which is more than I can say for us, because we're supposed to be in our cabins. Curfew was like an hour ago.

But here we are on the beach.

The salt hangs heavy in the air. It prickles my skin.

Burns my lips.

Tickles my memory.

I think the girl's name is Viv. The one with her arm around me. We're cabinmates. She has the bunk across from mine, and we are perfect opposites. My hair is the color of ice. More white than blonde. It falls just below my shoulders, hanging straight and limp in the dampness, but Viv's inky curls tumble all the way down her back. Like laughter. Our eyes are almost the same shade of green,

but hers are lined in that sexy cat-eye style I can never seem to master. She's swaying back and forth, and she pauses to whisper in my ear. Then she laughs, throaty and low. And I laugh, too. Because Viv is the kind of girl you want to laugh with. The truth is, I didn't catch what she said. Her words were lost to the crash of the waves. The cresting swell of voices all around us.

"Avril!" she shouts. "I'll be right back! I gotta pee!" And that I hear, so I nod and take a deep breath. I'm grateful for a few seconds alone in the crowd. A little time to just stand here and take it all in. This is why I came down to the beach tonight. I thought about skipping the party, but I had to be here. In this place. Something inside me wouldn't wait—couldn't wait—for morning.

I've always been drawn to the water. Even from landlocked North Texas, I've felt the pull of the tides. Craved the brokenness of the coastline. And now, finally, here I am.

Again.

Here I am again.

There are so many people, though. And I'm not really great with big groups.

Or small groups.

Or people in general.

I haven't met the tall girl writing her initials in the sand by the fire. Or the shaggy-haired guy who's sitting beside her, picking out chords on the guitar. Fragments of melody that Viv and I were trying—failing—to sing along to.

I do know the redhead who's walking toward me with a couple of beers. His name is Lex. I met him at dinner, and evidently that makes us besties now.

“Holy shit,” he says, and he hands me one of the sweating bottles. “Can you believe we’re actually here?” He raises his own half-empty beer in my direction, and his blue eyes come alive with reflected flames. “To the first night of the best summer ever!”

Each year, high school juniors from all over the country apply for a chance to attend the four-week theatre intensive at Whisper Cove. They all want the opportunity to study with Willa Culver. And we made it in—me, my new pal Lex, and everyone else milling around us. This secret after-hours welcoming party makes it official.

Lex is playing with the fringe on a light scarf that’s expertly draped around his neck. He’s all freckles and gorgeous red-gold hair in the firelight. Barefoot with his jeans rolled up, he looks like a stylish Tom Sawyer, and I suddenly feel plain in my cutoff shorts and concert T-shirt. “You ever been to Connecticut before?” he asks me.

“Once,” I tell him. “A long time ago. You?”

“Nope,” Lex says. “I’ve never even seen the ocean before.”

I detect a southern drawl, elongated vowels that clink together like ice cubes in a glass of sweet tea, and I remember he told me at dinner that he’s from somewhere just outside Nashville, Tennessee. Franklin, I think he said. Or something like that.

“It’s not really the ocean,” I correct him, even though it makes me an asshole. “It’s Long Island Sound.”

“Whatever.” He rolls his eyes, totally unbothered. “It’s basically the ocean. And it’s pretty, right?”

He’s not wrong about that.

Tonight a full moon hangs huge and low just above a horizon line that looks like it’s been stitched with golden thread, and below

that, waves rise and fall in a shimmer of silvery brilliance. In the distance, silhouetted against the black, a lighthouse is the tent pole holding up an expanse of dark sky.

The view doesn't look real. It reminds me of a storybook I had when I was a kid. Something Dad used to read to me at bedtime. About mermaids.

Or maybe they were pirates.

Lex and I stand there. Staring. Toes buried in the sand.

"Avril! Hey! You decided to come!" I turn to look over my shoulder at the sound of my name, and Jude is making his way toward us with a big grin on his face. He's the program assistant who picked me up at the train station earlier this evening. My flight from Dallas to New York City was delayed, so I had to take a later train out to Connecticut, which meant I was the very last one to arrive. I got here just in time to drop my bags in cabin number one before dinner. "And Alexander," he adds when he sees Lex. "Shit." He snaps his fingers. "Sorry. You said you go by Alex, right?"

Jude is cute. Dark brown skin and big, warm eyes. His hair is shaved short except for a cascade of perfect charcoal-colored ringlets in the front. I see Lex run a hand through his own red hair before he throws a grin back in Jude's direction. "It's just Lex. I go by Lex." He's playing with the fringe on his scarf again.

"Lex." Jude nods. "Got it." And I notice the way his eyes linger on Lex for a second, even though he's talking to me. "I told you the bonfire would be awesome. It's kind of a first night tradition. You get settled in okay?"

"Yep," I tell him. "Like you said. Hilton by the sea."

The temperature has dropped, and I wrap my arms around my

chest. I wish I'd grabbed a sweater. I keep forgetting I'm not in Texas anymore. By mid-June, Dallas is already sweltering. Even at night. But here, with the breeze sweeping in off the water, it's chilly.

"Yeah." Jude laughs. "The cabins aren't exactly luxurious." That seems like an understatement. I think of the paper-thin bunk bed mattress and the leaning dressers with their crooked drawers. "But you'll really just be there to sleep anyway. Willa keeps everyone busy." He laughs again. It's an easy sound, and it makes me a little jealous. I wish I could be easy like that. "Oh man, you guys are gonna love Willa. She's a trip. In the best way. You'll meet her before breakfast tomorrow."

"Whoa," Lex mutters under his breath, like he can't quite comprehend it. "Willa fucking Culver."

I knew she'd be here, of course. We all knew she'd be here. But Lex's reaction is still understandable, because Willa Culver is a theatre legend.

"The one and only," Jude tells us. "Y'all get ready, because for the next four weeks, Willa's gonna be your director, your teacher, your boss, your mom, and your best friend all rolled into one."

"You sound like you know the whole drill." Lex gives Jude a flirty little wink. I'm impressed, and I can't help wondering if he's always that brave, or if the beer and the moonlight are making him bold.

"I actually did the intensive last summer," Jude tells him. "But Willa picks someone from each group to come back the next year and help out. Manage rehearsals. Make van runs into town. That kind of thing."

"Did you have fun?" I ask. "Last year."

"Best four weeks of my whole damn life." The way he says it,

it's clear he's telling the truth. "And God, I learned so much. That's why I jumped at the chance to come back as a program assistant." Jude looks a little sad all of a sudden. "Man, this month will fly by. So make the most of it." That grin is back. Friendly brown eyes. He pops the top off a beer he's been holding, and I watch him slip the cap into his pocket like a quarter. "That's just a little free advice from someone who's been where you're standing."

"Noted," Lex says, and I'm glad he doesn't wink again. Because that would be overkill.

Viv the dark-haired beauty comes back to the fire. "Avril!" She grabs me by the arm. "Come swim with me!"

"Hey hey!" Jude raises his bottle to greet her like an old friend. "Val, right? From the City of Angels."

Shit. He's right. It's Val. Not Viv.

Valeria from Los Angeles. I remember that now.

And how the hell does Jude know everybody's name? There are like two dozen of us, and he just met us all today.

Val tosses her hair over her shoulder. "Good memory," she says, and I hope like hell I never called her Viv to her face. "Come on, Avril." She's tugging me toward the water. I turn back to Lex and Jude.

"You guys wanna swim?"

"Swim?" Jude laughs and shakes his head. "Oh hell no." He swallows a long swig of the beer he's been holding.

"You scared?" Val teases.

"Me?" Jude lifts his chin and brushes those charcoal-colored curls back off his forehead. "Nah. But listen, California girl, these are not the warm waters of your misspent LA youth." He shivers and jerks his head toward the waves. "The sound is cold. Especially at night."

Val rolls her eyes. She's staring at Lex now. He swallows the last of his beer and shrugs. "I don't have a swimsuit."

Val throws her head back and laughs, but Lex just stands there. Waiting.

"Oh," she says. "You're serious." And she raises one eyebrow. "Who cares? No swimsuit? No problem." She's already stripping off her sweater.

"I'm in," I say, not because Val convinced me, but because that dark water has been tugging on me since I first laid eyes on it. I bend down to plant my half-empty beer bottle in the sand, and I'm rewarded with a huge smile from Val. She grabs my hand and pulls me toward the shoreline.

"Jesus Christ!" I can't help but squeal when the waves lap over my feet. Jude was telling the truth. We don't have water this cold in Texas. Not even in the middle of winter.

"It's fucking freezing," Val hisses under her breath, and she tightens her grip on my hand. She turns to yell back in Lex and Jude's direction. "Come on! It's not that bad!" Then she looks at me, and we both crack up, because it's cold enough to stop your heart.

The guys exchange a skeptical look, but they stick their bottles in the sand, side by side, and follow us down to the water.

"Holy shit!" Lex does a little dance as the sound licks at his toes. "I thought the ocean was supposed to be warm, y'all!"

"Easy, Nashville," Jude tells him with a smirk. "You're thinking of Florida. You see any palm trees here?"

Val lets go of my hand and slips out of her jeans like she's shedding her skin, splashing into the water in just her tank top and underwear. I blink, and she dives beneath the black surface and

comes up gasping. “Oh my God! So cold!” Her dark hair stretches even further down her back. Heavy and wet now.

Lex hesitates, but then he strips off his scarf and his T-shirt and tosses them onto the sand like he’s throwing down the gauntlet. His skin is baby-smooth and china-pale. Dotted with freckles.

He grabs Jude by the arm and tries to tug him into the waves, and I see so clearly the moment Jude decides to let him get away with it. And the two of them laugh.

Val reaches for me again. A cold hand tight around my wrist.

And just for a second, I’m frozen.

Five years old.

Afraid.

Then Val and I both shriek as a big wave nearly takes us down, and that flash of almost-memory is swept back out to sea. Gone. Washed away. Like maybe it never existed.

We’re all playing and splashing now. Shouting. Darting up and down the beach, in and out of each other’s grasp. Sandy fingers reaching and wet hands slipping. The sound of our laughter mixes with the pounding of the surf.

The water is like ice, but after a few minutes I don’t mind the bite of it anymore. It almost feels good. Wispy bits of seaweed brush the backs of my knees like floating spiderwebs, and soft, deep sand squishes between my toes.

My T-shirt and shorts are already soaked, so I wade in deeper until I can lift my feet off the bottom and float. And then I can’t feel the cold anymore. I can’t feel anything anymore. So I let the current pull me out even further, past a floating swim dock and beyond the clanging safety buoys.



I can still hear the others carrying on and having a good time. But it's like an echo. I'm separate from all that chaos now. I stretch out on my back and let the water hold me up. Carry me away. I'm far enough from shore that there are only gentle swells. I rise and fall with them. Like breathing.

It makes me feel safe. That painless, floating feeling. The numbness of it. And the dark. Like being rocked to sleep. Suspended. Inside a cocoon, maybe.

Or a womb.

I stare up into the emptiness and think about that night. Twelve years ago. When I was five.

This beach.

These waves.

That sky.

I'm trying to remember something real. A tight hand on my wrist, maybe? But that moment has slipped away, and I can't get it back. There's just the same impossible memory as always.

Stars falling into the sea. Like rain on fire.

The heavy, wet plop of them.

And, always, a voice that seems to come from nowhere. From no one.

*Look at the stars!*

Water is sloshing around my ears, but somehow I hear shouting. Not memory voices. Real ones. Muffled words tinged with panic.

"Avril!" It's Jude. "Too far out!" Then something I don't catch. Dangerous. Undertow something. "Come on back!" I open my eyes and let my feet drop so that I'm treading water. It's so much deeper here than it was along the edge.

Darker.

Colder.

Val and Lex are waving at me like they're signaling an aircraft. Motioning for me to swim toward them. Lex yells something about sharks.

I spin in a slow circle. In one direction, I see my new friends. Jude and Lex and Val. The fire burning on the beach. The lights of Whisper Cove Theatre shining in the distance, at the top of the hill behind them.

But in the other direction, there's open water. The lighthouse, and then just black. A slick, wet nothingness that seems to go on forever and ever.

And for a second, I don't know which way I want to swim.

I hesitate. I'm looking for someone. Waiting for her.

Hoping she'll find me.

I've been searching for my mother for years. In creeks and rivers. In muddy Texas lakes. Our neighbor's bottomless swimming pool. The bathtub. And I've never found her.

Or she's never found me.

But surely here. In this place, of all places.

This ocean, dark and deep.

I wait. Tread water. Count my heartbeats. Bleed an invitation out into the depths.

*I'm here. I came back.*

There's nothing, though. There never is. So I start swimming. Toward the light. I'm slicing through the waves. Pushing against a current that's trying to pull me even further into the emptiness. I spit out water and keep going.

The others are waiting on shore. I haul myself out of the sound, panting and dripping. Sand clings to our feet. And legs. The sea runs down our back in little rivers, and we shiver together.

My mother is still lost to me. Still dead. But I'm alive. The ragged breath in my throat and the burn of my muscles is enough to make me know it. At least in this moment.

I'm alive.

The beach is almost empty now. Everyone else is gone. Or leaving. They're shaking off their towels and heading back up to the cabins, but someone's left an abandoned blanket near the fire. Jude grabs us a couple of new beers from the cooler—one for him and Lex to share and one for me and Val—then the four of us pile in close, greedy for warmth, as the water evaporates and the salt tightens on our skin.

Jude and Lex and Valeria are fishing for information about each other. They're sharing carefully curated pieces of themselves, passing little bits of their lives around like shiny gold coins.

Val has a boyfriend back in LA. He keeps texting her. Chester. She makes a face when she says his name. "I know, I know. It's a horrible name," she tells us. "It sounds like somebody's weird uncle. But he's hot . . . so . . ." She shrugs and shows us a pic on her phone, and he's all brooding eyes and bad boy energy. But she's not sure she loves him.

At least not that much.

She wants to be an actress. Movies, though. Not the stage. "There's no money in live theatre," she warns us.

Jude's from Macon, Georgia. He's a year older than the rest of us, so he's heading off to college in the fall. University of North Carolina. Chapel Hill. He wants to study dance. Ballet, to be specific. "My

mom thinks it's stupid, though." He runs a hand over his chest, and I see the glint of dried salt crystals against dark skin. "She's pissed because my sister's studying eighteenth century British poetry or some shit like that, so we're both gonna be broke as fuck. And who's gonna take care of her in her old age?" He shrugs. "She wants me to major in accounting. And she's paying, so it's whatever."

Lex tells us he has two goals for the next four weeks. "Learn everything I can from Willa Culver and have a hot summer romance." I see him blush and sneak a hopeful glance at Jude. "Like Sandy in *Grease*." He's grinning when he says it, but there's something almost sad underneath that mischievous sparkle in his blue eyes, and I wonder what his story is.

Then they're all looking at me. Waiting. So I take my turn handing out the scraps of myself that I've deliberately chosen. I live with my dad. It's just the two of us. My mom died when I was little. Acting is so deep a part of me that I can't even imagine my life without the theatre. I don't have a boyfriend right now. Or a girlfriend. I miss my cat. And I'm glad to be out of Texas for a few weeks. Because of the heat.

I hold up those pieces of me like it's show-and-tell. But there are other pieces I keep hidden. Truths I stuff down into my pockets. Secrets I choke on like seawater. At least for now.

I don't admit that I came here searching for something.

For someone.

Or that I've been here before. I don't mean to Connecticut. I mean right here. To this exact spot.

And I definitely don't tell them that this is where I died.

## ACT ONE: SCENE 2

“To new friends,” Lex says, and he lifts his beer in a toast before handing it to Jude. Fingers touch. Flirty smiles. The wordless exchange of the slick bottle. Lip to lip.

“To summer,” Val chimes in, and we all drink to that.

“To George,” Jude adds, and everyone looks confused. “He’s the one who bought the beer.”

“Who’s George?” Lex demands.

“The Whisper Cove caretaker,” Jude explains. “He gets paid extra to keep an eye on things at night. But if you slip him a little weed, he’s happy to look the other way.”

“To George, then,” Val says.

A chorus of gratitude and bottles clinking. “To George!” More laughter.

Then it’s my turn. I feel the space they’ve left open for me.

“To the stage,” I offer. And they all applaud. Drink again.

“You ready for auditions tomorrow, Avril?” Val’s face is relaxed. She’s sifting sand through her fingers, but there’s an edge under her words that I recognize. Sure, we can be friends, it says, but don’t forget that we’re also competitors. Because auditions tomorrow

night will determine what role each of us gets in the play we'll be working on together.

Willa Culver's play. The one that made her famous.

"Yeah," I say. "I think I'm ready." But suddenly I don't feel so confident.

"Good." Val laughs, and that edge disappears. "Then you can help me with my monologue. It's a mess. I just finished memorizing it on the plane this afternoon."

Lex pulls a crumpled cigarette out of his bag, and we pass that around between the four of us. The fire is getting low, so Jude and Lex go off to gather more driftwood. I watch them down the beach, doing more flirting and laughing than wood-gathering.

Val gets a call from Chester. She rolls her eyes and steps away for some privacy. I can't hear what she's saying, but that hand planted on her hip tells me she's annoyed, and I almost feel sorry for the poor guy.

It's finally quiet for a few minutes then. Just the sound of the fire dying. And the hypnotic repetition of the waves. I lean back on my elbows and breathe in smoke and salt. The fire and the sea. It's almost more intoxicating than the beer, that smell. If somebody could invent a candle that really smelled like this, they'd be so rich.

Then, from somewhere behind me, I hear voices. Hushed and secretive and carried on the wind. I can't make out the words, but there's something familiar about the barely there sound. It brushes against my memory the way the seaweed brushed the backs of my knees.

More whispering.

I think it must be Lex and Jude. But when I sit up and look

toward the water, I see the two of them standing close together, arms full of sun-bleached driftwood. The moonlight makes it look like they've been gathering bones.

I glance over my shoulder and there's no one there, but I still hear the sound of muffled whispers. Leftover partiers, probably. A half-drunk couple hooking up in the tall grass.

I get to my feet and take a few steps away from the fire. Toward the dunes. And that whispering sound.

"Who's there?" I ask. My voice is soft, almost a whisper itself. But no answer comes back to me on the damp night air, so I try again. Louder this time. "Is somebody out there?"

There's nothing now. No sound at all. So maybe I never heard anything to begin with.

I turn back toward the water to find Lex and Jude and Val again. Just to make sure they're not messing with me. I count heads. One. Two. Three.

"Hey."

A voice from the darkness. Not a whisper this time. A solid word.

I spin around to look behind me, and a figure is walking out of the blackness. A guy about my age. Someone I haven't seen before.

"Looks like I missed the party," he says.

My muscles tense. There's something about the way he moves. Too slow. Too easy. Too sure of himself. Like he owns the place or something.

He stops a few feet away, still mostly in the shadows. All I can really see are his eyes. "I'm Cole." There's a pause. Like maybe that should mean something to me. "Willa Culver's son."

“Oh,” I say, and I relax a little because at least that means he’s not a weird drifter with a necklace made of human teeth. But I’m also surprised, because I didn’t know Willa Culver had a son. Or any kids at all.

Cole is just staring at me. Like he’s waiting for me to say something else.

“So, do you have a name?” he finally asks with a little smirk. “Or . . .”

Shit. Now I look like an idiot.

“Avril,” I tell him, and we stare at each for a few seconds. “Avril Vincent.”

He takes a step closer, and now he’s lit by what’s left of the fire. I make note of the tattered jeans paired with an expensive sweater. The dark, wavy hair above wild, dark brows. The hard angles of him. Features carved out of rock. I feel him run his eyes over my wet T-shirt and shorts. My sandy bare feet.

My face.

There’s something strange about the way he’s staring at me now. The change in his breathing. I feel it. And I wonder if maybe I was wrong about that necklace of human teeth. But then he smiles.

And damn. My stomach drops.

I pull my eyes away from Cole’s to peer around him. Into the blackness. “Who were you talking to?” I ask, and he gives me a funny look. I’m still searching the dunes behind him, waiting for another shape to emerge from the night. “Just now. Who was out there with you?”

He shakes his head. Slips his hands into his pockets. “Nobody.” I still feel his eyes on me. “Why?”



I don't think I believe him, but I also haven't heard that whispering again.

I shrug. "I thought I heard something." My damp hair is clinging to my face. It's in my mouth. My eyes. I reach up to tuck a strand behind my ear. "I just—" I stop and listen, because maybe it's almost there again. That whispering sound.

Or maybe not. I can't tell anymore. The waves are so loud.

The way Cole is studying me makes me uncomfortable. "Forget it," I tell him. "It doesn't matter." I shiver and wish again that I'd gone back to the cabin for a sweatshirt or something. I turn and walk back toward the dying fire. Cole follows me.

"You're cold," he says.

"A little," I lie. My teeth are starting to chatter.

"Here. Take this." He pulls his sweater over his head and tosses it to me. The T-shirt he's wearing underneath hugs his chest and his arms, but I don't let myself stare, because he's just standing there watching me with this slightly amused look on his face. "I mean, unless you enjoy freezing."

The sweater is soft in my hands. Thick and warm. And it smells like sandalwood and summer.

But that cocky grin pisses me off.

"Thanks," I tell him. And I toss the sweater back. "But I'm fine. Really." I force my muscles to relax. Refuse to shiver.

He shrugs and pulls the sweater back on. "Suit yourself."

"Cole!" Jude shouts. He and Lex are heading back in our direction. "Good to see you again, my man!" They pile on the driftwood and get the fire going.

Val comes back, too. Drawn by the flames. She sits close to the

fire and tucks her long legs under the blanket, jeans spread out to warm in the heat beside her.

Jude handles the formal introductions.

Lex.

Val.

Avril.

Cole.

“Willa’s son,” Jude tells us, and Lex and Val seem appropriately impressed. Which is probably the reaction Cole is used to. “We hung out last summer.” Jude fishes the last floating beer out of the cooler and wipes the wet bottle on his damp shorts before he hands it to Cole. “He’s gonna be a senior this year. Same as you guys.”

“Are you doing the intensive, too?” Lex asks. I figure he’s sizing up the competition—like Val was with me—but Cole shakes his head.

“I’m not much of an actor. Music’s my thing.” He pops the top off his beer. “I’ll be around, though.”

Jude keeps Cole busy answering questions about the past year. Everything that’s happened since they last saw each other. But I notice how Cole’s eyes drift in my direction. The way he keeps looking at me through the fire. Between the flames.

I try not to stare back, but there’s something about Cole Culver that makes it hard for me to look away.

“So you grew up here?” Val asks him.

“Lived here my whole life,” Cole answers. “Right next door to the theatre.”

“I was just telling Lex some of the stories about this place,” Jude says. “But he didn’t believe me.”

Lex rolls his eyes. “I didn’t believe you when you said it was haunted.”

“Every theatre has a ghost,” Val tells us. She’s drawing lazy circles in the sand with one finger. “It’s like a requirement or something.”

Jude laughs, but I’m thinking about our high school back home. It’s only a couple of years old. All chrome fixtures and big windows. Bright lights and fresh paint. The fine arts building sits on the site of a former JCPenney’s.

No ghosts there, except for maybe the ghosts of sales gone by.

That’s one of the reasons I love it so much. I actually feel less haunted on that stage than I do most places.

Cole shakes his head, like Val got it wrong. “Every theatre has a ghost *story*,” he corrects her, then he drains the last of his beer and tosses the bottle into the fire. “But that’s not the same thing.” He looks at me then, and there’s something about his eyes. “Whisper Cove is different.”

“Well, fuck,” Lex says, and he giggles. But it’s a nervous giggle. “I did not sign up for ghosts. That was not in the brochure, y’all.”

Cole looks around our little circle. Faces lit by firelight. “You guys know how this place got its name?”

We shake our heads. Say that we don’t.

“Oh shit,” Jude says. “Here we go.” He raises an eyebrow at Lex, passes the bottle in his direction. “Better have another drink.”

“There used to be a little whaling village,” Cole tells us. “Right here, on this property. Back in the 1800s. A dozen or so little houses up on the hill, where the theatre is now. A general store and a tavern.” He looks around to make sure we’re all paying attention. “The story goes that, one summer, the men went off to sea, like

usual. But when they came home six months later, the village was deserted. Totally empty. All the houses abandoned. Plates still laid out on the tables. Vegetables rotting in the gardens. Laundry flapping on the lines.” He shrugs. “But not a soul to be found.”

Cole may not be much of an actor, but he’s a born storyteller. He’s got us eating out of his hand. Everyone looks around, as if we could see the laundry now. Those silent houses standing sentry at the edge of the sea.

But all we can see is the dark at the edges of our circle where the firelight doesn’t reach. And the strange glow of the lighthouse off in the distance.

“So they start asking around,” Cole goes on. “Where are their wives? Their sweethearts? But nobody will say. And finally this one guy tells them what happened. They’re all drowned, he says. The womenfolk are all dead. They walked into the sea.”

“Jesus.” Lex shudders.

“Told you,” Jude says, and he reaches for their shared bottle. “Haunted as fuck.”

“That’s not even the worst of it,” Cole tells us. “They took their kids with ’em. Grabbed their toddlers by the hand. Carried their babies in their arms.”

“You’re full of shit,” Val accuses, and Cole shrugs.

“I’m just telling you how the story goes.” He pauses to lick dried salt from his lips, then he looks around our circle again. His hair is damp from the night air, and it shines like obsidian in the firelight. “People around here believe the sea was calling to those women. Luring them to their deaths.” Cole turns to look in my direction. He brushes the hair out of his eyes. “Whispering to them.”

And now I get it.

He's messing with me. Trying to freak me out.

That's the point of any good ghost story, after all.

"Seriously?" Lex says, and Cole nods. He picks up a stick to poke at the fire. Sparks explode like a fountain.

"Swear to God, that's how the story goes."

Jude leans in close to Lex's ear and makes a whispering sound, and Lex gives him a shove. "Asshole," he mutters. But one corner of his mouth twitches up.

"Anyway," Cole says, and he wipes his sandy palms on his jeans, "that's why they call this Whisper Cove. And they say if you start to hear that whispering, it gets inside your head. The sea, it'll start calling to you. Whispering right in your ear at night. And if you're not careful, you'll end up just like those women more than two hundred years ago. Drowned." He pauses to look around our little group again. "Because what the sea wants, the sea will have."

The words hang there for a second. Suspended over the fire.

Then Val laughs and Cole's spell is broken. She rolls her eyes. "Oh my God," she says, and she reaches for the bottle I'm holding. "So dramatic." Her dark eyeliner is all smudged now, but somehow it only makes her more beautiful. "What the sea wants, the sea will have. That's a great line."

Cole shrugs. "It's not a line." He looks in my direction. Our eyes meet again, and I don't let myself look away, because I want Cole Culver to know that I'm not afraid of his campfire tale. I've been living with ghosts my whole life.

"Look," Jude tells us, and he rubs at his arms. "I know it's corny. But I get fucking goosebumps every damn time I hear it."

“It’s just a story,” Lex says, almost more to himself than to us. He’s finger-combing that gorgeous red hair of his, but he stops to look around the circle. “Isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” Jude adds. He shifts closer to the fire. “But every story has some truth to it.”

“It’s a bunch of bullshit,” I say, and they all turn to look at me. “People die. The sea is dangerous.” My mouth suddenly feels like it’s full of sand, and the words come out rougher than I intend them to. They’re gritty on my tongue. “You don’t need a reason to drown.”

“That’s true most places.” Cole shrugs. “But Whisper Cove is different.” He gives me a look, almost like the two of us are sharing some kind of secret. An inside joke I don’t quite get.

“That part’s true.” Jude glances around at the rest of us. There’s something I can’t read in his big, brown eyes. “You’ll see that for yourselves.”

The fire pops and crackles.

The waves moan.

The beach is alive with night sounds. Singing frogs. The buzz of insects.

And the clanging of safety buoys. They ring like alarm bells.

But nobody speaks for a long minute, and then Jude mentions that it’s getting late. And we have to be at breakfast early. So we all get to our feet. Start to gather up our stuff. Val pulls on her jeans, and most everyone wanders down to the water’s edge to collect the things they discarded there. Shirts. Socks. A sweater or two. Val is shaking the sand out of her hair, and I see Jude say something to Lex as he goes to pick up his scarf. The quiet way Lex laughs lets me know it was a joke meant just for him.

I don't have any clothes to collect, so Cole and I stay behind with the heat of the fire between us. A smothering fog has started to roll in off the water. I feel it clinging to my skin.

He reaches up to run a hand through that dark, wavy hair, and I notice a little tattoo. Some kind of four-point star on the inside of his wrist. He catches me staring.

"It's a compass rose," he says, and he moves around the fire to show me. "I got it last year when I was sixteen. Used a fake ID. One point for each direction. See? North, south, east, and west."

"Cool," I say, and I glance toward the water. I can hear Lex giggling now, but I can't see him anymore. I can't see any of the others. The fog has settled like a curtain between us.

Cole is studying me again. His eyes are gray. The color of smoke. Or ash. "Sailors thought a compass rose tatt was good luck," he says. His voice comes from deep in his throat, and there's an almost hypnotizing ebb and flow to it. The words move against my ear with the rhythm of the waves. "They thought it would protect them. Keep them safe at sea."

"Are you a sailor?" I ask, and he laughs.

"No. My mom is deathly afraid of the ocean." He rolls his eyes. "We live right here on the water. And we don't even have a boat."

"Then what do you need protection from?"

He gives me that little smirk from earlier. But there's honesty in his eyes this time.

"Myself, mostly." He moves in closer, and he's really staring at me now. My face flushes, and I feel his breath on the top of my head. "What do you need protection from, Avril?"

"Nothing," I tell him. But he's still staring at me. I'm relieved

when the others emerge out of the fog then, sandy and stringy-haired and yawning. I see Lex take note of the way Cole and I are standing close together. The way his eyes are locked on mine.

And then I feel that warm breath on the top of my head again. Heat. And proximity. “What do you need protection from, Avril?”

Cole is staring down at me. Waiting for an answer. I look around. We’re alone. Where is everyone?

“I . . .”

I blink. And the others are stepping toward us out of the fog. Again. Lex cuts his eyes toward Cole. Then me. Just like before.

The sand shifts under my feet, and I lose my balance. Cole shoots out a hand to steady me. “Easy,” he says, but I take a stumbling step back. Away from him.

The beer is making me woozy. Everything feels strange.

Off-kilter.

Jude smothers the fire with sand. Val gathers up the empty beer bottles. Someone rolls up the blanket.

Everyone is quiet as we start back toward the theatre together. The fog follows us up the boardwalk and over the dunes, across a salt marsh where the sickly sweet smell of mud and rot fills up my nose. The overwhelming scent of decay.

And then we’re deposited on thick grass. The boardwalk spits us out and we bunch up, tripping over each other as we struggle to get our shoes on.

We make our way up the great sloping lawn toward the cluster of buildings gathered at the top of the hill. The big yellow farmhouse where we all ate dinner earlier this evening. The red barn theatre. And the twin blue cabins on the other side of the field.



In the thick fog, I can just barely make out a green-striped awning extending off the back of the farmhouse.

The sea porch.

I know that somehow. I hadn't remembered it earlier when I saw it at dinner. But I know it now.

I remember it.

Cole says good night when we reach the gravel driveway, and Jude starts off toward the cabins. Lex and Val follow him, but when I turn to go with them, Cole grabs my hand to stop me. His touch is hot against my skin. I feel that shifting sand beneath my feet, even though I'm standing on solid ground now.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something small, then he presses whatever it is into my palm. He closes my fingers tight around it, and I feel the smooth coolness of his gift.

"Sea glass," he tells me, and I open my fist to stare at the little blue chunk. It's beautiful. Frosty and polished. Round like a pebble. "You find it all over the beach here. The waves and the sand wear it down."

"What do I do with it?"

Cole laughs low in his throat. "Just keep it. It's a good luck charm. I have a ton of it. All different colors." It's my turn to stare at him now. "It's for protection."

"I don't believe in lucky charms," I say. For a couple of years, I carried around a rabbit's foot. It was dyed hot pink, and I won it at the Texas state fair. I threw it out, though, once I realized it obviously hadn't been lucky for the rabbit. "And I don't believe in ghosts."

Even if I've spent my whole life looking for one.

“I don’t believe in ghosts, either.” Cole shrugs. “But there are lots of ways to be haunted.” He gives me a little smile. “Just take it.”

I never asked for a party favor from him, but I give up and slip his treasure into my pocket.

“Welcome to Whisper Cove,” he tells me, and something flickers behind those smoke-gray eyes again. I’m almost surprised when he doesn’t correct himself with *Welcome back, I mean*. But he doesn’t. Instead he just vanishes into the dark, and I stare after him for a second before I hurry to catch up with the others.

I’m grateful Jude knows where he’s going. The fog has me all confused. Turned around. And disoriented. I would have sworn we were headed the wrong direction.

## ACT ONE: SCENE 3

We follow Jude through the fog to the first of the blue cabins that sit huddled together on the other side of a muddy field. One for the girls and one for the boys. He reminds us about the breakfast meeting with Willa Culver before he and Lex disappear into the mist, headed for the other cabin just a few yards away.

Val and I trudge up the front steps to our temporary home. She pushes open the door, and I close it tight behind us. I'm not really afraid of serial killers, but I don't want that fog to follow us inside and fill up the room.

Swallow us whole.

The walls of the long, narrow cabin are lined with a dozen or so bunk beds, and a threadbare green rug fills up the floor between them. Most of the other girls are already asleep, so Val and I tiptoe by cell phone light, try to keep things quiet. No sense in pissing off our new roommates on the very first night.

Her phone vibrates. It's Chester. Again. *CALL ME BABE*. She shows it to me and rolls her eyes. Then she deletes his text without a reply.

I pull Cole's sea glass out of my pocket and tuck it into my overcrowded dresser drawer, between my socks. I still need to finish

unpacking, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow. I'm too tired to think about it tonight. "Where's the bathroom?" I whisper. "I need a shower."

"There's a building out back," Val mumbles. She's flopped down on her bunk with all her sandy clothes on, and it makes me itch just thinking about it. "Like an outhouse, only with electricity and plumbing and stuff. Just follow the path." I'm digging in my suitcase for some clean shorts. "Want me to come with you?" Her voice sounds so sleepy.

When I turn back to answer, her eyes are already closed, so I grab my things and head toward the door. But as soon as I step into the fog, I'm suffocated. Disoriented again. I wish I'd packed a real flashlight. Dad told me to, but I ignored him. Because I'm seventeen, and I don't need to be told what to fucking pack.

Clearly.

I feel my way down the steps—one, two, three—until I hear the crunch of a gravel path under my feet, then I work my way around the little cabin until my eyes find the flicker of a fluorescent light not too far away. I head in that direction, but it seems to take longer than it should to get there. Like someone keeps moving it just out of my reach. I'm relieved when I finally feel an old-fashioned doorknob under my fingers. The grit of crusted salt on smooth, worn metal.

It's chilly in the bathroom, but at least the light is bright and the water is hot. I'm exhausted and my muscles ache. I lean against the shower stall and let the steam soak into my bones. Was it really just this morning that Dad dropped me off at the airport in Dallas? It seems like so long ago.

I think about the big fight we had back in February when I first

told him I planned to apply for the summer intensive at Whisper Cove.

*Pour l'amour de Dieu. Pourquoi?*

For God's sake. Why?

He'd shouted the words at me in our little kitchen, his hands white-knuckled, gripping the back of a chair.

My father is French, and it pisses him off to no end that I'm less than fluent in his native language. He was a university professor in Paris, until he met my mother and fell in love. She was a graduate student on a study abroad trip, but he decided he couldn't live without her. So he followed her home to Texas, only to wind up living without her anyway. Now he teaches beginning French to uninterested freshmen at a private high school he could never afford to send me to.

And when he's irritated—which is most of the time—the French comes out.

*Why would you want to go there?* he'd asked. *To that place. Why drag all that up?* We fought about it for days until he finally threw up his hands and declared, *Do what you want. Je m'en fiche.*

I don't care.

He didn't tell me not to apply, but he obviously didn't understand. Maybe he would have if I'd told him why I wanted to come so bad. If I'd explained how disconnected I've always felt. That I just need to find some link to a mother who's never been anything more than a ghost to me. Some hint of who she was. Some anchor.

So maybe I'll know who I am.

But I couldn't tell him any of that, because Dad and I stopped talking—I mean really talking—in English or French—years ago.

I can still see the look on his face when he found out I'd actually been accepted into the program. All pale and thin-lipped. Afraid. The last words he said to me at the airport this morning were, *Whatever you're looking for, Avril, it won't change anything. Elle sera toujours morte.*

She'll still be dead.

So maybe he understands more than I think he does.

The water starts to go cold. I dry off and put on clean clothes, then I brush the fuzz of cheap beer from my teeth before I head back to our cabin. The wet, worn wood of the front steps is slick as glass under my flip-flops, and my feet almost go out from under me. I suck in my breath from the surprise. "Shit." A sharp sound in the dull fog. I grab the handrail to steady myself. I can't seem to find my footing tonight.

"Avril?"

I turn to look over my shoulder, and I'm instantly blind. Squinting against the glare. Bright light bouncing off the moisture in the air. Hitting me square in the face.

One second, I'm seventeen. Standing on the steps.

The next, I'm five.

Standing in thick, wet grass.

Blinking.

Against that sudden blinding light.

Paralyzed.

I can't see.

My chest tightens and I can't breathe. Can't move. Can't call out for my mother.

“Avril?”

The redhead—Lex—lowers his flashlight. And I can see again. He’s standing at the bottom of the steps.

I’m standing on the porch.

We are seventeen.

The return feels like being sucked backward up a vacuum cleaner hose.

“You okay?” Lex asks.

“Yeah,” I say, “I just . . .” But I don’t know what the next words are. Because I don’t know where that thought came from. That memory. Or whatever.

The bright light in my eyes.

It’s like having amnesia and *déjà vu* at the same time.

“I was on my way to the bathroom,” Lex says. “But I heard something.” He hesitates. Stares at me. I’m still half-frozen. “I wanted to make sure everything was okay over here.” He waits. “Av?”

Nobody’s ever called me that. A nickname. I guess we really are besties now.

“Yeah,” I say again. “I’m fine.”

Lex looks around. But there’s nothing to see. We’re walled in by fog.

“Can I hang for a minute?” he asks. I start to say no, because all I want is to go to bed, but Lex turns off his flashlight and settles on the top step without waiting for an answer. “I don’t think I can sleep yet. I’m nervous, I guess. About auditions tomorrow and everything.”

I take the towel that’s draped around my shoulders and spread

it on the boards to protect myself from the slick wet, then I settle down to sit beside him. I pull the sleeves of my sweatshirt down over my hands.

“So what do you think of Whisper Cove?” Lex asks me.

“It’s good,” I say. “Like summer camp without the stupid canoeing.”

“I never went to summer camp. My mom never had the money,” he admits. “So I’ll have to take your word for it.” He nudges me with his shoulder. “I saw the way Cole was looking at you tonight.” Lex raises one eyebrow and gives me a sideways smile. “Not bad. Willa Culver’s son.”

“Did you know she had a son?” I ask him. “Before you came here?”

Lex shakes his head. “I didn’t know anything about her personally. I just knew the play.”

I know the play he means, of course. Everyone knows *Midnight Music* by Willa Culver. Our Intro to Theatre class read it in ninth grade, and I remember being so swept away by the heartbreaking beauty of it. It was the first play that ever moved me like that. I carried the script in my backpack all the rest of that year, just so I could take it out and reread my favorite parts whenever I had a free moment.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “I didn’t know much about her, either.” And that’s certainly not a lie, but I’m thinking of a photograph that I have tucked away inside a notebook back in Dallas. My mother with long hair—icy blonde like mine—in a black cap and gown. College graduation. She’s laughing, and her arm is around another young woman, this one with hair as dark as my mother’s is blonde.



Willa Culver. The famous playwright. Only she wasn't famous back then, of course. And her last name wasn't Culver.

They were college friends. That's all the info I was ever able to get out of Dad. That's how we ended up at Whisper Cove that summer, my mother and me. When I was five years old.

"He's fucking hot," Lex says. And it takes me a minute to bring my mind back around to what he's talking about.

Who he's talking about.

Cole Culver.

And Lex is undeniably right about that, but there's something about Cole that puts me on edge. So I change the subject.

"What about the way you and Jude were flirting?"

Lex blushes. "He's cute, right?"

"He is," I say. "For sure." It's my turn to nudge him. "You're a fast mover."

"No," he says. "I'm not. But I've only got four weeks." He shrugs. "So no time to waste, right?" Lex sighs, and his grin slips a little. "I just don't want to drag my feet. If there's something there, I wanna find out. You know? Before it's too late." His face has clouded over, and I know that cloud must have a name. But he doesn't tell me who it is that made him sigh like that, so I guess I was wrong about us being besties. We aren't quite there yet.

Lex digs around in his bag and comes up with a cigarette. He offers it to me, but I shake my head, so he shrugs and lights it up for himself.

"You ever wish that you could erase certain memories?" he asks me. "Like how you can turn off a light switch. Or like . . . fuck . . . I don't know." He sucks in smoke and holds it for a minute before

he breathes it out again. “The way you can pull a weed up out of a garden or something.”

It’s a weird thought to me. Wanting to forget. I’ve spent my whole life trying so desperately to remember. “What memories would you erase?” I ask him. “If you could.”

Lex laughs, but it’s not that same playful giggle from the beach. This laugh has a hint of bitterness to it. Like coffee grounds left at the bottom of a cup.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he says. “The shitty ones?” But then he stops. Puts the cigarette to his lips again. Takes another long drag. “Actually, the happy ones, maybe. The really good ones. Like the best fuckin’ ones. Those are the memories that hurt the worst sometimes. Right?”

It’s quiet for a long minute, and I stare out into the fog. It plays tricks with my depth perception. The light on the front porch of the big farmhouse, just across the little field, looks like it could be the light on a cargo ship far out at sea.

“Do you ever wonder,” I ask, “if maybe you’re dead?”

I feel like we’re drifting. Untethered. The only two people in the world. And that’s probably why I say it. Because it’s not something I’ve ever asked anyone else before. Not something I ever would have asked. Not in a million years.

But even though I’ve only known him a few hours, there’s also just something about Lex that feels right. Something about him makes me feel seen.

Recognized.

Safe, maybe. As weird as that sounds.

He’s watching me. His cigarette smoke mingles with the fog.

It floats lazy and thick around our heads. “I know this is crazy,” I tell him, “but something happened to me. A long time ago. And sometimes I have this thought that maybe I’m living out a scene from one of those movies where the main character doesn’t know she’s dead. You know? That she hasn’t survived the accident. Or whatever.”

Lex thinks about that for a few seconds, like it’s a totally normal question to ask an almost-stranger.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’ve ever really been alive,” he finally says. “Is that the same thing?” He offers me the last of his cigarette, and I take it from his fingers and suck in hard before I hand it back to him so he can put it out on the porch steps. It makes me cough something awful, but I like the way it starts my head spinning.

“Yeah,” I choke out. Words wrapped in smoke. “I think maybe it is.”

A long, low sound reverberates through the still air—a sort of soothing, sustained baritone—and at first I can’t figure out what it could be. But then it comes again, and I realize it must be a foghorn.

I like the lonesomeness of it.

“I better get to bed,” Lex says, as if the foghorn had been some kind of reverse alarm clock. He stands up and stretches. “Night, Av.”

“Good night,” I say. I’m already falling in love with that Tennessee drawl of his. It makes me think I could get used to having a nickname. “See you in the morning.”

I lose sight of Lex as soon as he steps off the porch, but I hear the crunch of his feet on the gravel path, heading toward the bathroom. I listen to his footsteps until they fade away.

And then I’m all alone.

But I don't go inside. I'm too tired to get up, and I keep thinking about those new almost-memories. Those flashes. Or whatever they are.

The one on the beach with Val. A cold hand tight around my wrist.

And the sea porch. How I knew what it was called. That green-striped awning.

Then the moment on the steps with Lex. Blinding light in my eyes.

I've never been able to remember the night my mother died. Or anything before that, either. It's like the sea washed everything away. It stole all my memories and spit me out clean. Oxygen deprivation, the doctors said.

I drowned, after all.

But what if being here is opening up some kind of locked drawer inside my head?

I know that's what Dad was worried about. And I swore to him that I could handle it. Because if I could find just one real memory of her—of my mother—it would make all the difference in the world.

Suddenly I'm overwhelmed by a familiar ache. It's such a deep, constant part of me, that longing for my mother, but it still takes me by surprise when it hits fast and hard like this. It feels like being hit in the stomach with a baseball bat.

It sucks the air out of my lungs and leaves me gasping.

I reach for the cigarette lighter Lex left on the steps. I flick it with my thumb, and the flame comes to life in my hands. It's a familiar feeling, and just holding it makes me feel more in control.

I touch the lighter to a string hanging from the edge of my towel, and the flame eats it alive. Gobbles it up in a rush of light. A bright flash. And then it's gone. I burn another string. And then another. And another. Until there are none left. Then I take my other hand and hold my palm just above the lighter's flame. I like the heat it gives off. And the brightness. The pain of it. Like the catch in my lungs and the ache of my muscles after that long swim back to the beach.

The burn proves that I'm alive.

I slip Lex's lighter into my pocket, and I sit there listening to the low moan of the foghorn.

And then maybe there's another sound—a barely there sound that drifts into my ears like cigarette smoke—and at first I think Lex has come back from the bathroom. I stand up. Say his name into the darkness.

And that's when the whispering starts.

## ACT ONE: SCENE 4

“A vril, wake up. We’re gonna be late.”

Someone is shaking me. I open my eyes and blink a few times before Val’s green eyes and dark hair come into focus.

I push myself up and look around.

“What time is it?” I mumble. All the other bunks are already empty.

“Seven thirty,” Val says. “Meeting starts in fifteen minutes.”

Shit. I wonder why my alarm didn’t go off. Val heads out to the bathroom to brush her teeth, and I tell myself I need to get up and get dressed. A quick glance toward the window lets me know the fog is already gone. All I see is blue sky and sunshine.

I throw back the sheet and swing my feet to the floor. And that’s when I notice the dried mud. And the grass. On the bottom of my feet and in my bed. There’s not a lot of it, but for a few seconds I just stare, trying to make sense of it. I remember being out on the porch last night. I remember Lex. And the foghorn. But after my shower, I never left the gravel path and front steps. So where did the mud and grass come from?

And then I remember the whispering.

But that part doesn't seem real now. It's like a dream, maybe. Something I imagined.

I feel a little dizzy—slightly hungover, probably—but I shake it off and stumble into some clean shorts and a T-shirt. I brush off my sheets before I run a comb through my hair and shove my feet into my flip-flops, then I grab my toothbrush and hurry to the bathroom. Val's already on her way back, but she promises to wait for me. I get ready in record time, and we start across the field toward the farmhouse.

“Hey! Av! Wait up!”

I look over my shoulder to see Lex waving at me. He and Jude are jogging toward us, and we pause to let them catch up.

“Mornin', boys,” Val says, and she bats her mascaraed eyelashes. “Ready to set the world on fire?”

“Ready for breakfast,” Jude says. “That's for damn sure.”

“You sleep okay?” Lex asks me.

“Yeah,” I tell him. But that starts me thinking again about the grass in my bed. The mud on my feet. I brush it out of my mind, though, the way I brushed it out of my sheets. I must have picked it up on the path somehow.

The day is perfect. The sun is warm, but the breeze is crisp and it carries the kiss of salt. I stop for a second to take in the crumbling rock wall that surrounds the garden. The sloping green lawn and the brilliant sparkle of the sea beyond. It's like something out of an impressionist painting.

“Jesus.” Val throws her arm around my shoulders. “The beach in LA never looks like that,” she whispers, like she's letting me in

on some kind of secret. “We have fucking amazing sunsets, but we don’t get that kind of blue.”

“It’s incredible,” I say. You’d think I’d remember a view like this.

But then, you’d think I’d remember a lot of things.

We’ve almost made it to the front steps when a man steps out from a cluster of trees next to the farmhouse. He’s older, with sandy-blond hair and a weathered face, and he’s carrying a giant pair of hedge clippers. Jude raises his arm in a friendly wave. “Hey! George!” he shouts. “Good to see you, man!”

So this is the infamous Whisper Cove caretaker. The one with a fondness for weed and a reputation for looking the other way.

George gives Jude a dismissive scowl, then he lifts his clippers to lop off a low-hanging branch. “Still can’t believe they let you back in here,” he mumbles. Then he shakes his head and bends to pick up the clippings at his feet. When he straightens back up, his eyes lock on mine, just for a second. There’s something about the way he looks at me that makes my arms break out in goosebumps. Maybe it’s the way I feel his eyes moving over my body—or maybe it’s the giant clippers in his hand—but I’m instantly uneasy, and I’m relieved when he disappears into the trees again.

“He loves me,” Jude assures us with a grin. “I promise.” And I tell myself that I just imagined that weird feeling. That being here has my mind, playing tricks on me. I shake it off and tell myself to focus on more important things. Like how I’m about to be face-to-face with Willa Culver.

The farmhouse is painted bright yellow, and it seems to spread out forever with no clear plan, the way houses do when they’ve been added on to and then added on to again. We all gather up



on the big front porch, since that's where the welcome meeting is supposed to be.

A bunch of the others are already there. It's crowded, so I perch on the railing between Lex and Val. I run my hand over the worn wood and think about how my mother probably touched it. I already feel closer to her here than I ever have in our apartment back home. Dad erased all trace of her there years ago, but here it's easy to picture her strolling across the lawn. Or sitting in the shade of one of those big trees, reading a script.

"Y'all ready to meet Willa?" Jude asks us. His smile is so wide. It's clear how much he adores her. "She's the one who really put this place on the map, ya know. A decade or so ago, Whisper Cove was just another struggling summer theatre. It was about to go under for good. But Willa's play changed all that. She—"

We don't get a chance to talk any more, because the most striking woman I've ever seen suddenly bursts through the screen door and onto the porch. She's tall and elegant, with long legs and long, dark hair streaked with steely silver. She has on jeans and heeled boots. Dangly earrings and jangling bracelets. A flowing yellow scarf trails behind her like the tail of a kite.

But it's those eyes that really demand my attention. They're gray. Unflinching. So much like Cole's that, even if I hadn't spent the past couple of years staring at that photo of her younger self, I'd know without a doubt exactly who she was.

There's a flurry of activity and excited murmuring, because this is Willa Culver. Right here in front of us. In the flesh. She's the reason theatre kids from all over the country compete for a chance to come here. They all want an opportunity to study with Willa.

I can't stop staring at her for another reason, though. Because standing right here in front of me is someone who knew my mother. Someone who called her a friend.

"Hello, my lovelies!" Willa is beaming at us. "Welcome to Whisper Cove!"

I was such a little girl the last time she saw me, and my name is totally different. And I know there's just enough of my father in my face to keep Willa Culver from recognizing me. But I have this sudden urge to stand up and shout out my truth to her.

*My mother was Nicole Kendrick!*

Instead, I bite my lip and stick to my plan. I'll tell her after auditions. After the play is cast. That's what I decided on the plane.

"Okay, okay," she tells us. "Let's get down to business. First, I want to say congratulations, and I want you all to take a moment to consider that you are among greatness. Right here on this humble farmhouse porch." Willa looks around our group, and we wait with a hushed anticipation that's settled on us thicker than last night's fog. "The two dozen of you here this summer were chosen by me personally, handpicked from among hundreds of applicants. I was looking for something special. Something that stood out. And each and every one of you had that." She gives us a dazzling smile. "So please know that each one of you is already extraordinary."

Val leans over to whisper in my ear. "Holy shit." She's twisting a long strand of dark hair around one finger. "Can you believe this is real life?"

I glance around and everyone is staring, rapt, at Willa. Lex. Jude. All the others. They're hanging on her every word. I know she's

talking about us, but there's obviously something special about her, too.

"You may be aware," Willa starts, "that a while back I wrote a little play." Everyone giggles, of course, and Willa laughs with us. "But seriously," she says, "*Midnight Music* is the greatest achievement of my life. It's the reason this theatre is still here. It's the reason I'm still here." She pauses for a deep breath. "And now it's the reason you're all here." A cheer and a round of applause go up from our group, and Willa pauses another moment before she continues, one hand over her heart. "And for that, I am eternally grateful."

She goes on to explain that our mornings will be filled with classes on everything from stage combat to dialects. "We've arranged for some of the industry's top theatre professionals to work with you this month." Naturally, she teaches playwriting herself.

In the afternoons, we'll have our work assignments. Because there's no cost to attend the intensive, the work assignments are how we give back to Whisper Cove. Willa tells us all to check the call-board on the front porch to find out where we'll be working. But I've already done that, so I know I'll be at the reception desk.

"Classes start tomorrow," Willa lets us know, and she tucks a strand of long, dark hair behind one ear. Silver bracelets jingle. "That gives you a little more time to settle in. But work assignments start this afternoon." She pauses, and her eyes sparkle. "Which brings us to this evening's auditions."

A hush falls over the group. We all lean forward like we're scraps of metal, powerless against Willa's magnetic pull. It reminds me of the way we listened to Cole's story last night on the beach.

Those deserted houses with their rotting gardens.

“As you’re probably aware,” Willa says, “each year the students present a workshop performance of *Midnight Music* on the final day of the intensive.”

Lex has stopped breathing beside me. He’s gripping the porch railing, and the freckles on the backs of his hands stand out like tiny drops of blood.

“But you don’t need to look so worried,” Willa says. “Everyone gets a part. All worthy roles, I assure you. I happen to know the playwright.” She winks at Lex, and he giggles. It comes out super high-pitched. Nervous. And he clamps a hand over his mouth, embarrassed. But then Jude tosses him a grin, and he starts to breathe again.

“And, of course, Jude here will be our trusty stage manager.” Willa waves a hand in Jude’s direction, and he lights up under her attention. “So no worries about tonight,” she says. “You’ll all be stars, I promise.”

We wrap up the meeting by going over the rules, and there aren’t many. Be on time. Work hard. Love each other. And one last thing. Nobody outside the cabins after eleven o’clock. It’s a rule we’ve already broken, but nobody volunteers that information.

“Here’s a thought for the day,” Willa adds before she dismisses us. “In act four of *Hamlet*, the beautiful but doomed Ophelia says, ‘We know who we are, but not who we may be.’ I want you all to remember that. Think about it every single day while you’re here. Every moment, even. You came to Whisper Cove as one person, but if you’re lucky, you’ll leave here as someone else. Someone you can’t even begin to imagine yet.” She looks around our group

again. “Let this summer set your soul on fire. Let it bring you to life, my lovelies. That is the real magic of the theatre.” She claps her hands. “Meeting adjourned. Now, someone please get Jude some breakfast!”

There’s another round of applause, and we all float in the screen door on a wave of chatter and excitement. A small woman stands up from a reception desk to greet us. Her curly brown hair is just barely held under control by an overworked headband. She doesn’t look very old. Late twenties, maybe. It’s hard to tell because of her huge glasses.

“This,” Jude announces, “is Glory.” He swoops in to give her a big hug. “Think of her like your big sister. She knows this place inside and out. You have any questions, or you need anything, you talk to Glory. She’s the real boss around here.”

Glory blushes. “Don’t listen to this one,” she warns us, and I notice her Boston accent. Or maybe it’s New York. Either way, it’s definitely not the Texas twang I’m used to. “Jude’s too charming for his own good.” She’s running her hands over her wrinkled skirt. Picking cat hair off her cardigan sweater. “Everyone knows who’s in charge around here.” She gives us all a nervous little smile. “Whisper Cove is Willa’s baby. I’m just lucky to be a part of it. But do let me know if you need anything.” She offers us each a peppermint from the bowl on her desk. “We want you to feel at home here.”

She seems kind, and I’m glad, since I’ve been assigned as her assistant. I start to introduce myself, but just then the phone rings, and Glory turns to answer it. “Whisper Cove Theatre. This is Glory. How can I help you?”

She gives us all an apologetic wave, and Jude blows her a kiss as

he ushers us on down the hallway, around a corner, and through a set of swinging doors into the little cafeteria.

A hot-food line with buffet-style serving tables sits along the far wall, and there's a drink station in one corner. A salad bar fills up the middle of the floor. Last night, at dinner, it was overflowing. But it's empty now. The rest of the room is taken up with round tables.

We all grab trays and make our way through the line, filling our plates with scrambled eggs and sausage. There are biscuits, too. Big, fluffy ones. And fresh strawberries.

All around the cafeteria, kids are splitting up into groups. We've only been here one night, but everyone seems to have found their people already. It reminds me of the school cafeteria back home. I guess some things are universal.

I fill my glass with orange juice from the dispenser and head toward a spot in the middle of the room where Jude, Lex, and Val are waiting for me.

"What'd you guys think of Willa?" Jude asks as we slide our trays onto the table. His plate is piled high with biscuits. "I told you she was a trip, right?"

"She's fucking amazing," Lex says as he reaches for the pepper. "Exactly like I thought she'd be."

"I keep thinking about what she said," Val tells us. She's dressed all in black this morning. Ripped jeans and another tank top. Cat eyes and red lipstick. She looks like a rock star. "About how we know who we are, but not who we may be." She pops a strawberry into her mouth. "That's deep shit."

"So, who are we going to be four weeks from now?" Lex asks,

pepper shaker frozen in midair over his eggs. He sneaks a look at Jude. "I don't wanna leave here the same person I was when I showed up."

And I don't, either. But I don't know yet who it is I want to become.

Maybe none of the others do, either. Maybe that's what this summer is about. For all of us.

We fill in some more gaps about ourselves between bites.

Val has done some modeling in LA. Just stuff for a local mall, she tells us like she's halfway embarrassed. But the rest of us are impressed.

Lex got suspended last year for skipping classed. But he still had straight As. So fuck 'em.

And Jude plays sax in the marching band. "Played," he corrects himself. He probably won't have time to keep it up next year. In college. The look on his face tells us he already misses it.

I dig around inside my brain for something that feels safe to share. Something easy and comfortable. The kind of thing you can lay out on the breakfast table next to the biscuits and the butter. But I've never been good at this kind of thing. I settle on a funny story about playing the part of an apple tree in *The Wizard of Oz*, even though I'm allergic to apples.

And that seems to satisfy them.

At least for now.

The rest of the talk over breakfast is about auditions. The monologues we've prepared. What we're wearing. We harass Jude with questions about what to expect, but he just grins and says his lips are sealed.

We're almost finished eating when a man in khakis and a wrinkled blue dress shirt comes into the cafeteria. He's going bald, but he has a handsome face. I watch him stop at the hot-food bar and load his plate up with eggs and biscuits. Jude waves, and he comes over to our table.

"Morning, Jude!" His voice is louder than I expect it to be. "These must be some of our new recruits."

"Lex, Avril, and Val," Jude says, "this is Brody Culver. He's the artistic director here at Whisper Cove."

And just like that, I'm face-to-face with someone else who would have known my mother that last summer of her life. I want to ask if he remembers her. But I don't. Not yet. I just stare at him and wonder.

"He's also Willa's husband," Jude clarifies. But we all knew that already.

"Most important part of my title," Brody says with a chuckle. "Mr. Willa Culver."

And he's Cole's father, of course. But there's no sign of Cole in this man. Cole is all dark hair and intensity. Like his mother. This guy is almost too relaxed and casual. Too laid back to be genuine.

"Sorry to fill my plate and run," Brody is saying. "But I need to get back to my office. You won't see a lot of me. My focus is on the professional shows we have going up the second half of the summer. But you're in good hands with Willa." He slaps Jude on the back. "And with my buddy Jude here, of course."

When he's gone, we finish our breakfast and dump our trays, then everyone splits off to work on their audition monologues. Lex and I make plans to rehearse together, but Jude catches us on the



way out of the cafeteria. “Hey, Avril,” he says, “do you mind if I steal Lex for a little bit?” He’s talking to me, but those big brown eyes are trained on Lex. Just like last night on the beach. “I promised I’d show him around this morning.”

“Oh,” I say. “Yeah. Sure.” I almost add that I’ll come, too, but the way Lex is blushing clues me in that this is meant to be a private tour.

“You don’t mind, do you, Av?” Lex looks worried. Like he feels bad leaving me alone. But I’m used to being alone, so I shake my head and tell Lex that he should go with Jude. Because Jude is leaning against the door frame, grinning, all gorgeous curls and long eyelashes and flirty smiles. So, yeah. Of course Lex should go with him.

We promise to meet back up for lunch, and I decide to head out to the sea porch. I’ve been thinking about that green-striped awning since I saw it in the fog last night.

I try finding my way through the house, but the rooms and hallways are like a maze. After I get lost the third time, I give up and backtrack to the cafeteria so I can head out the side door and follow the stone path around to the back.

When I come around the corner of the farmhouse, I stop dead in my tracks. I wonder if I’ll ever get used to it all. That stunning view. Or the coolness of an ocean breeze in the middle of June. And the way the air smells here. Fresh, but with a little bit of a bite. Like salt and flowers and seaweed. And something that reminds me of the way clean, crisp sheets feel against your skin in the summertime.

I listen to the faraway song of the waves. Watch them breaking down at the beach in a line of white foam. Seagulls cry overhead,

and colorful sailboats dark back and forth against the horizon. It's perfect.

Magical.

So much more beautiful than anything I've ever seen in Texas. It seems more like another planet than another state.

It's more than just pretty, though. There's also something about it that just feels right. Like this is where I belong. Right here. On these wide back steps with the lighthouse standing guard.

I let my eyes travel the distance to the water.

Green lawn.

Brown sand.

White foam.

Blue sea.

Then I look up. There's something so familiar about that striped awning covering the huge porch.

I wait. Just in case. But no new memories come to me, so I take out my phone and return a few texts from Dad. I promise him I'm fine. Really. That everything is going great. Then I pull the script for *Midnight Music* out of my bag. It's a dog-eared edition from when I first read it in ninth grade. I need to go over it again and make some notes before tonight.

But something stops me.

Down on the beach, a figure is climbing out of the surf. It's too far away for me to see his face, but that shock of dark hair tells me who it is.

Cole Culver.

I watch him bend down and pick up a T-shirt. Shake out the sand. Pull it over his head. Then I lose sight of him. He disappears

into the dunes, and I can't see him anymore. Not until he emerges onto the green lawn a few minutes later.

He's running now. Not jogging. Full-out running up the big hill toward the farmhouse. Like some kind of monster is hot on his heels in pursuit. And I can't seem to tear my eyes away from him. There's something beautiful about the way he moves across the bright green grass. Like he's pure energy. His feet don't touch the ground.

I manage to force my eyes down toward my script when he gets close, but he keeps on coming. He doesn't stop until he reaches the sea porch, and then he leans down, hands on his knees. Breathing hard. And dripping. Saltwater sliding down his cheeks and arms. His neck.

Not that I'm looking at his neck.

"Hey, skeptic girl," he pants. "You busy?"

I look up, like I only just noticed him, and Cole is standing at the bottom of the steps, grinning at me. It's weird seeing him in the daylight, almost like I'd imagined he was a ghost himself. But here he is with his annoyingly good hair and his smoky eyes.

"Reading," I say. And I hold up my copy of the script.

Cole smirks and takes the steps in one long stride. He settles down beside me, just like I'd invited him. "Is it any good? I've never read it."

I can't tell if he's being a smart-ass.

"It's not bad," I say with a straight face. "I think it could be a big hit." Cole laughs then. It's a real, genuine laugh, and it kind of makes me forget how cocky he was last night.

"Hey," he starts, almost like he can read my mind. "About that story I told at the bonfire. I wasn't trying to freak you out, I just—"

“You didn’t freak me out,” I say. “I don’t believe in that kind of stuff. I told you that.”

“Yeah. You did. Right.”

Cole reaches into his pocket and pulls out another little piece of sea glass. This one is a pinkish color. It reminds me of a shell. He rubs it between his finger and his thumb as he stares at the water, and I wonder what he’s really doing here.

He has on dark blue swim shorts and a faded gray T-shirt that matches his eyes. It sticks to his back and his shoulders, where he’s still wet, and I can see the angles and edges of his body. He’s all lean muscle and bone. The only thing soft about him is that dark, wavy hair.

Cole’s hot, like Lex said, but there are things I can see in the daylight. Things I didn’t notice last night on the beach.

Those black circles around his eyes.

The chewed skin at the edges of his fingernails.

That tension in his jaw.

He catches me looking at him, and I turn back to my script.

“For whatever it’s worth,” he says, “most people say it’s just the wind in the dune grass. That whispering sound you heard last night.”

I have this sudden twinge of fear. Just the smallest shiver. And I want to tell him I didn’t hear anything—on the beach, or later, on the cabin porch.

Cole tosses that pink sliver of glass into the air and catches it in his hand like a game of “heads or tails.”

“But that story about the mass drowning is true,” he tells me. “There’s a little graveyard not far from here.” He jerks his head toward the tree line. “Where the women are buried. And the kids.”

The idea of a cemetery, rows of little graves, makes me uncomfortable. So I change the subject.

“Were you swimming?” I ask him, and he nods. Runs his fingers through his still-wet hair.

“I swim every morning. A couple of miles. Up the coast to the state park and back.”

That explains the leanness of him. Those taut muscles and that agile grace.

“You swim for exercise?” I say, and he shakes his head.

“I swim because the ocean scares me.”

We look at each other for a few seconds.

He told me last night his mother was afraid of the water. He didn’t say he was. My eyes find the soft skin of his wrist. That compass rose tattoo.

“But you’re safe,” I tease. “You’ve got that magical tattoo, right?”

He laughs out loud again, and I realize it wouldn’t take me long to become a fan of Cole’s laugh. If I let myself.

“Yeah,” he says. “Totally safe.” He’s watching me. But I’m staring at my toes now. “You should come with me some morning.”

“Maybe I will,” I say. And then I’m not sure what to say next.

He looks down at the script in my lap. “Have you read it before?”

“Yeah,” I tell him, “I’ve read it lots of times. I just wanna make sure I’m ready for auditions.”

“Don’t bother.” Cole reaches down to swat away a horsefly that’s buzzing around his ankles. “You can’t prepare for Willa Culver, trust me.”

“What does that mean?” I ask him, and he shrugs.

“She’ll surprise you every time.” He smiles. “Did you know she

wrote that in one single weekend? Just went into our study and typed it up.” He shakes his head. “Nobody even knew she was working on a play.”

“That’s incredible,” I tell him, even though I’d heard that before. It’s part of the fabric of theatre lore. The stuff of myths and legends. “Does that talent run in the family?” I’m teasing him now. Flirting, maybe. Or at least trying to.

“The talent for keeping secrets?” he asks. “Yeah. As a matter of fact, it does.” He pushes himself up off the steps. Looks down at my script again. “Let me know how it ends.”

“Sure,” I say. But I can’t tell if he’s messing with me.

“And break a leg tonight.” He tilts his head to one side and grins. “Or do you not believe in luck, either?”

“I’ve never needed luck before.” I figure two can play that cocky game of his.

“Yeah, well,” he tells me, and he steps out from under the green-striped awning and into the bright sunshine, “you’ve never been to Whisper Cove before, Avril Vincent.”

And only one of us knows that isn’t true.