

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

There's a photograph of me and my sister in front of a table crowded with bottles of wine and liquor. The photograph is worn and blurred with age, but there we are: my sister with her beautiful red hair, me with my tangled blond hair. We're fancied up; it looks like I'm in some sort of pretty, checkered velvet dress. Maybe it was Christmas and a family party, lots of cousins and aunts and uncles and tumult. I'm four or five in the photo. I know this because my kindergarten picture is the last one of me with long hair. After that, it was cut short, never to be long again.

I think about that photograph a lot. Was it some portent of what my life would someday be? Because a long time ago, I really, really, really, really liked drinking. And I was good at it, until I wasn't. Like it did for Bella in *The Glass Girl*, everything began innocently for me: a game of quarters with cousins and a bottle of champagne at eleven. Like Bella, when that initial buzz hit, I felt like I was home. I could talk and be funny. The world smoothed out in impossibly velvety ways. My anxiety lessened. Like Bella, I became an expert self-medicator and felt like as long as I was doing what I was supposed to be doing (school, work, all the things that are supposed to make a life) and doing it reasonably well . . . well, what was the problem?

The problem is when you have a *problem* and that problem becomes an even bigger problem: where to get alcohol, how

much to get, how to hide it, how to recover from it, how to keep doing it. It's amazing to me now (and sometimes quite funny; people in recovery develop extremely dark senses of humor) the lengths to which I was willing to go to make sure I could keep doing that thing that I thought was helping me function in the world but was actually erasing me, bit by bit. (The anecdote in *The Glass Girl* about a kid duct-taping alcohol to their body to sneak into rehab? Let's have coffee sometime and I'll tell you a story about underage me, a trip to Juárez, duct tape, and rum.)

I've always been fascinated by how addictions begin (a side note here: some studies suggest alcohol addiction is 50 percent inherited; the percentage rises for other addictions). For Bella, it was a bonding moment with her grandmother and an immediate salve for her anxiety, which increased with her parents' divorce, her grandmother's death, the pressures of school, and a bad breakup with her boyfriend. But lots of kids go through those things and don't abuse drugs or alcohol.

But also . . . lots of kids do. Those are the kids Bella meets in rehab. Kids reeling from trauma. Kids neglected or abused by their parents. Kids with anxiety. Like most of them, Bella doesn't think she has a problem; she's just trying to survive. After all, who's an alcoholic at fifteen? Drinking is everywhere. Everyone does it; or at least, everyone does *something*. There are plenty of people who are responsible drinkers throughout their lives.

And lots of people who aren't, or can't be. They deserve our support when they need help, not judgment. Recovery is not a straight line. Recovery can take years and require many efforts. Relapse happens. Like Fran says in this book, you can

have years of sobriety and suddenly the littlest thing will trigger that buried need; something inside you will take over, something you thought you'd successfully outrun.

Oh, let's talk about Fran and Sonoran Sunrise. Bella ends up in a rehab center in the desert. Sonoran Sunrise is run by a team of addicts in recovery doing their best to teach kids to value themselves, confront their fears, earn some successes, believe in themselves. (If you're reading this and you've been to rehab: Bella's experience might not mirror your own. All rehabs are different. This is a work of fiction.)

Can I tell you how much I loved writing Fran's poem? Because I did. Because that poem encapsulates addiction for me: you can smooth out the edges, you can try to drown whatever's inside you that's eating you alive, you can bury shame and anxiety and trauma by dropping shitloads of pills on them or dousing them in alcohol . . . but in the end, those things are still there. You have to face yourself. And that's the toughest part, like Fran says:

*You will still be  
You.  
You must live in spite of all this.*

Bella is at the very beginning of addressing her addiction. I don't know what the future holds for her, but I have hope. By the end of the book, she's trying to commit to a sober life. She has support in friends like Dawn and Amber. She's discovering photography as a way to connect with her grief over her grandmother. She's going to *try*. That's all you can ask of someone, and that's all they can do: try. The other side of addiction



is recovery, and sometimes it really, really, really sucks here, but also . . . there are great and shining moments, and believe me, you want to be able to experience them clearly. You want to be able to see yourself, like Fran says, in all your heart-shaped glory.

*Kathleen Glaszow*



THE  
GLASS  
GIRL

BY KATHLEEN GLASGOW

*Girl in Pieces*

*How to Make Friends with the Dark*

*You'd Be Home Now*

*The Glass Girl*

BY KATHLEEN GLASGOW AND LIZ LAWSON

*The Agathas*

*The Night in Question*

# THE GLASS GIRL

KATHLEEN GLASGOW



**This book contains material which some readers may find distressing, including discussions of alcoholism, self-harm, depression, divorce, drug use, addiction, rehab and suicide.**

A Rock the Boat Book

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*The branches dug into her palms  
She didn't mind the blood there  
She kept going  
Higher and higher  
Leaves in her hair  
Tears in her jeans  
She didn't mind the blood there  
Some fire in her heart  
Pushing her higher  
Away from the shouting  
Away from the stares  
Away from the world  
Strong feet, bare on the branches  
She didn't mind the blood there  
At the top  
In the sky  
Able to breathe  
The shouting gone  
The stares gone  
Leaned her cheek on the tree  
Closed her eyes  
Took it all in  
Washed it all away, away, away  
Such a beautiful world*

*When she dulled it all down  
Smoothed its jagged edges  
Filed it all to ash  
And watched it drift between her fingers  
And then  
A snap, a crack, and she fell  
And fell  
And fell  
The shards of her nesting in the blood there*

EVERY MORNING WHEN I wake up, I don't think I'm going to make it. Or maybe I think that I don't want to make it. I'm heavy with what I did the night before and I'm heavy with everything inside me and sometimes it is just too god-damn much to carry around. I am the kind of tired that makes your bones feel skeletal and clacky. I am the kind of tired that is cement in your shoes, X-ray vest on your chest, bricks tied to your wrists. But I get up. I drag myself out of bed and plant my cement feet on the floor and start the stupidity of routine because that's what it is to be fifteen: your mother will yell at you if you're going to be late for school; your dad will yell at you that he'll be late to work if you don't get a move on. Your teacher will embarrass you in class because you weren't paying attention. Anyone and everyone knocks into you in the hallway, sending you tumbling against the wall, and it isn't even on purpose. It's worse. They just don't even see you. You don't exist. You are not the tiniest blip on their radar of humanity. You'll see that person who took your heart and cleaved it in half and stuffed it in their mouth and swallowed and you want it back and you think you'll never get it and who can live like that? Or you'll remember your grandmother is dead and that's a giant black hole hungry for you, too. And who can live like that? Maybe there will be a shooter drill today and you'll have to huddle under the windows in art. Or maybe it will be real

this time and not a drill. The penguins in Antarctica have plastic in their blood. Fire. Floods. It's hot where you live in the desert and every year it gets hotter. But you have to get up because you're fifteen and that's what you do. Put on baggy jeans. Put on baggy T-shirt. Baggy hoodie. Baggy everything because you need to leave room for your pain to grow. Protect yourself. You've perfected a mask of powder and black eyeliner and a face for people to look at on the outside and maybe it's not really who you are on the inside, but who wants to see that? That part is too much and not enough. That part is all hollows and a gray, dying heart. Everyone says it will get better after all this. When you're older. Like it's a sentence you have to serve. Like it will toughen you up if you can make it. Like it will all be worthwhile. And maybe that is true, but it seems a long way away and a long time to carry that weight and the only reason you can get through the day is because you know what you can do at the end of it to make it worthwhile for a little bit before that comforting wave takes you away and drowns everything else out.

# ONE

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Ten, ten, ten, ten for everything  
Everything, everything, everything  
—VIOLENT FEMMES, "KISS OFF,"



## FRIDAY

IT'S LIKE WE'RE PLAYING spin the bottle, but without the actual bottle. I know exactly how it will go. The imaginary bottle will spin among us in a dizzying way and then slow, eventually pointing to me.

Cherie doesn't want to be the one. She says she's not good at it, even though she's only done it twice. She says she doesn't like the way people look at her.

Amber says forget it. Since she's the only one with a car and a license, she drives and says that's enough. If she has to stay sober, she shouldn't be the one. *I'm the ferry captain*, she says. *I'm navigating this drunken ship, so not me*. She doesn't like drinking, anyway. She tried it once and everything seemed okay; she was giggling along with the rest of us in Kristen's room as we passed Dixie cups of crème de menthe around, but then she vomited in her lap. We had to undress her and put her in the shower, me volunteering to stand in there with her so she wouldn't fall. I shampooed the chunks of vomit from the ends of her long hair as she cried. It's a good thing Kristen's mom was at her boyfriend's for the night. We found the crème de menthe on the very top shelf of a kitchen cabinet, the bottle dusty from neglect. It looked and smelled candyish, so we tried it. We were thirteen; what kid doesn't like candy? Anyway, that was the first and only time for Amber.

Kristen is pressed against the car door, pigtails with red bows fluttering in the wind drifting in the half-open window.

“Bella, you do it. You’re the best. You don’t care,” she says, waving her vape pen.

“That’s so disgusting,” Amber tells her. “Sincerely gross.”

“Everything is gross when you think about it,” Kristen replies. “Who cares?”

In the back seat, next to Cherie, I sigh.

The bottle has landed on me. What Kristen said is what everyone always says to me, for everything, in various versions:

*Bella, you do it.*

*Bella, tell your sister it’s time to get off her tablet and come to dinner.*

*Bella, tell your father he’s late with the check again.*

*Bella, find out if that guy thinks I’m hot.*

*Bella, I didn’t read the book, tell me what happened so I can write this stupid frigg’in’ paper.*

*Bella, Bella, Bella.*

I close my eyes. I wish I was alone, but I’m not allowed to be alone, after Dylan, and I know I should be grateful my friends are trying to take care of me, but sometimes I just want some peace and quiet, no noise, nothing. Just . . . nothing.

Sometimes it feels like I live in a pinball machine and I’m the scratched-up ball, being knocked from one nook to the next, lights blaring, bells ringing. I can never stop the game because I *am* the game.

Amber pulls up to the curb around the block from the store. Some of the red letters on the sign above the store have gone dark, so it reads L \_ C \_ Y L \_ Q \_ \_ R.

Lucky Liquor. Some of the older guys at school call it Lucy Licker. *Me and Lucy Licker hung out last night.* Explaining away puffy eyes, bad breath, as if anyone would actually care they were



hungover. Honestly, no one ever cares what guys do. Only what girls do.

Everyone in the car is quiet, waiting for me.

I make them wait a few minutes longer, like I always do. This is our routine. It never changes.

If Kristen drives, she says she can't do it. If Amber isn't driving, she says it makes her feel weird and she doesn't really like drinking anyway, so everyone forgives her. Cherie never does it anymore because a gross dude once grabbed the pocket of her hoodie and ripped it off. It's round and round, all the time, spin the bottle. It doesn't matter what we play: the pebble of our booze hopscotch always lands on me.

It lands on me because they know I'll do it.

*Bella is always up for adventure. Bella will do it. Bella is good at it. Bella will come through. Bella, come on.*

Kristen and Cherie hold out their money and I listen to them breathe. Amber's eyes are turned to the left, toward the darkness outside the driver's-side window, so I can't see them in the rearview. I think she's mad, but she won't say it out loud.

*Fine, I say. Fine, you cowards.* I snatch the money, warm and wrinkled, from their hands.

*Bella, they say. Bella, you're the best.*

I'm not the best. I'm the worst. But it doesn't matter. All I want right now is to dull the sharpness inside me. The stuff that no one can see. The stuff poking me and making me bleed.

I open the car door and get out.

There are rules you have to follow, things you have to remember.

Like waiting a little bit, but not too long, and not too close to the store or somebody might get suspicious. An older lady in a Lexus, pulling into the store, pretending she's there just

for Arizona Iced Tea and Altoids. Those ladies are righteously judgmental and need to be avoided, even though they'll come out with plastic bags of wine they'll probably finish in a couple of hours. I mean, come *on*. The reason they're at this crappy liquor store in a crappy neighborhood is so nobody they know sees them buying all that wine in their *own* neighborhood. Because they drink *a lot* and don't want anyone to know how much. And there's always some old suit heading inside, frowning at the girl on the sidewalk (me) pretending to check her phone. *You need something?* he might say, his bald head shining. *You lost?* Even though that's not really what he's asking. You can tell because they always look you up and down. You can't pick them. They'll want to walk you back to the car, "make sure you're safe," check out your friends, be pervy. They probably have daughters and would die if they knew their daughters did this. We are all someone's daughter.

You have to choose carefully. It can never be a lady unless she's slightly disheveled and kind of dumpy (flannel shirt, cigs in pocket, flip-flops), which signifies she doesn't give a damn. She might do it, say, *You be careful with your party, now*, as she hands over the bag. *Don't get into any trouble*.

It can be a guy in his twenties, maybe, but not too cool, not too slick, maybe lonely-looking (taped eyeglasses, T-shirt with inscrutable cultural reference, dirty sneakers), but you can't let him think he can walk back to the car with you, or get your number, and you can't talk to him too long or it turns into a *thing*, which did actually happen once and ended with Kristen literally catching the guy's fingers in the car window as she furiously rolled it up, him calling us names, and Amber hitting the gas. We screamed hysterically in the car, everyone's voices blending together in a high pitch, but soon enough we were

buzzed (not Amber) and laughing hysterically. That's the kind of nice thing about drinking: what seemed to be one thing becomes an entirely different thing once you're drunk.

That can also be bad but I'm trying to stay away from bad stuff and thoughts. Like Dylan. Which was definitely a situation where one thing became another, and not in a good way. That was the night I had what Kristen refers to as Bella's Extremely Unfortunate Public Downfall.

Anyway, you need a person who doesn't care. A person going into the store for their own reasons. You want a person who doesn't even bat an eye, just listens to you and takes the money and comes back with their bag and gives you yours and takes the change and goes back to their car or walks down the sidewalk into the night without even saying *goodbye* or *where you partying* or *be safe*, because they've got to get on with the night, too. You need to scope out who is absolutely here for alcohol, who has to have it *now*, like you, and doesn't mind making an extra ten for their trouble.

You have to make it quick and clean. Blunt. I've learned a lot just from the few times we've done it this way.

*Hey, will you buy me a fifth of vodka? You can keep the change.*

You want a guy. Oldish, hair messy, ball cap, band T-shirt under a sports jacket, shuffling along in his low-rise Converse, smelling like cigarettes. Like one of my dad's friends, actually: used to be in a band "or something" and on the wrong side of cool now. Maybe thought he'd be a rock star, but now he's cubicle-bound during the day, dreams dead and gone in a blur of Excel spreadsheets. All he's got comes from this store.

On the sidewalk, I jiggle my toes inside my sneakers, pretending to scroll on my phone but peeking up furtively every few seconds to scope out the situation. If I'm being honest, I

don't actually mind doing this, because I know where I'll end up: feeling better. And a tiny part of me gets a little thrill from it.

Then I see him.

I can tell; he'll do it. This guy doesn't give a damn. Eyes on the sidewalk; doesn't care if I'm cute or hot or not. He doesn't give a crap about me. He's here for the same thing I am: to get drunk.

Right when he's about to pass me by, out it comes.

"Hey, could you buy me some vodka? You can keep the extra money." I make sure my voice is neutral my face expressionless. "A fifth. Not the little bottle."

He doesn't stop to stare at me. Look me up and down like the guys in suits. He's got things to do.

He barely stops. Nods. His hands have ink on them and his skin is dry as he takes the money and says, "Yeah, sure."

There's always that moment when my heart beats too quickly and my hairline prickles with sweat. Will he come out and take off in the opposite direction? I can't chase someone down. Will he come back and walk right by me, give me an evil grin, and say *Stupid kid* as he taps the bags and keeps going? That's happened a couple of times.

I track his progress through the barred glass windows of the store. Chips aisle, Gatorade, beer cooler, liquor aisle, then the counter, his lips moving, his nod to the cashier, the bottles being bagged up, my heart still racing, my palms a little wet.

I text Kristen. *All good.*

She texts back. *Hero.*

The gentle *bing-bong* bell of the door as he pushes it open and walks across the parking lot to the back edge, where I'm standing on the sidewalk, half hidden by a shrub.

He's got the bag in one hand and a case of beer in the other,

the Gatorade shoved in his jacket pocket, its weight making the fabric sag.

“Cheers,” he says, and that’s that, he’s gone, shuffling down the sidewalk.

When I’m back inside the car, Kristen and Cherie cheer, but Amber stays silent.

“Bella!” they shout. “Bella, our queen!”

“First one’s mine,” I say, cracking the bottle and pouring as much as I think I can get away with into my half-empty bottle of Sprite.

It always is.

Amber is looking at me in the rearview mirror, her eyes darkening slightly.

“Jesus, take it easy,” she murmurs.

“It’s Friday,” I tell her. “Just *chill*.”

Kristen’s fingers tremble as she scrolls on her phone. The nights are getting colder and she’s not even wearing a hoodie or anything, just a thin tank top and jeans with holes in the knees. The tips of her ponytails brush against her bony shoulders. “People are hanging at Cole’s,” she says.

At the exact same time, Amber and Cherie say “No” and point to me.

Kristen sighs, shoving her phone in the back pocket of her jeans and jumping up and down to keep warm.

We’re sitting on a picnic bench in the park, just four girls with bottles of Sprite and a bag of cheese popcorn on a Friday night. Innocence and fun. We won’t be able to stay here long. The park closes at ten, and there are some sketchy-looking people drifting around.

But for now we're okay. I take a long sip of my drink, the vodka spreading in my body like a rush of warm water. The feeling I've wanted all day.

"You guys are like hobos, you know, boozing it up in the park," Amber says.

One by one, we giggle.

"What else are we supposed to do, Amber?" Cherie asks. "There's nothing to *do*."

It seems like such a long time ago that we just stayed in, watching movies, practicing cat's-eye makeup with YouTube videos, falling asleep in heaps of blankets and pajamas and messy ponytails, and now here we are. This is what we do. The park or parties or someone's garage. It's what everybody does.

How did it change, and where and when? This is just kind of life now. There was a life before, and sometimes it seems like one day I woke up and everything was different.

I don't really like to think about it, how things changed so suddenly, because then I'd have to think about Laurel, and thinking of her feels like being squeezed by a very large, mean person. So tight that I can't get away and I can't breathe.

"How long is she going to be on social probation anyway? This is getting old." Kristen turns to me. "Can you *just* get over him, already?"

I raise my head and take a long drink of my Sprodka, as Cherie calls it. The combination of sweet and strong feels good as it goes down. I start to loosen.

Sometimes I'm so wound up I think my body is going to crack in a million pieces.

Okay, not sometimes. All the time.

"I'm totally over him," I say, keeping my voice smooth and light. "I've loved and lost and learned my lesson."

“Liar,” Amber says, scrolling on her phone.

“Agree,” Cherie says. “I saw you staring at him yesterday in the courtyard. You totally looked ready to cry.” Her hand on my back is gentle.

The tiniest pain races through my heart when she does that, so I take another sip and move slightly to make her hand fall away.

“You can’t go to any parties until we’re sure you won’t flip out again,” Amber says, looking up from her phone. “That last time was bad.”

“It was kind of funny, in retrospect,” Kristen says. “Bella’s Extremely Unfortunate Public Downfall.” She takes out her vape pen.

“Can we not talk about that, please?” I say, my stomach tightening. The memory of Luis’s party is still hazy. I can only remember blurry patches: The heat of too many kids in too small a house. Music from tiny speakers. The keg in the galley kitchen. Then seeing Dylan, in that sweater of his that I loved, the old green one we found at Tucson Thrift, the one that felt so soft when I leaned my head against it. His hands in his pockets, bending close to that girl, Willow, and the way her hair fell against her cheek as she leaned in to hear what he was saying.

Standing there, kids bumping me, sloshing drinks and yelling, I remembered what Dylan said when he broke up with me in the parking lot of our high school, his eyes traveling anywhere but at *me*, the way he said, “You’re just . . . too much.”

At Luis’s party, I watched as Dylan’s fingers tugged the ends of Willow’s hair, gently. Something splintered inside me.

After, things got weird.

Amber touches my hand. “Hey,” she says. “We’re just looking out for you.”

I nod, breathe in deeply. Take another drink.

“Don’t point that toward me,” Cherie tells Kristen, waving her hands in front of her face. “My mother will kill me if she smells anything weird. I’m already going to have to Febreze the hell out of this jacket.”

Kristen makes a face. “Just take me to Cole’s, pleeeasssse,” she begs Amber. “I’ll get a ride home. Love you, Bella, but we shouldn’t have to suffer just because of your broken heart.”

“Thanks for the support,” I say sarcastically, giving her a thumbs-up.

“Fine,” Amber says. “But Bella stays with me.”

We watch Kristen weave up the drive to Cole’s house. He lives in the foothills, a fancy, sprawling place with huge windows and a glossy, heated pool out back. That might make him sound like some popular rich kid, but only the rich part is right. He’s just a kid whose parents don’t care if he parties. They buy the alcohol and then they leave for the night, and at that point, it really doesn’t matter who you are at school. If you have the drinks and an empty house, people will converge. I don’t even know most of the people at these things and I supposedly go to school with them.

I can’t help it, but my eyes scan the packs of kids outside the house for Dylan.

Cherie says, “Sorry, but I don’t want to waste this night, either,” and jumps out of the car, running after Kristen. My heart drops when I see our bottle of vodka in her hand. I check my Sprodka. Not enough.

I climb into the passenger seat.

Amber looks at me.



“It’s cool,” I say. “If you want to stay. I’ll behave. I will.”

Part of me hopes she’ll say yes so I can look for Dylan.

She shakes her head. “Nah, you’re not ready. I gotta get home anyway. My mom needs the car for her shift tonight and I’m on Lily duty. You can stay over if you want. We can Couch.”

*Couch* means hanging out in her living room, watching movies and YouTube, eating junky snacks, but no drinking. That’s not allowed at Amber’s house.

“Not tonight,” I say. “I should probably just go home, hang out with my mom. I have to work tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

It takes about twenty minutes to get from the foothills back to midtown. Amber takes River Road, which is curvy, like a beautiful roller coaster. Amber is a careful driver, and the car’s headlights illuminate the prickly pears on the side of the road, each one an eerie, spiky green ghost. It feels almost like we’re floating in a dreamworld, a weightless, half-glowing thing.

I sip my Sprodka slowly, savoring it, being careful. I can’t have too much in front of Amber or she’ll get weirded out. She’s being quiet right now, and it’s peaceful.

I feel like if I could just stay in the car with Amber forever, slightly buzzed, feeling warm and safe, not lost, that would be perfect.

But I can’t.

Amber turns down my street.

My brain says: *Lie to her.*

My heart says: *Oh, Bella.*

Casually, I say, “Actually, can you just drop me at Laurel’s? I forgot my mom asked me to check on the house.”

“You want me to wait and take you home? I can come in. I love Laurel’s house. I miss it. I miss her.”

That last part she kind of whispers.

All my friends loved Laurel. Who wouldn’t? She was semi-famous in a way that they didn’t fully understand but that seemed cool. She took us to the mall and bought us earrings at Claire’s and makeup at Sephora and laughed at all the horny things in Spencer’s with us. She asked to listen to our playlists and she actually *did*.

They were all really nice to me after it happened. Of course they were, because they’re my friends, but after a bit, it kind of felt like they moved on, and I was somehow still standing in the barn at Agnes’s staring at my beautiful, cool grandmother in a black-and-white photograph on a table surrounded by candles and incense and sage and cameras and postcards and Polaroids and flower petals, my little sister’s hand tight in mine as our parents argued in the corner.

Those Polaroids. I took them from the barn. People sent them to us from around the world when they heard about Laurel. The test shots she’d do before a session, for lighting, angle, to get people loose.

I have a whole stack of photos of complete strangers in my dresser drawer. Some people wrote on the white borders. *Laurel captured my soul. Laurel saw beauty in me when I saw none.* Some of these people are incredibly famous, or were, and some people are just people, but Laurel made them seem like more than that.

The squeezing is starting and I hold my breath, shove my Sprodka bottle in my backpack so I don’t have to see Amber’s concerned eyes.

“No, I’ll be fine. Text me later? Tell me what you’re watching?” Am I slurring? I don’t think so. I bite my lip a little too hard. The sharpness helps me focus.

“Okay,” she says. “Hey, you know what?”

“What?”

“We should look at the map again soon, go over our savings. I’ve got fifteen hundred now. You?”

The trip. The map on Amber’s wall in her tiny room: red pins for weird attractions, like the World’s Largest Tin Family in North Dakota, constructed entirely out of empty oil drums; blue pins for natural landmarks, like the Grand Canyon, which neither of us has ever seen, even though we only live six hours away. We’ve been planning this since we were eleven and everything was locked down, like maybe someday when we could go out in the world again, we’d really make it worth it. Buy a car together when we were old enough, spend the summer after graduation driving around, sleeping in hostels and camping in tents, seeing weird things and beautiful things and meeting weird people and beautiful people, maybe people who are beautiful because they’re weird, just two girls in a car out in the world, before whatever comes after high school happens. Amber walks the dogs in her neighborhood to make money, scooping poop into bags while holding the leashes of barking terriers and lustrous retrievers. I bus tables at a place whose signature dish is a hamburger with three patties, six varieties of cheese, ten pickles, three habanero peppers, and a crunchy layer of batter-fried onions on top, and if you finish it, you get a bumper sticker that says *I Ate the Pepper Patty at Patty’s Place and Survived*.

I hesitate. “I had a setback. Laptop went haywire. I just have eight hundred now, but I’m being careful with tips, so I’ll make it back. I will.”

That laptop is hidden under a pile of old clothes in my closet at my mom's house, the screen shattered, half the keys missing. My mom refused to buy me a new one, so I used some of the tips I'd saved and went out and got a repurposed one, since it was cheaper.

It was a bad night, the night of Luis's party. Like I said, the details are a little muddled. When I try to catch distinct memories of what happened, they float away from me, like fluff on a dandelion after you blow it. Usually, I remember everything. Well, almost everything; sometimes the memories are like a book with pages missing. But the night at Luis's was different. It kind of felt like I had tipped over into a bottomless well, just falling, falling, falling, and no place to land. And then things just . . . disappeared at some point.

The laptop was a casualty. Obviously, I threw it or something, or hit it, and that's what made my mother wake up and come to my room. The noise. And then she found me and that was that. I was too messed up to pretend I wasn't messed up. So not only are Amber and my other friends keeping me on a tight leash, so is my mom.

Amber smiles. "No worries. We've got plenty of time. Hey, I found another cool place. It's called Bubblegum Alley, and people have been sticking their gum there for *years*, can you imagine? It's in California. It's, like, fifty feet long!"

"That's disgusting and somehow fantastic at the same time," I say. "Excellent addition. Good find."

I step out of the car carefully.

"Bella!" Amber calls.

I turn back, lean down through the open passenger window.

"It'll be okay. The Dylan stuff. You just need some time. Remember how long it took me to get over Caleb?"

I remember. There was a lot of crying, and Coughing, and eventually Amber became Amber again: positive, clear-headed, focused.

But the big difference between Amber and Caleb and me and Dylan is that Amber broke up with Caleb. He didn't dump her. She dumped *him*. She didn't have to stand in a parking lot in front of half the high school while he told her she was *too much*, his friends flanked behind him, like a giant collective, protective squid.

*Oh, shit, she's crying.*

*Dude, we gotta get out of here.*

*Dylan, man, chill, it's done, let's go before she loses it.*

Dylan's Squid Squad had their phones out just in case, though, because there's nothing better than posting a breakup meltdown. I had to stand there and take it, or my freak-out would be posted everywhere within seconds. I had to pretend I was nothing, a ghost, no feelings, no expression, just . . . *Whatever okay be cool Dylan you know whatever have a nice life.*

As I walked away, he said, "Take care of yourself, Bella," unaware that inside, I was disintegrating, shattered by the casual tone in his voice.

"Yeah," I tell Amber, trying to smile, biting my lip again to make sure I don't slur or anything. "I know. I'm good. It's cool."

She hesitates. "Maybe take it easy tonight, okay?"

She means the Sprodka. *Did I slur?*

"Oh, for sure," I say quickly, because the best thing to do here is just to get into Laurel's as fast as possible. "I'm gonna ditch this inside and then head home."

"Love you, B," she says.

"Love you, too, A."

\* \* \*

There's a part of the bricked walkway leading up to my grandmother's house that I always avoid. I've learned to count how many steps it is to her front door. On the fifteenth, I know to swerve off the path and return only when I know it's time for step eighteen.

A little part of me always blanks out at step fifteen and comes back to life at step eighteen. I know nothing will happen if my sneakers land on those particular bricks, but it still seems wrong.

It hurts knowing what happened there.

I exhale deeply as I unlock and open her front door, a blast of warmth hitting me. It's November in Tucson, so the nights dip down to the fifties and the stars hang crisply against the dark blue night sky. My mother still hasn't turned off the gas, or the electricity, or changed anything. Laurel's house is still Laurel's house, five doors down from ours, just like she left it. Like she's going to come back any minute from a trip she forgot to tell us she was going to take.

She's not coming back.

Every time my dad tells my mom it's time to put the house on the market, her face turns ugly with a mix of sadness and anger. *You don't get it*, she tells him. *You just want the money. Haven't you taken enough from me?*

And then my dad shuts down. And then my mom shuts down. And then Ricci amps up and starts hitting, or yelling, or kicking the dishwasher, and then

*Bella, calm your sister.*

*Bella, tell your father it's time to leave.*

*Bella, tell your mother I'm out of here.*

I unlock the front door and walk straight through Laurel's living room, past her pretty vintage robin's-egg-blue velvet couch, past all the pristinely framed black-and-white photographs of my mother as a child that first made Laurel famous, the ones I usually like to stop and look at for a long time, my mother frozen at four, seven, ten, her skin luminous and ethereal in the woods of upstate New York, her body like some sort of marbled girl ghost.

Sometimes I look at my mom now and try to find that girl in the photographs, the one whose eyes stared out fiercely, who seemed not just a girl but an otherworldly entity, brave and powerful even in her smallness.

I'm not sure I see her now in my mom's matted, hastily pulled-back hair, in her eyes, which have seemed so sad for years and even more now that Laurel, her mother, is gone.

I wish I could find her. I feel like we could have been friends, that girl and me.

I head straight to the kitchen, to the pantry, which is also still the same: boxes of tea, cans of soup, bags of rice and pinto beans, canisters of incense and flour.

And the endless bottles of gin and vodka and vermouth and brandy and schnapps.

We don't *have* to go out and shoulder-tap at Lucy Licker. We could come here. My mother never comes here. But I don't want them here. I love Cherie and Kristen, but they'd get loud after a while. Messy. Something about them being here would ruin it, maybe. The stillness.

It's my place.

\* \* \*

I never sit in the living room because that makes me lonely, seeing her empty lounge and the tray table where she'd set her dinner while she watched television. Plus, once, Mrs. Rabinowitz saw the lights on and came over and knocked on the door to see if everything was okay and I had to stand there for like ten hours listening to her yammer about her cat and her bad back, praying the whole time she wouldn't notice I was a little drunk.

"Such a nice girl to watch over her house. She loved you so much." Mrs. Rabinowitz had tiny, kind eyes behind her giant glasses. One hand stroked the thick white braid resting on her shoulder, and when I saw the tears starting, I almost lost it, so I told her I heard my phone ringing and shut the door practically in her face.

You'd think an old lady would like cozy romances or historical stuff, but Laurel liked murder, especially true crime. I feel like after she stopped being a photographer, she should have had a second life as a detective, really, because she could solve half the stuff on *Forensic Files* within the first fifteen minutes. "All people," she used to say, nibbling cheese and crackers, her delicate hands shaking like they always did, "have a darkness inside them. You just need to dig a little."

I pass the hallway leading to the bathroom and the bedrooms. One was Laurel's bedroom, one was for me and Ricci if we stayed over, and the other is where she stored her photo archives. I don't think she liked to go in there much on her own anymore, but sometimes she'd let me look through her files, which I could do for hours. She made a lot of money at one point photographing actors and rock stars. Sometimes she'd tell me little stories about the famous people she met.

I walk to the kitchen to sit at the long, old-fashioned



wooden lab table she found at 22nd Street Antique Mall, her favorite place to wander for hours before driving got hard and she couldn't get there. She and I would play Scrabble on this table, or backgammon or Go Fish.

"Just a bit," she'd say, pouring me some schnapps. "Something sweet for my best girl."

She never gave me too much. Just enough to send prickles of pleasure down my spine. Enough to make me somehow feel *better*.

Our last game of Scrabble is still on the table.

I get a glass, some ice, and pour myself some vodka, add some Sprite from a can, sit at the table, look at our leftover words.

*Apothecary. Hidden. You. Hush.*

I pull my phone from my jacket pocket.

My mother's texted me three times. I ignore her.

Kristen and Cherie are posting from the party. Hazy lights behind them, glossy faces. I zoom in. Is Dylan there in the background? I don't see him.

I check his Stories, my heart pounding.

Nothing.

Once, he told me I was the coolest girl he'd ever known. Pressed me against the lockers at school and kissed me. Didn't drop my hand when his friends came around.

I told Laurel about Dylan before my mom even knew. She shifted letters on her tile holder and looked at me.

"Romantic love is dizzying and wonderful and frightening and lovely, but don't let it obscure you." Her sea-blue eyes were serious; the charcoal eyeliner lopsided at the corners. It was hard for her to apply with her hands so shaky, but she was determined to do it, every day.

My grandmother was an artist; everything she said was fascinating and strange to me. I didn't understand what she meant then, and I'm not sure I do now. Maybe I will when I'm older.

My stomach tightens. I wish she was here at this table with me right now. I wish I'd never—

I close my eyes and drink.

Move letters around on my Scrabble tile holder. I could spell *douse*.

Once, I asked Laurel about my mother's father and who he was and where he was and she just said, "Sometimes you can't take people to the places you need to go."

I wonder if Laurel was ever *too much*.

She always liked me just as I was.

I drink drink drink.

It's so quiet here. It's the only quiet place I know in my world of noise.

I brush my teeth before I leave, careful to rinse off the toothbrush. I wash the glass, dry it, put it back in the kitchen cabinet. I pop three mints just in case. Pinch my cheeks to feel more alert and less woozy. Fill up my Sprodka bottle again, shove it in my backpack. Make sure the lights are off and the door is locked and everything is just so. Outside, the cool air feels good on my skin, sobering me up a little.

When I'm two houses from ours, I can already hear Ricci, long whines and cries of "*Nooo*. I don't want to."

I take a deep breath as I open the front door. I'm so glad I have something inside me to blunt all this, just a little.

My mother is standing in the living room, her face exasperated and pink, hands on hips, as my little sister rolls around on the floor, clutching her tablet.

I close the door. Mom swivels toward me. “Where were you? I texted you.”

The house smells like overcooked noodles. Macaroni and cheese is the only thing Ricci will eat right now, and she likes the noodles so soft they practically dissolve on her fork.

“With Amber. I told you this morning.”

She sniffs the air. “What is that smell? Were you smoking?”

I drop my backpack on the ground.

My brain says: *Tell her it was Kristen. She doesn't like Kristen anyway.*

“Kristen vapes. I don't. You know that.”

“Was there drinking? We made a deal, Bella.”

Ah yes, the deal after Luis's party: no drinking, no parties.

“Nope. Want to smell my breath?” I open my mouth.

My mother considers me.

If you want to pretend nothing is amiss, pretend nothing is amiss. Like you have nothing to hide. I'm a good girl. I get good grades. I do a lot around the house. I have a job. I keep everything together. I've survived death and divorce. I had a little blip with my Unfortunate Public Breakdown, that's all.

I keep my eyes on my mother's face as I say, “Mom, come on. Honestly?”

“You know how I feel about Kristen.”

I shrug. I'm safe. My mother's dislike of Kristen will override any suspicion of me. Also, she's too frustrated with Ricci right now.

Her shoulders sag. “I need help here. She only lasted half the day at school today and I have a deadline. I can't miss it. Can you . . .”

My mother is a writer for a weird daily radio show based in another state. In seven years, she's never even met her boss in person, just exchanged emails and phone calls and Zooms

with the producer. They send her ideas for stories, like about aliens in Roswell, or how a famous Hollywood actor has cryonically preserved his mother in his mansion. She researches all the theories and news stories and then writes up the content, and the radio host, some guy named A. W. Stryker, does shows about them. I like listening to it—it’s a trip. He gets dozens of calls for every episode, and believe me, like Laurel said, people really do have darkness in them. And a lot of time on their hands. It’s a very popular show, but the host is weird and sometimes switches up the topics at the last minute, leaving my mom to work and write late at night. I know she wants to do something else, like what she’ll sometimes call “real writing,” but it’s the only job that lets her deal with Ricci.

Ricci is a lot of work.

“Ricci!” I shout, standing above my sister. “Ten hut.”

She stops rolling and pops up, standing at attention, tablet wedged under one arm.

“Sergeant Sister, are you ready for bed?”

“No, ma’am, no.”

“Sergeant Sister, will you be ready for bed after thirty minutes of cat videos and three Oreos and one glass of milk? Major Mom is on work detail and must be released or it’s the stockade for her. Do we want that to happen to Major Mom?”

“No, we don’t.”

“Do we understand each other, Sergeant Sister? This is your captain speaking.”

My sister straightens her shoulders. “I am ready, Captain.”

“Then forward, one two, one two.” I make marching steps, pointing down the hall to her bedroom.

My sister, blond ponytail swinging, Olaf pajamas sagging around her butt, one-twos down the hall. I follow her.

“Ricci, did you fake being sick at school again so you could come home?” I ask softly, once we’re in her room. “You know Mom needs time to work.”

“Sorry,” she says, rubbing her face.

Ricci has a hard time at school. My parents moved her to a new one, where they have beanbags and forts for quiet time, but you also have to pay for it. At least twice a week, Ricci complains of stomach trouble, or a headache, and either my mom or my dad, depending on who has us that week, has to stop everything and go get her. Each time, she miraculously improves the instant she gets home and my parents have an argument over the phone about what’s wrong with her and whose fault it is and meanwhile I’m screaming inside my head *It’s because our grandmother died and you got divorced and every day when she leaves the house she’s afraid something else is going to change while she isn’t looking and she is seven years old and can’t take one more awful thing.*

Ricci hasn’t told me this, of course. It’s just a theory of mine.

“Okay,” I say. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

“What are the topics tonight?” I ask my mother as I walk into the kitchen, pour Ricci some milk, gather Oreos in a napkin.

My mother’s got deep shadows under her eyes and looks like she didn’t get a chance to shower today. She shuffles work papers on the kitchen counter. “A woman in Arkansas saw Jesus in her grilled cheese sandwich and a man in Italy is marrying the Leaning Tower of Pisa.”

“I hope they’ll be very happy together.”

“Unless Pisa turns out to be a nagging shrew.”

I run my finger over the texture of the Oreos. That’s something my dad said to my mom last year, before he moved out.

I don't know if he knew I could hear them fighting. They'd closed their bedroom door and lowered their voices to harsh whispers. *Look who you've become, Diana. A nagging shrew.*

"Go to work, Major Mom."

She gives me a grateful smile and moves to the kitchen island, sitting on the stool and popping open her laptop.

My sister is under the covers. I hand her the napkin with the Oreos and climb in, settling against her. I sniff her neck delicately. "You need to take a bath, Ricci."

"Water is itchy. Do the room!"

I sigh, getting back out of the bed, and Ricci finds the videos she wants to watch on her tablet. You might think being in front of a screen before bed would make her more antsy, but watching animal videos actually quiets her. She loves animals. If she had her way, our house would be a zoo.

Ricci needs everything a certain way before bedtime, so I walk around the room, carefully pushing her Minecraft figures back into place on her desk, arranging her coloring pencils by color (white, black, yellow, blue, green, pink), tapping the fish tank three times to say goodnight to the plump goldfish fluttering inside, checking the inside of the closet for monsters. The last thing is tucking her blanket around her tightly, under her legs and torso, but not over her arms. She needs those out. She calls it being "burritoed."

"Sergeant Sister, the quarters are clean. May I enter the bunk now?"

She nods happily. I lie down next to her.

"You need to let Mom work, you know," I tell her. "It's

her job. You have thirty minutes, then lights out, okay? I have things to do.”

My voice might be a little sharper than I wanted, because Ricci’s face squinches.

“Sorry,” she whispers.

I make sure my voice is softer this time. “It’s fine. But this is it, okay?”

She nods.

I set the timer on my phone.

Cue cat and hedgehog videos, the crunching of Oreos and slurping of milk, and soon my sister’s eyelids are fluttering. I smooth her hair. Sometimes I forget that she’s only seven and the world is hard for her. Seven seems so long ago, I can hardly remember it, just flashes of carefully reading aloud to my teacher and making sure my math sheet was neat and clean. I gently slip the tablet from her fingers and she snuggles into me.

I’m struggling to stay awake, but I don’t want to fall asleep just yet, so I pinch my thigh through my jeans because I want to go to my bedroom after this, lie down on the floor and be alone and put on my headphones, finish my Sprodka while staring at the fairy lights strung along my walls and forget Dylan, and forget everything, alone and drifting and dulled in my very own private ocean.