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Chapter 1

Gram is worried about me. It's not just because my sister Bailey died four weeks ago, or because my mother hasn't contacted me in sixteen years, or even because suddenly all I think about is sex. She is worried about me because one of her houseplants has spots.

Gram has believed for most of my seventeen years that this particular houseplant, which is of the nondescript variety, reflects my emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. I've grown to believe it too.

Across the room from where I sit, Gram – all six feet and floral frock of her, looms over the black-spotted leaves.

"What do you mean it might not get better this time?" She's asking this of Uncle Big: arborist, resident pothead, and mad scientist to boot. He knows something about everything, but he knows everything about plants.

To anyone else it might seem strange, even off the wall, that Gram, as she asks this, is staring at me, but it doesn't to Uncle Big, because he's staring at me as well.

"This time it has a very serious condition." Big's voice trumpets as if from stage or pulpit; his words carry weight,

even *pass the salt* comes out of his mouth in a thou-shalt-ten-commandments kind of way.

Gram raises her hands to her face in distress, and I go back to scribbling a poem in the margin of *Wuthering Heights*. I'm huddled into a corner of the couch. I've no use for talking, would just as soon store paper clips in my mouth.

"But the plant's always recovered before, Big, like when Lennie broke her arm, for instance."

"That time the leaves had white spots."

"Or just last fall when she auditioned for lead clarinet but had to be second chair again."

"Brown spots."

"Or when—"

"This time it's different."

I glance up. They're still peering at me, a tall duet of sorrow and concern.

Gram is Clover's Garden Guru. She has the most extraordinary flower garden in Northern California. Her roses burst with more color than a year of sunsets, and their fragrance is so intoxicating that town lore claims breathing in their scent can cause you to fall in love on the spot. But despite her nurturing and renowned green thumb, this plant seems to follow the trajectory of my life, independent of her efforts or its own vegetal sensibility.

I put my book and pen down on the table. Gram leans in close to the plant, whispers to it about the importance of *joie de vivre*, then lumbers over to the couch, sitting down next to me.

Then Big joins us, plopping his enormous frame down beside Gram. We three, each with the same unruly hair that sits on our heads like a bustle of shiny black crows, stay like this, staring at nothing, for the rest of the afternoon.

This is us since my sister Bailey collapsed one month ago from a fatal arrhythmia while in rehearsal for a local production of *Romeo & Juliet*. It's as if someone vacuumed up the horizon while we were looking the other way.

Chapter 2

THE MORNING OF THE DAY BAILEY DIED,
SHE WOKE ME UP
BY PUTTING HER FINGER IN MY EAR.
I HATED WHEN SHE DID THIS.
SHE THEN STARTED TRYING ON SHIRTS, ASKING ME:
WHICH DO YOU LIKE BETTER, THE GREEN OR THE BLUE?
THE BLUE.
YOU DIDN'T EVEN LOOK UP, LENNIE.
OKAY, THE GREEN. REALLY, I DON'T CARE WHAT SHIRT YOU WEAR ...
THEN I ROLLED OVER IN BED AND FELL BACK ASLEEP.
I FOUND OUT LATER SHE WORE THE BLUE
AND THOSE WERE THE LAST WORDS I EVER SPOKE TO HER.

(Found written on a candy wrapper on the trail to the Rain River)

My first day back to school is just as I expect, the hall does a Red Sea part when I come in, conversations hush, eyes swim with nervous sympathy, and everyone stares as if I'm holding Bailey's dead body in my arms, which I guess I am. Her death is all

over me, I can feel it and everyone can see it, plain as a big black coat wrapped around me on a beautiful spring day. But what I don't expect is the unprecedented hubbub over some new boy, Joe Fontaine, who arrived in my month-long absence. Everywhere I go it's the same:

"Have you seen him yet?"

"He looks like a Gypsy."

"Like a rock star."

"A pirate."

"I hear he's in a band called Dive."

"That he's a musical genius."

"Someone told me he used to live in Paris."

"That he played music on the streets."

"Have you seen him yet?"

I have seen him, because when I return to my band seat, the one I've occupied for the last year, he's in it. Even in the stun of grief, my eyes roam from the black boots, up the miles of legs covered in denim, over the endless torso, and finally settle on a face so animated I wonder if I've interrupted a conversation between him and my music stand.

"Hi," he says, and jumps up. He's treetop tall. "You must be Lennon." He points to my name on the chair. "I heard about – I'm sorry." I notice the way he holds his clarinet, not precious with it, tight fist around the neck, like a sword.

'Thank you," I say, and every available inch of his face busts into a smile – whoa. Has he blown into our school on a gust of wind from another world? The guy looks unabashedly jack-o'-lantern happy which couldn't be more foreign to the sullen demeanor most of us strove to perfect. He has

scores of messy brown curls that flop every which way and eyelashes so spider-leg long and thick that when he blinks he looks like he's batting his bright green eyes right at you. His face is more open than an open book, like a wall of graffiti really. I realize I'm writing *wow* on my thigh with my finger, decide I better open my mouth and snap us out of this impromptu staring contest.

"Everyone calls me Lennie," I say. Not very original, but better than *guh*, which was the alternative, and it does the trick. He looks down at his feet for a second and I take a breath and regroup for Round Two.

"Been wondering about that actually, Lennon after John?" he asks, again holding my gaze – it's entirely possible I'm going to faint. Or burst into flames.

I nod. "Mom was a hippie." This is *northern* Northern California after all – the final frontier of freakerdom. Just in the eleventh grade we have a girl named Electricity, a guy named Magic Bus, and countless flowers: Tulip, Begonia, and Poppy – all parent-given-on-the-birth-certificate names. Tulip is a two-ton bruiser of a guy who would be the star of our football team if we were the kind of school that had a football team. We're not. We're the kind of school that has optional morning meditation in the gym.

"Yeah," Joe says. "My mom too, and Dad, as well as aunts, uncles, brothers, cousins … welcome to Commune Fontaine."

I laugh out loud. "Got the picture."

But whoa again – should I be laughing so easily like this? And should it feel this good? Like slipping into cool river water.

I turn around, wondering if anyone is watching us, and see that Sarah has just walked – rather, exploded – into the music room. I've hardly seen her since the funeral, feel a pang of guilt.

"Lennieeeee!" She careens toward us in prime goth-gonecowgirl form: vintage slinky black dress, shit-kicker cowboy boots, blond hair dyed so black it looks blue, all topped off with a honking Stetson. I note the breakneck pace of her approach, wonder for an instant if she's going to actually jump into my arms right before she tries to, sending us both skidding into Joe, who somehow retains his balance, and ours, so we all don't fly through the window.

This is Sarah, subdued.

"Nice," I whisper in her ear, as she hugs me like a bear even though she's built like a bird. "Way to bowl down the gorgeous new boy." She cracks up, and it feels both amazing and disconcerting to have someone in my arms shaking from laughter rather than heartbreak.

Sarah is the most enthusiastic cynical person on the planet. She'd be the perfect cheerleader if she weren't so disgusted by the notion of school spirit. She's a literature fanatic like me, but reads darker, read Sartre in tenth grade – *Nausea* – which is when she started wearing black (even at the beach), smoking cigarettes (even though she looks like the healthiest girl you've ever seen), and obsessing about her existential crisis (even as she partied to all hours of the night).

"Lennie, welcome back, dear," another voice says. Mr. James – also known in my mind as Yoda for both outward

appearance and inward musical mojo – has stood up at the piano and is looking over at me with the same expression of bottomless sadness I've gotten so used to seeing from adults. "We're all so very sorry."

"Thank you," I say, for the hundredth time that day. Sarah and Joe are both looking at me too, Sarah with concern and Joe with a grin the size of the continental United States. Does he look at everyone like this, I wonder. Is he a wingnut? Well, whatever he is, or has, it's catching. Before I know it, I've matched his continental U.S. and raised him Puerto Rico and Hawaii. I must look like The Merry Mourner. Sheesh. And that's not all, because now I'm thinking what it might be like to kiss him, to *really* kiss him – uh-oh. This is a problem, an entirely new un-Lennie-like problem that began (*WTF-edly?!*) at the funeral: I was drowning in darkness and suddenly all these boys in the room were glowing. Guy friends of Bailey's from work or college, most of whom I didn't know, kept coming up to me saying how sorry they were, and I don't know if it's because they thought I looked like Bailey, or because they felt bad for me, but later on, I'd catch some of them staring at me in this charged, urgent way, and I'd find myself staring back at them, like I was someone else, thinking things I hardly ever had before, things I'm mortified to have been thinking in a church, let alone at my sister's funeral.

This boy beaming before me, however, seems to glow in a class all his own. He must be from a very friendly part of the Milky Way, I'm thinking as I try to tone down this nutso smile on my face, but instead almost blurt out to Sarah, "He

looks like Heathcliff," because I just realized he does, well, except for the happy smiling part – but then all of a sudden the breath is kicked out of me and I'm shoved onto the cold hard concrete floor of my life now, because I remember I can't run home after school and tell Bails about a new boy in band.

My sister dies over and over again, all day long.

"Len?" Sarah touches my shoulder. "You okay?"

I nod, willing away the runaway train of grief barreling straight for me.

Someone behind us starts playing "Approaching Shark," aka the *Jaws* theme song. I turn to see Rachel Brazile gliding toward us, hear her mutter, "Very funny," to Luke Jacobus, the saxophonist responsible for the accompaniment. He's just one of many band-kill Rachel's left in her wake, guys duped by the fact that all that haughty horror is stuffed into a spectacular body, and then further deceived by big brown faun eyes and Rapunzel hair. Sarah and I are convinced God was in an ironic mood when he made her.

"See you've met The Maestro," she says to me, casually touching Joe's back as she slips into her chair – first chair clarinet – where I should be sitting.

She opens her case, starts putting together her instrument. "Joe studied at a conservatory in *Fronce*. Did he tell you?" Of course she doesn't say *France* so it rhymes with *dance* like a normal English speaking human being. I can feel Sarah bristling beside me. She has zero tolerance for Rachel ever since she got first chair over me, but Sarah doesn't know what really happened – no one does.

Rachel's tightening the ligature on her mouthpiece like

she's trying to asphyxiate her clarinet. "Joe was a *fabulous* second in your absence," she says, drawing out the word *fabulous* from here to the Eiffel Tower.

I don't fire-breathe at her: "Glad everything worked out for you, Rachel." I don't say a word, just wish I could curl into a ball and roll away. Sarah, on the other hand, looks like she wishes there were a battle-ax handy.

The room has become a clamor of random notes and scales. "Finish up tuning, I want to start at the bell today," Mr. James calls from the piano. "And take out your pencils, I've made some changes to the arrangement."

"I better go beat on something," Sarah says, throwing Rachel a disgusted look, then huffs off to beat on her timpani.

Rachel shrugs, smiles at Joe – no not smiles: twinkles – oh brother. "Well, it's true," she says to him. "You were – I mean, are – *fabulous*."

"Not so." He bends down to pack up his clarinet. "I'm a hack, was just keeping the seat warm. Now I can go back to where I belong." He points his clarinet at the horn section.

"You're just being modest," Rachel says, tossing fairy-tale locks over the back of her chair. "You have *so* many colors on your tonal palette."

I look at Joe expecting to see some evidence of an inward groan at these imbecilic words, but see evidence of something else instead. He smiles at Rachel on a geographical scale too. I feel my neck go hot.

"You know I'll miss you," she says, pouting.

"We'll meet again," Joe replies, adding an eye-bat to his repertoire. "Like next period, in history."

I've disappeared, which is good really, because suddenly I don't have a clue what to do with my face or body or smashed-up heart. I take my seat, noting that this grinning, eye-batting fool from Fronce looks nothing like Heathcliff. I was mistaken.

I open my clarinet case, put my reed in my mouth to moisten it and instead bite it in two.

AT 4:48 P.M. ON A FRIDAY IN APRIL,
MY SISTER WAS REHEARSING THE ROLE OF JULIET
AND LESS THAN ONE MINUTE LATER
SHE WAS DEAD.
TO MY ASTONISHMENT, TIME DIDN'T STOP
WITH HER HEART.
PEOPLE WENT TO SCHOOL, TO WORK, TO RESTAURANTS;
THEY CRUSHED CRACKERS INTO THEIR CLAM CHOWDER,
FRETTED OVER EXAMS,
SANG IN THEIR CARS WITH THE WINDOWS UP.
FOR DAYS AND DAYS, THE RAIN BEAT ITS FISTS
ON THE ROOF OF OUR HOUSE –
EVIDENCE OF THE TERRIBLE MISTAKE
GOD HAD MADE.
EACH MORNING, WHEN I WOKE
I LISTENED FOR THE TIRELESS POUNDING,
LOOKED AT THE DREAR THROUGH THE WINDOW
AND WAS RELIEVED
THAT AT LEAST THE SUN HAD THE DECENCY
TO STAY THE HELL AWAY FROM US.

(Found on a piece of staff paper, spiked on a low branch, Flying Man's Gulch)