

THE COMPANION



KATIE ALENDER

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2020 by Katie Alender

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

[Insert CIP]

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780399545917

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Suki Boynton

Text set in Agfa Wile Roman Std

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedication T/K



MARCH —30—

MY SISTER DINA'S last words were, "I'm telling you, that hamburger tasted like it had boogers on it."

My sister Siena's last words were, "Are you saying . . . it was a hambooger?"

My mother's last words were, "Tony, do you see that—"

My father's last words were, "Oh God—hold on, girls. *Hold on!*"

Then the car plunged off the side of the road and sank darkly into a drainage canal full of icy slush. And *poof!* the Radegan family was finished.

Well, except for me.

Apparently I didn't get the memo.

I remember thinking, *Mom, I can't breathe*. And then somehow I found myself gasping in the frigid cold air, dog-paddling, too dazed to know which way was up, fading in and out of consciousness, and then,

at last, facedown and elbow-deep in a patch of frost-crunchy mud.

I turned to look for the others. The water was horribly still and silent, except for the occasional gurgle of air escaping from the car below like the belch of a beast that had eaten its fill.

The scene remained mostly quiet until emergency vehicles arrived. There were bystanders up on the road, people milling about at the top of the steep hill, pondering the horror of what they'd seen. Snippets of their horrified reactions reached my ears, oddly clear in the damp air—all those *oh nos* and *I can't believe its* and one particularly heart-wrenching *Merciful Mary, mother of God*. They didn't come looking for me because it was unthinkable that anyone could have survived.

So I lay in the dark without making a sound, waiting and wanting to die.

Three months later, I was still waiting.

CHAPTER

1

MY TOOTHBRUSH WAS slime green, and the bristles, after only six weeks of use, were beginning to fray and spread outward. They also came unattached and got stuck between my teeth when I brushed, which I did, twice a day, for the full two minutes that my mother would have insisted upon had she been around to do so. The end of the toothbrush's handle tapered to a sporty point, and the gold-embossed brand name, WALLYTEETH, was chipping quietly away. It was as if someone at the Wallyteeth factory had said, *We want it to look like a toothbrush, but basically it should suck.*

And it did. But what *really* bothered me was that someone else's hair was taped to it.

The day I'd arrived at Palmer House, a woman named Ms. O'Neil, who had long, curly auburn hair (as I was later reminded twice a day for two minutes at a time) gave me a short welcome speech, followed by

a tour. She had a stack of supplies waiting for me on her beat-up wooden desk, including a pair of pajamas still on their plastic hanger, a thin graying bath towel and washcloth, the green toothbrush, and a small blue stuffed bunny.

"The pajamas and the rabbit are donations," she said, almost an apology. "You don't have to keep them if you don't want them. I'm sure once your things arrive, you'll want to wear your own clothes, but that may be a few days—"

"No, I don't have anything," I said.

"Like I said, it may be a few days before it gets here," she said, with the unpleasant smile of someone who was being very patient in the face of stupidity. "But your caseworker will arrange to ship everything—"

"No," I said. "There's nothing to ship. They thought I was going to die, so they donated everything."

Blink. Blink-blink. The smile never left her face. Her silence seemed like a call for more information.

"They thought they were being nice," I said, feeling like I had to cover for them. "My dad's law firm handled the estate pro bono because there was a lot of debt from my mom setting up her dental practice. And . . . mistakes were made."

"I see," Ms. O'Neil said.

"There are a few boxes," I admitted, not wanting

to seem melodramatic. “Mostly paperwork. It can stay in storage.”

I turned away to inspect the pajamas, noting that the print on the polyester fabric was hot-pink lipstick kisses and that the front read, #TOTESFAB. I handed them back to her and was on the verge of passing the bunny back, too, when I decided to stuff it into my backpack instead.

Ms. O’Neil tossed the pajamas onto the table in the corner and held the door open for me.

I hadn’t known until a few days before my arrival that there still *were* places like Palmer House: technically an orphanage (which made me technically an orphan?), officially a home for kids who needed somewhere to stay but hadn’t yet found their way into the foster care system, or had been slightly chewed up and then spit out by it. Palmer House certainly didn’t look like the prison-style brick structures of my childhood nightmares (*oh, you naive little nightmares*); it was just a dated beige stucco house with a treeless yard, designed maybe twenty years ago by someone who wasn’t particularly good at designing houses, with five bedrooms and a kitchen and some bathrooms and all the other things you might expect to find in a house. It had been donated to the Children’s Relief Society by the Palmer family—hence the name. My caseworker,

an obviously overworked woman named Frankie, told me I was supremely fortunate to get a spot here. It was “one of the nicest in the system.”

And I was its newest resident.

Efforts had been made to find me an actual home, but I had no living relatives, and staying with my best friend Becca’s family had ended badly—probably because of my nightmares, nosebleeds, and middle-of-the-night screaming episodes that kept the family awake and sent her younger siblings to therapy, Becca and I discovered that we hadn’t been very good friends after all. In fact, that had happened with all the people I’d thought were my friends. While finishing out the school year I realized that what had bound us to each other was just that we were all kind of . . . mean. Mean to other people and mean to each other.

I guess I didn’t have the energy to be mean anymore. I didn’t have the energy to be anything at all.

Palmer House’s administrative offices were in a converted space that had once been the garage, so we emerged into the kitchen and went from there to the living room, where some of the other girls were lounging, watching TV, or absently scrolling on their phones.

“Hey, everyone,” Ms. O’Neil said. “This is Margaret.”
Actually, I go by Margot, I didn’t bother to say. In

my old life, no one had called me Margaret except substitute teachers, but I let it go for the moment. Margaret was my father's grandmother, and Mom had agreed to the name only if she could shorten it.

A vague chorus of *hellos* answered her, and a few of the girls glanced up, but they all quickly turned away again.

Except one girl with dirty-blond hair and a scowl.

"Hey!" she snarled. "That's *my* toothbrush!"

Ms. O'Neil blinked, looking down at the toothbrush sitting atop the graying towels, and then sighed. "Tam, this is not yours. It's a new one from the supply closet."

Tam sat up. Her too-big T-shirt read, #GIRLSQUAD. Her eyes were watery blue and her face seemed weirdly flat, like everything except her nose and eyes were on the same level. "Well, it *looks* like mine," she said. "And that means at some point she's going to mess up and use mine. Which is disgusting."

Ms. O'Neil turned away with an eye roll. Tam saw it, too, and her lip curled as she prepared to say more.

Then Ms. O'Neil held up her hand, warding off the attack. "Okay, okay, don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"*Disgusting*," Tam repeated.

"Come on, Margaret," Ms. O'Neil murmured, and we retreated to the garage. She grabbed a roll of duct

tape out of her desk drawer and started to write on it with a black marker.

Since it seemed like I might be here for a while, I decided to take a chance. "You can just write *Margot*," I said.

"Oh, is that what people call you?" she asked. "Okay."

She wrote *Margo*, ripped the tape off the roll, and wrapped it—along with a wayward strand of her own long, curly hair—around the handle of the toothbrush.

"Ta-da," she said. "Now it is clearly your toothbrush."

In my old life, I would have said, *Oh, excuse me, there's a t at the end of my name.*

Maybe even, *Oh, excuse me, you've attached a piece of your hair to this device I'm supposed to insert into my mouth.*

But now? Nah.

She carried it out and held it up to Tam, like a flag waved in a parade, as we passed the TV room. Tam didn't quite seem to process what she was seeing, but she didn't get up and follow to air further grievances, so I figured it was fine.

And it was. It worked out well enough, in the sense that I never used any toothbrush but my own for the entirety of the six weeks I spent at Palmer House. Tam found several other reasons to despise me, but Tam despised everyone, so I didn't dwell on it.



ON THE MORNING of the third day of the seventh week, I was in the bathroom, brushing, when Tam came in, grabbed a random towel off the rack, and began using it to dry her hair. She glared at me in the mirror.

"Hah," I said, with the toothbrush between my teeth.

"Don't *hi* me," she said. "I'm exhausted, and it's your fault."

"Uh-kah," I said.

"Can I just tell you how miserable it is to have you here?"

I spit into the sink. "Sure."

Tam stepped closer. Not threateningly, but close enough to speak quietly so no one else could hear. "Everyone else here feels bad for you, but I don't. I'm the only one who'll tell you the truth, which is that we're all sick and tired of you waking up every night, shrieking like a maniac."

I wobbled, as though a pebble caught in my blood-stream had forced its way through the valves of my heart.

"You were in an accident," she said. "So what? Get over it and let the rest of us sleep."

"All right," I said. "Great advice, Tam, thanks for the words of wisdom."

She leaned against the wall. "I'm serious. Things were peaceful until you came. Now every night's a horror movie."

"Okay," I said, rinsing out my toothbrush.

"Look at me, Margot," she said.

I looked at her. Her eyes were flat and dull, but they weren't stupid. And there was a glint of self-satisfaction in them that told me she was carrying out a rather pleasant errand. Had the others nominated her to tell me all this?

Probably.

"You should go," she said.

"Cool," I said, letting my attention drift away.

It was the first hit I'd scored on her. She tried again, less certain. "I mean it. You should go somewhere else."

"*Tam*," I said sharply, turning on her. "I'd love to. But where would I go?"

I heard something in my voice then—something dangerous and biting, like the strike of a snake.

Again, she wavered. "I don't care," she said. "Talk to Ms. O'Neil. She'll figure something out. I'm sure you'll be fine. You're the luckiest person I know."

Then she stormed away before I could reply.

I went back to my room at the far end of the hall. One thing that made them all angry was that I was the only girl with my own room. My roommate went to

live with her grandmother two days after I arrived, and by then everybody knew I screamed all night, so they didn't want to share with me. In that regard, Tam was right. I was lucky. She'd lived here for going on two years, and by all rights the single should have been hers. But Ms. O'Neil refused to switch us, because no one who roomed with me would get any sleep.

I lay on the bed with Blue Bunny sitting on my chest, wondering in what other way I could possibly be considered lucky. The lawyers at Dad's firm had held a fundraiser for me, so I had a little money waiting for when I was an adult—not a ton, because my parents had cashed in their life insurance policy to build Mom's practice. But it would be enough to get me through college, if I chose a cheapish school and lived on a strict budget, working weekends and summers to make up the difference. I was pretty sure none of the other girls could say that—but Tam couldn't have known about the money, so that wasn't it.

Did she think I was lucky because I had made it out of the water when my parents and sisters hadn't?

That was lucky? Really? Surviving to see my family home emptied and sold? Surviving so I could wake every night in a cold sweat after some horrific nightmare? Be rejected and unwanted by all the people I'd thought were my friends? Surviving to end up *here*?

Lucky?

I turned to my side, feeling exhaustion coming for me, not wanting to let my eyes slip shut but knowing that it was inevitable. Between the dreams last night, I'd probably managed four hours of sleep, and that wasn't enough to get me through the day. Still, I fought sleep as long as I could. At least when I was awake I could stop myself from focusing on the accident. If I fell asleep, all my protections and distractions melted away.

Lucky.

I tucked Blue Bunny into my armpit and tapped his nose three times, hoping it would wake up whatever magic bunny energy he possessed and help him guard me from the shadows.

Then my eyes closed.

The shadows descended almost immediately—gray, black, and a sick mildew green, and behind them all was Tam. But not normal Tam—Tam's dead body bloated with canal water, floating out of her bedroom and down the hall into my room. I dreamed that she came hovering through the door and then slowly, like a seesaw, her feet lowered and touched the ground, and she came closer and stood over me and looked down with her cold, wet, dead-fish eyes. I waited for her to speak, but she didn't say anything.

She just reached down and put her hand over my mouth, and it felt like a giant slug. A scream began

to grow in my lungs like a train approaching from far down the tracks.

Then, suddenly, I was awake.

Someone had knocked on the door. When I opened my eyes, Ms. O'Neil's head was poked into the room. Her eyes were agleam with something like confusion, or maybe excitement.

I'm leaving, I thought.

Ms. O'Neil, like the rest of them, basically hated me. I don't think she wanted to, but all I did was make her job harder, and not in an interesting way like Tam did. With Tam, she could spar, and roll her eyes, and complain—but with me, what could she do? You can't roll your eyes at the sole survivor of a tragic car accident.

I mean, I guess you could roll your eyes at anything if it got aggravating enough.

I'll bet I'm aggravating enough, I thought.

The shiny-eyed moment hung in the air half a beat too long, and I had to break the silence.

"Hi," I said.

Her left eyebrow went up. "You," she said to me, "are a lucky girl."

CHAPTER 2

MY ROOM LOOKED out over the driveway, which meant that as I shoved my few possessions into my backpack and a plastic grocery bag, I could look down and see the roof of the massive black SUV idling there, waiting for me. The business-suit-clad man who'd arrived in it, Mr. Albright, had told me to take my time, but I didn't have enough stuff to take my time with.

The door pushed open, and I expected to see Ms. O'Neil. But it was Tam who came in, looking around in a curious, wide-eyed way. She had a duffel with her, and she heaved it onto the bed.

"My room now," she said, as smug as a house cat.

"Good for you."

She sighed and sat down on the mattress, arms folded. Then she leaned forward to peer down at the car in the driveway.

"So you're just getting, like, adopted?"

"No," I said. "I don't want to be adopted. I'll be a ward."

"They're probably going to make you their servant or something." She didn't sound entirely disappointed by this idea. "Lock you in the cellar and all that. I'm sure you'll be miserable."

"You never know."

She sat back and shook her head. "Ridiculous."

"Yep." I finished folding my third and final T-shirt and stacked it in the bag on top of the other clothes.

"If you're rich now, will you send me stuff?"

"I'm not rich," I said.

She pointed out the window. "That's a limousine. You're rich."

"It's not my money," I said. "I'm the servant, remember?"

She snorted. "Fingers crossed."

"Make yourself useful," I said. "Take the sheets off the bed."

She obeyed without complaint, reaching across to pull the fitted sheet out from under the mattress.

Then, driven by curiosity, I asked, "What kind of stuff would you want me to send?"

"Hmm," she said. "A pair of nice sunglasses. Like, really nice ones. And a crossword-puzzle book. And—"

I reached into my backpack, pulled out a cross-word-puzzle book, and lobbed it at the bed. She picked it up, studied the cover, quirked her mouth into a smile, and went on.

“—a better phone?” She watched expectantly to see if I was going to give her mine.

I was not.

She shrugged. “So your whole family is dead, right? No grandparents or aunts or anybody?”

“Nope,” I said. “My parents were only children and my grandparents are all dead.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I have aunts, but it doesn’t do me any good. My mom’s sisters. They won’t take me because they think I’m too much like my mother. I don’t care, though. I turn eighteen in seven months, and then I’ll go do my own thing.”

“Where will you go?”

“New York,” she said. “I’m going to be a model.”

I looked at her in disbelief, but even as I prepared to mentally dismiss the idea, I suddenly felt as if I was seeing her clearly for the first time—that simple, odd face. The impossibly tall, slender frame. I could totally see her slinking down a runway in some outlandish outfit. Her scowl was perfect for it, too.

“Good luck,” I said. “I think you *could* be a model, actually.”

She rolled her eyes. "I wasn't asking for your opinion."

Never change, Tam.

"Anyway, you're the lucky one." She dumped the bundle of sheets on the floor.

"You keep saying that," I said. "I don't know if you realize how much my life has sucked over the past three months."

She stretched out on the bare mattress, relishing it. "I never said your life didn't suck. Only that you're lucky. Those are two totally different things."

Huh. Were they?

"For instance," she said. "My mom is a homeless meth head who stole my grandma's life savings and her pills, which is probably why Grandma died. Be careful who you let handle your meds, by the way."

I was about to reply, but she silenced me with a finger.

"My last foster family fed me exactly one bowl of generic-brand Cheerios per day. I had a kitten there, but Palmer House made me give it away before I could come. I haven't seen my brother in seven years. My life sucks. And yet—no rich people have *ever*, even once, swooped in to adopt me. Hence, unlucky."

I looked down at the SUV waiting to cart me off to an enormous estate in the country, owned by million-

aires who (I assumed) would not actually make me live in the cellar and carry trays of food around.

Then I looked at Tam, whose left hand was curled around a small stuffed kitten wearing an Easter hat.

Well, maybe I am lucky, I thought. *But my life still sucks.*

"So then—" I said, and I wouldn't have gone on except she took the trouble to open her eyes and look at me. "If things are so terrible, what's the point?"

"The point of what? Of life?" she asked.

"Yeah, I mean . . . it's so hard." I felt myself blush. "I can't believe I used to think there was anything wrong with my life. I was so ignorant."

She shrugged. "Nobody has a perfect life. My cousins are rich, but they hate themselves."

"Doesn't everybody hate themselves?" I asked.

Tam's eyes narrowed contemptuously. "No. I don't. I've never done anything horrible enough to hate myself. Have you?"

I felt as if our eyes were locked together. She was waiting for an answer, but I didn't have one. Or maybe I did, but I didn't want to say it.

"You're overthinking this," she said finally. "You're alive, so you might as well go along with it. There's no big secret. You live, and then you die, and that's it."

"That's it?" I half laughed.

"That," she said, closing her eyes, *"is plenty."*

I carried my bags and the bundle of bedsheets to the door. "Tam, we could have been friends if you weren't such a jerk."

"I don't want to be your friend," she said, not even bothering to open her eyes. "I don't like you."

I closed the door and went downstairs.

I didn't bring the toothbrush.

CHAPTER 3

I'D NEVER BEEN to a country estate before. I didn't actually know what a country estate *was*, but I had a vague idea that it was where a duke or earl would live if we had dukes and earls in America. I figured Mr. Albright was being melodramatic about what would end up being a big house in a nice suburban neighborhood.

I was wrong.

I mean, it *was* a big house, yes. It was enormous. But it wasn't in a nice neighborhood—it wasn't in a neighborhood at all. It was (as one might have guessed) out in the country. About ten minutes before coming into view of the stone pillars at the entrance to the property, we'd passed through a minuscule town with one traffic light, a small row of stores, a used-car lot, a doctor's office, and a single-story building with

a sign reading COPELAND COUNTY SCHOOL. And that was it as far as the local society went.

I watched helplessly as the signal on my phone weakened, like blood draining from a body, and then disappeared altogether, replaced by two small words: NO SERVICE. It wasn't that I had any friends to call, but it still felt strangely and almost spookily like being cut off from the world, or going back in time.

The SUV slowed as we approached an elaborately scrolled iron gate centered in a brick wall that went on forever on both sides of us, and Mr. Albright looked over at me from his spot in the driver's seat. He was in his forties, balding, and judging by the puffiness around his eyes, could have used a good night's sleep. His gray suit jacket was draped over the seat between us, and his sleeves were rolled up.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "It's a new beginning for you."

What was I supposed to say, that I *wasn't* ready? I nodded and tried to smile and went back to looking out the window.

Mr. Albright was the Sutton family's lawyer and business manager, which meant (he'd told me) that he handled just about everything for them, because when you had that much money, everything was business. He described them as if they were dolls in a collection, with

an odd, patronizing note in his voice. But at the same time, he never missed a chance to say that looking out for their family was basically the purpose of his life.

To his credit, despite this great sense of combined ownership and deference he felt toward the Suttons, my going there didn't seem to worry him. In fact, he acted like it was natural, even charming, that they should take me in.

To me, it seemed kind of random and strange, but what do I know about how superrich people think?

Here's what I did know: John Sutton, the patriarch of the family, had gone to law school at Northwestern with my father. One day, they both happened to be swimming laps in the college pool, and John, who hadn't been feeling well, slipped into unconsciousness in the water. My dad crossed the two lanes between them, pulled him out of the pool, and performed CPR.

"Thus saving his life," Mr. Albright had said in the garage office at Palmer House, interlacing his fingers as if he were offering a silent prayer of thanks. "And so, when the news reached Mr. Sutton that your family had encountered this great tragedy, he felt compelled to reciprocate in any way he could."

Your family had encountered this great tragedy. He said the words so impersonally, as if the deaths of my parents and sisters were footnotes in a legal document.

Then again, what were his alternatives? What did I want him to do, break down and cry about it?

The iron gates began to open for us. Not wanting to seem overly awestruck, I tried not to crane my neck to see the house. I may have spent six weeks brushing my teeth with someone else's hair, but I had a smidgeon of pride left.

As it turned out, I didn't need to crane my neck. Copeland Hall, as Mr. Albright called the house, was too big to miss. It was a huge gray building, both long and tall, with boxy outcroppings and peaked roofs and windows, and towerlike projections poking out from various places. Ivy clung to the stone walls, and gnarled trees threw patches of dappled shade against the facade.

When the SUV rounded a corner, I spotted a pair of huge wooden double doors on the side of one of the stone rectangles that bulged off the main structure. The doors faced the side of the property, not the front, as if the house was turning away, hiding its face from visitors.

A two-story garage with entries for six cars hulked behind the building, and we pulled all the way into one of the bays before the car came to a stop.

"Leave your things," Mr. Albright said, as if my luggage had consisted of five trunks, eight suitcases, three hatboxes, and a birdcage. "I'll bring them later."

I looked helplessly at my backpack, not wanting to be parted from it. After only six weeks at Palmer House, I'd begun to develop the anxiety that all the girls shared—the nagging feeling that someone wanted to steal from me. But seeing the lumpy, over-stuffed canvas and the broken zipper that only closed halfway, I decided to leave it behind.

“We’ll go in the side entrance,” he said, leading the way toward a single door near the corner of the building.

I scanned the grounds as we approached the house. The lawns were immense and lushly green in the summer sun. It was a pleasant day, not too hot, with a light breeze. Birds twittered lazily from their shaded hiding places and a squirrel hunched under a bush, working hard to tear apart some small fruit or nut.

I live here now, I thought, trying the thought on like a dress.

Shouldn't a person feel a rush of emotion at the thought of being part of such a grand place? Shouldn't I feel happy? Or intimidated? Or . . . lucky?

I felt . . . nothing.

Until, that is, I stepped through the door behind Mr. Albright and saw the Suttons standing right there, waiting for us.

Then I felt something: completely mortified.

I'd assumed I'd have the chance to wash my face, brush my hair, psych myself up.

But instead, I found myself being inspected by a man and woman standing about ten feet away—a perfectly matched set of well-bred, meticulously presented rich people.

Mrs. Sutton, who was as sleek and slim as a greyhound, wore an ivory sweater and a pair of pale beige pants, with pointed-toe copper-colored flats. Her hair fell in a glossy light brown sheet, just skimming the shoulders of her sweater. Her watch and earrings were simple gold. Her makeup was subtle and flawless, setting off the glittering brown of her eyes and the pearly white of her teeth. Her smile was warm and welcoming. She was, in a word, tasteful.

Mr. Sutton looked a little less comfortable in his own skin but no less refined. His long-sleeved shirt was blue and crisp, and the hem of his gray trousers broke in just the right spot over his shining loafers. His hair was silvery brown, cropped close to his head, and he wore a smile that had a touch too much tension behind it to be perfectly sincere.

They were elegant in a casual, uncomplicated way—not like showy rich people from the city but like people so rich they don't have to live in the city. Their money lived there, and they hired people like Mr. Albright to carry it back and forth for them.

"I'm sorry to surprise you," Mrs. Sutton said, seeing what must have been a horrified expression on my face. Her voice was as smooth and polished as the rest of her. "We've been so looking forward to your arrival that we couldn't bear to wait in the sitting room like a couple of posed dolls. We wanted to meet you right away . . . but now I can see that wasn't very thoughtful of us."

"Nonsense, Laura, she's fine," Mr. Albright said cheerily. Then, turning to me, he said, "Margaret, allow me to introduce you to John and Laura Sutton."

"At your service," Mrs. Sutton said, her smile more subdued.

There was silence as everyone waited for me to speak. I didn't think I was going to be able to come up with anything, but when I opened my mouth, a few words tumbled out. "Thank you so much for having me," I said. "It means a lot."

To my horror, Mr. Sutton stepped closer and put a hand on my shoulder. "For a very long time, I've wanted to repay the debt I owed your father. I'm glad to have a chance, and I'm sorry that it's under these circumstances."

I tried to think of a suitable response.

"Oh, John, now's not the time for speechmaking," Mrs. Sutton said, swooping over and swatting him away. "I'm sure Margaret wants a few minutes by herself before we descend on her."

I did, desperately. But maybe their classiness was rubbing off on me, though, because it seemed impolite to go off alone so soon. "I'm okay," I said. "Could I please maybe have a glass of water?"

They leaped into action, thrilled to have a task. Mr. Sutton rushed away to fetch the water, while Laura ushered me down the hall to a room where the blessed rehydration could take place.

"The west parlor," she said, with a subtle flourish of her slim hand. "Please make yourself comfortable."

I looked around as she steered me toward a small sofa. The room was like something from a museum—every detail looked as if it had been left untouched for a hundred years. The walls were polished wood, adorned with large paintings of horses and hunting dogs. The furniture was ornate and old-fashioned. The love seat I found myself on was upholstered in a satiny fabric of blue and white stripes, with tufted green velvet pillows nestled in the corners.

Mr. Albright waited off to the side while Mrs. Sutton perched on a leather armchair and looked at me like I was the dessert cart at a fancy restaurant.

"Was the drive all right?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Thank you."

"Long, though, wasn't it?" She glanced almost accusingly at Mr. Albright, as if the distance were somehow his fault. "Did you get lunch?"

"A long ride, but very pretty," I said. "And yes, we did have lunch."

"We stopped in Hopkins," Mr. Albright said in his own defense. "We had sandwiches."

"Oh, Hopkins, that's good," she said, relaxing and sitting back. Then she sat up again. "You have to tell me if there's anything we can get for you. We aren't in town every day, but we can send out if there's something you require."

I was about to deflect the question, but then I realized I had a real need. "I could use a toothbrush, I guess," I said. "I left mine at Palmer House."

"Palmer House," she repeated. "Is that where you were staying?"

I nodded.

"Was it nice? Did you have friends?"

I stared straight into her eyes, which were nearly the same brown as the wood paneling on the walls behind her. Despite her kindness, their undeniable generosity toward me, I couldn't help feeling that this was all some kind of assessment. A test.

Better pass it.

"Oh, yes," I said. "It was very nice. I had a lot of friends."

I could feel Mr. Albright's eyes on me. "Excellent facility," he agreed. "Bright, a lot of natural light."

"That's good," she said, compassion in her voice.

"I imagine the girls there have all had a hard time. It's nice to think they have a comfortable place to live. I—I guess I just don't feel that girls belong in 'facilities.' But of course that's not a problem for you any longer. You live here, Margaret, with us. And you absolutely must let us know what we can do to make you feel at home."

Let's see. If I were at home, I would be in my room, on my bed, listening to music and browsing my friends' social media accounts to see what everybody was up to. And my parents and sisters would be alive. So good luck trying, Laura, but I can't see that happening.

"We only have one rule here, really," she said. "To respect one another—and the house, of course. I find that if respect is in place, everything else falls into line."

Doable. "Of course," I said.

The sides of her eyes crinkled in approval as Mr. Sutton came through the door with a glass of water—not a normal glass, but one made of intricately cut crystal that weighed about three pounds. I thanked him and took it with both hands, sipping as carefully as I could and then resting it on a coaster that Mrs. Sutton slid across the enormous wooden coffee table.

She fidgeted and looked up at her husband, who was still standing off to the side. "I was telling Margaret that I don't think girls belong in facilities."

He gave her an impatient look and spoke with an edge to his voice. "There's time to discuss that later."

I grabbed for my water like it was a life preserver. The room was totally silent as I drank, and at one point my teeth clanked against the crystal. The sound seemed to echo off the walls.

Finally, when the glass was empty, I set it down for good and looked up at them.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sutton," I said. "And Mr. Sutton. I hope this doesn't sound rude, but could I please see my room?"

They exchanged a glance.

"Call me Laura," Mrs. Sutton said. "And *Mr. Sutton* is John. We can't be formal. We're all going to be good friends. We're like . . . a team. Working together toward a common goal."

A goal? Okay, was this the part where they sent me to the maid's quarters to fetch the broom so I could sweep the house before they tossed me a crust of bread?

The air dripped with unspoken words. I thought I was imagining it until I glanced over at Mr. Albright, whose cheeks seemed slightly flushed. Then, after a peculiarly weighted look from Laura, he lurched into action, walking to the fireplace mantel and picking up a crystal picture frame. He carried it over and handed it to me. It was so heavy I nearly dropped it. Why did everything rich people own weigh twice as much as normal stuff?

It was a family portrait, taken on a wildflower-

covered hill on a beautiful cloudy day. Mr. and Mrs. Sutton—or should I say John and Laura—stood in the background. In front of them were two young teens: a boy with neatly cut dark brown hair and brown eyes like Laura’s, and a teenage girl who was beautiful enough to be a movie star. She had long waves of golden hair, perfectly chiseled cheekbones, and glinting, intelligent blue eyes.

“That’s our family,” Laura said. Her voice was thin, like she was worried I wouldn’t approve. “Barrett—he’s sixteen. He goes away to school, to St. Paul’s in Thurmond, about a three-hour drive from here. He’s been in Italy with one of his friends, but he flies back in a few weeks.”

“Oh,” I said. “Nice.”

She drew a deep breath. “And that’s Agatha.”

“Does she go away to school, too?”

For a moment, no one answered, but when I looked up at Laura, she smiled almost painfully. “No.”

Oh no. Oh God. She was dead.

Why did *everyone* have to be dead?

The silence that followed was agonizing. Finally, it was broken by Laura’s shaky inhalation.

“Agatha is upstairs,” she said. “Would you like to meet her?”

CHAPTER

4

I FOLLOWED JOHN and Laura down the long wall-papered corridor and into the grand main hall, with its two-story ceiling of ornamental plaster. I was vaguely aware of faces staring at me from paintings, of glass-doored cabinets packed with figurines—a flock of delicate birds, a squadron of tiny ballerinas, collections of vases and teacups and tiny bowls—but they passed into my head and then out, like snapshots of things I’d seen long ago.

Why couldn’t Agatha just come downstairs to say hi? I tried not to dwell on the question, just as I tried not to dwell on the fact that I was pretty sure I’d asked Mr. Albright if the Suttons had children and he hadn’t said yes.

I don’t know . . . maybe he hadn’t said no, either.
But he *definitely* hadn’t said yes.

Two separate sets of stairs wound dramatically up

opposite walls and met on a shared landing. Laura paused at the base of one set of the stairs. "To the right, here, is our bedroom. Our offices, as well—and straight ahead you can see the library. The door behind the stairs leads to the service hall, which you won't be needing to visit."

Shows what you know, Tam, I thought.

She looked over her shoulder. "And obviously, back the way we came, you saw the kitchens, the dining room, and the breakfast room. Plus the drawing room, the music room, and the sitting room."

Did I see those things? It was all a blur.

When the four of us reached the top of the stairs, I could see that the landing branched off into three halls: left, right, and center.

"This way," Laura said, starting straight ahead. "You won't need to use the green wing or the west wing. I keep the doors closed, to save energy. As you can imagine, it's quite a feat to heat or cool a house this size."

I nodded, as if I had spent time imagining such a thing. "Are they all bedrooms?"

"Oh no," she said. "There are anterooms, dressing rooms, bathrooms, the old sauna, a gymnasium, linen storage . . . And several guest rooms, as well."

My head felt like it was spinning. Was this supposed to make sense to me?

"Actually, Margaret, I think I'll go see about your belongings," Mr. Albright said suddenly, reversing course and heading back downstairs.

Coward. I helplessly watched him go.

I tried to ignore the prickling sensation on my skin as we walked farther down the hall, stopping outside the second-to-last door on the left.

John put his hand on the knob, but Laura lightly touched his shoulder. "I like to knock," she said softly. "Even if—well, we should get into the habit anyway."

So he knocked. Then he opened the door.

Laura paused in the doorway and turned to me. "She hasn't always lived in here. We just felt it was . . . simpler."

And then, leaving me to cope with that extremely mysterious pronouncement, she went inside.

I had nowhere to go but after her.

It took me a moment to figure out where I was, but after taking everything in, it hit me: This was a nursery, a room for small children. The wallpaper was an old-fashioned pattern of fruits and flowers arranged in rings around little scenes of woodland creatures hanging out together—bunnies, squirrels, birds, and turtles, all with the creepy wild-eyed expressions people somehow used to think were normal and cute.

There were no cribs or bassinets, but there was a white wooden toy chest carved with stars and moons

against one wall, a few feet away from a small desk with the same pattern carved in its legs.

I looked around the room. Two beds, decorated with the same celestial motif, were pushed up into the corners against the far wall.

"Agatha," Laura said softly, "there's someone we'd like you to meet."

And then I saw her—sitting in a high-backed wooden chair by the window, her body angled so she could look outside.

My throat went dry. A very bad feeling began to tap-dance in my mind.

She didn't turn to look at us, but Laura went on walking toward her, talking as she went. "Her name is Margaret," she said, in a voice as thin and clear as a rod of glass. "She'd like to say hello to you."

My heart and stomach felt like they were in a wrestling match. I told myself, *Calm down, you're making assumptions, you're being ungrateful . . .*

Laura waved me forward, and I followed a few steps in her wake, because what else was I going to do? Run hyperventilating out of the room?

I was only there to meet Agatha, who was apparently not a very social person.

"Margaret has come to live with us," Laura said. She put a hand on Agatha's shoulder.

Up close, I could see that she was as beautiful in

person as in the photo—maybe even more so. Wavy hair, pulled back with a white ribbon, reached almost to her waist, and her face, though clear of makeup, was lovely because of her luminous skin and those killer cheekbones. Her eyebrows were slightly furled, coral lips gently pursed.

I saw all this in profile. She never so much as turned to look at me.

Her clothes were like younger interpretations of her mother's style: a cornflower-blue sweater and a knee-length plaid skirt. Her ears were pierced and she wore small silver hoops. Her shoes were simple penny loafers of smooth gray leather.

Laura gave me a questioning smile, perhaps checking to see if I *was* planning to run hyperventilating out of the room, and I had no choice but to give her a small smile in return. This was a delicate moment and I needed to play it cool. There would be plenty of time later for freaking out.

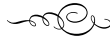
"This is our sweet Agatha," she said to me, letting her fingers trail slowly down a lock of the wavy hair. Then she reached over to a side table for a brush, and smoothed the hair back into place.

Agatha didn't react. She might as well have been in another dimension.

"Nice to meet you," I said to Agatha, fighting the urge to back away.

This delighted Laura. “How *lovely*, Margaret,” she said. “You know, that’s a very empathetic instinct, to speak directly to her. You’d be shocked by how many people treat her like she’s not even here.”

“Yes, very good,” John said, startling me. I’d forgotten he was in the room with us. “Perhaps it’s time for us to have a little talk.”



WE DIDN'T RETURN to the west parlor. Instead, Laura stopped short at the base of the stairs and said, “Oh, let’s talk in the library; the view of the grounds is so nice this time of day.”

So we went into the library, which was a large room almost entirely walled in by overflowing bookshelves. In the center, four olive-green leather chairs faced one another, each with its own little wooden table and an antique reading lamp dipping its nose over the chair’s shoulder. On the far wall of the room, an expanse of windows looked out over a breathtaking vista of velvety green hills backed by silver-pink late-afternoon clouds.

I had the distinct feeling they were trying to distract me with how lovely the property was.

“Please, Margaret, sit,” John said, and I sat in one of the chairs and then tried to make myself appear

fascinated by the walls of books. Whatever they were about to say loomed over us like smog, and I didn't want to look up into their eyes and see that they knew it, too.

Laura began to speak, then stopped herself and coughed a little, as if the words had choked her. There was a long silence. It was so painful that I was compelled to speak.

"So . . . Agatha," I said. "How old is she?"

They both answered at once. "Sixteen," John said, while Laura said, "Seventeen."

They exchanged a tense look, and then Laura sat down in the chair across from mine. "Seventeen," she said again.

"And what's . . . wrong with her?" I cringed inwardly when I heard myself ask the question, but neither Laura nor John seemed bothered.

"Agatha is sick," Laura said. "Up until eight and a half months ago, she was your typical happy teenager. She went out with her friends, went to parties, loved shopping . . . you know."

I nodded as if I could relate. I had no memories of being a happy teenager. Everything in my life before the accident had been wiped into a smeary haze. Maybe I'd been happy. I guess so. But I didn't remember much about it.

"And then, one day . . . everything changed. *She*

changed. It was as if she became a different person. Angry. Disturbed, almost. We were baffled and helpless—we had no idea what could have caused it. And then just as we were getting help, she . . .” Laura’s voice trailed off.

I looked at John.

He swallowed hard. “She . . . shut down. Like someone had flipped a switch. And she became what she is now. She’s very cooperative and doesn’t cause any trouble. She can feed herself, dress herself . . . shower with a bit of help. She can walk. And we *think* she can read, though we’re not entirely sure.”

“She’s not interested in reading,” Laura said.

“What is she interested in?” I asked.

They glanced at each other.

“Nothing, as far as we can tell,” Laura said, her voice straining to sound casual. “Whatever you feed her, she’ll eat. Wherever you take her, she’ll go. Doctors’ appointments, needles, examinations—nothing bothers her. The doctors think it may have been some kind of aggressive bacterial infection that affected her frontal cortex . . . Do you know much about the brain?”

I shook my head and sat back in the chair. *Well, no big deal*, I told myself. *So they have a catatonic daughter. Agatha’s a person with a medical condition. You can live with a person who has a medical condition.*

I had nothing against sick people. When you thought about it, it really had nothing to do with me.

"You're probably wondering," Laura said slowly, "what this has to do with you."

Oh.

"I'm afraid," John said, looking down at his hands, "that our motives for bringing you here weren't *entirely* as Mr. Albright explained. The fact remains, obviously, that we want to provide you with a comfortable home, with people who care about you. We are committed to giving you the same life we are giving our own children—spending money, clothes, even paying for your college education. The debt of gratitude I owe your father is in no way diminished by the fact that this situation is slightly more complex than it seems at first glance."

There had been a little tower of feelings inside me. Something small and fragile, a house of cards made of hope. I'd thought I might be okay for a while—

"But—" he said.

—*but*.

"But we *are* going to ask you for something in return," he said.

The tower imploded. I stopped pretending not to look at them and faced Laura head-on. I could see, suddenly, every flaw in her impeccable facade: wispy hairs rebelling against her sleek mane, fine lines at

the corners of her lips and eyes. The way she held her shoulders so primly square, so purposefully rigid.

"We'd like for you to be Agatha's . . . companion," Laura said. She bit her lip. "The doctors have said that, while she can't be out in public, it's not good for her to live in total isolation. She needs people around, and not just her parents, or even a nurse. She needs . . . a friend."

"A friend?" I asked. "How can we be friends? She didn't even notice I was in the room."

Laura leaned forward. "Of *course* she noticed. I could tell how happy she was to meet you. She was thrilled to have a visitor her own age."

"We don't mean you have to spend *all* of your time with her," John said. "We have other help, and Laura manages most of it on her own. But a fair amount of time, every day—when you're studying, perhaps. Just for her to have the sense of not being without friends. That's all we want." His voice tightened, like there was a fist around it. "If you had known her before—if you had met her before she got sick, you'd understand. She could light up a room. She was so vivacious and charismatic."

"She was very popular," Laura added, sounding proud. "She had so many friends. Unfortunately, when she fell ill, her friends abandoned her. It only took a few weeks for them to stop calling, stop offering to visit."

"To be fair," John said slowly, "the calls and visits may not mean anything to her."

"But they tell us she's still in there," Laura said. "Trapped in her own mind. But for whatever reason, she can't get out. And we can't let her think we've given up on her."

But this was all wrong. Couldn't they see? Agatha, when she was awake, charming, full of zest and fun and sprinkled with popularity like some magical teenage cupcake, wouldn't have wanted me as her friend. I had nothing to offer. Maybe once upon a time we would have gotten along. But now? I was a hollowed-out shell. In some ways I was basically a version of Agatha who could talk.

Laura dug her manicured fingernails into her palm. "They told us to send her away. To a—a facility. They call it a home, but how can a place like that be a home?"

John reached over and patted her knee, and she dialed back her emotion.

"This is her home," she said. "And we'd like for it to be yours, as well. It's not perfect, but life never is."

Now wasn't *that* the truth.

John leaned forward. He was trying to look relaxed, but I could see his forehead twitch. "What do you think, Margaret? Do you want to try?"

The Suttons didn't come right out and say that if I refused to be Agatha's companion, they'd ship me back to Palmer House. In fact, I was pretty sure they didn't think they would. But I knew it would come to that, in time. If I said no, the mere sight of me would be an ever-present reminder of my selfish choice to neglect their darling Agatha, and what was I doing with my time otherwise? Reading? Surfing the internet? Couldn't I do those things with her in the room? It wouldn't take long for them to see me as a greedy person who was taking advantage of their kindness.

It wasn't a yes or no question. It was a stay or go question.

I didn't really want to stay.

But I *really* didn't want to go back to Palmer House.

So I reached up, scratched the back of my neck, and said, "Okay."

And their expressions, like banners advertising joy and relief, actually warmed my heart and made me glad I'd said yes. Maybe I couldn't help them, but it was nice that they thought I could.

There was silence for a little while, during which Laura made a show of looking out the window and smiling.

"It's a beautiful evening," she said. "Should we have dinner on the terrace?"

John jumped slightly, as if he'd forgotten we were there. "No, I can't," he said. "I'm sorry. I have a call at seven. I'll eat in my study."

"Of course," Laura said. "Then Margaret, Agatha, and I will eat in the breakfast room."

"Actually," I said, "people call me Margot."

"Margot," Laura repeated carefully. "With a *t*?"

I nodded.

"How sweet," she said. "Agatha will love it."

I was saved from having to reply by a soft knock on the door signifying Mr. Albright's return. He was carrying my backpack and the plastic bag.

"I can take these up to Margot's room," he said. "Which is it?"

"Oh, the nursery, Tom, of course," Laura said. "She'll be staying with Agatha."