

Part One: Spring

Chapter 1

The light outside the window is haloed around the street lamp, and I am sitting in the police station, on one of the metal folding chairs that line the front window. A fan whirs in the corner, moving the sultry air from one side of the room to the other. I am so alone—not so much different from every other day, really. Except it is. Today is different, and nothing will ever be like it was again.

“You can come home with me,” says Leslie McGill, laying her large, square hand on my arm.

I am here because this is where they brought me after they put up the yellow CAUTION tape and began to process the scene. The crime scene. The scene where my mother had ended her life, or somebody had ended it for her. Suicide is murder—ending a life. No difference. I remember being asked months ago if she had suicidal tendencies, and at the time, all I could think was: don’t we all? Back when I had sliced my own little lines of self-destruction into my skin, writing the words that defined my life on the arches of my feet, into the hollows below my ankles, and finally, just angry, wordless lines in the soft flesh of my arms.

I do not look up at her, this large, soft woman, but stare at the dark skin of her square hand, her clean, trimmed fingernails showing pink. She is fabulously big and round, in a tunic that may have been originally designed as a tent. It is every color imaginable all at once. Her black tights stretch taut over the thick muscles of her calves. I think I have seen her somewhere before, but don’t have the mental capacity to figure out where. “I don’t want to go home with you. I have a home,” I say, looking away from her hand and back through the window, out into the night. The glow of headlights pool in the street as a car passes.

“Yes. I know you have a home, but it looks like your home is going to be tied up for a little while.” She pauses, lifting her hand off my arm, folding it over the small manila envelope that sits across her lap. My name is written in the top left corner. Alison Hayes. Written in black pen, with such force that I can see where the paper has dented with the passage of the pen. “You’ll just be with me until we find your family.”

“I don’t have any family,” I say. I’ve been through this already, with the policeman who brought me here. “I don’t have any family. I don’t know my father. I don’t know who my grandparents are or if my mother had siblings.” It rolls off my tongue, foreign, their word, not mine.

“Yes. That’s what they told me. I am sorry,” she says in a quiet voice, resonant with sympathy, and I glance up at her for maybe the first time. She has blue eyes, large and slightly protruding, circled in dark by the skin around them. The dark color fades to a ruddy mocha down her cheeks, and her full lips are compressed to a tight line. “I am very sorry.”

I believe her. Her eyes are pooled with liquid, and for a second, I think the liquid will spill over and run down her cheeks. But she blinks several times, looking away from me and out the window, watching as a car moves slowly past, then back. When her eyes latch to mine again, they are dry. “Won’t you come with me? I have a cozy room with a nice little bed in a room you’ll have to yourself.”

“When will I be able to go back home?”

“I don’t know, honey. It depends on what the police decide.”

My mother flashes through my mind, as she was when I went into her room, her mouth open, her skin gone to gray. I close my eyes against the vision and feel my brows rising into my forehead. When I have forced the vision out, I open my eyes again and stand up. “Then let’s go.” I stride to the door and turn back to her as she pushes herself up from the seat, holding one leg out straight, like the knee is stiff and sore. “Can we go by and get some clothes on the way?” I ask. It isn’t really clothes I want; it is my backpack that has all my money stashed inside.

“No. They won’t let us in until they are done.”

I nod, not surprised, and push the door open and step out into the night. She leads me to her van, a burgundy Town and Country, and I go around to the passenger side and let myself in. When she settles her bulk into the driver's seat, the van squats with a groan. She inserts a key attached to a collection of dangling fobs that jingle and clink together. She squares her bottom more comfortably in the seat, and the engine roars, taking off and down the street for the whole two minutes it takes to arrive at her house on Polk Street. I almost laugh when she pulls into the drive and turns off the car. I had thought I was going somewhere else, somewhere in another town, Mattoon, Arcola, Tuscola or Arthur, anywhere else. I didn’t think I would end up just three or four blocks south of where we started. I could have walked here in as much time as it took her to get settled into her seat and out again.

The McGill house looks like a little cracker box ranch, stretching out the length of the yard. The living room, which we now step into, is long, connected and open to the dining room. A hall heads off in the other direction toward the two bedrooms at the end of the house. I take my shoes off and follow her as she walks down the hall, flipping on lights as she goes. “Mr. McGill,” she says, “is a fireman. He won’t be home until day after tomorrow.” She motions for me to follow her, and I do, my socks sinking into the soft, blue carpet. “You know my son?” she asks, and I shake my head. “Tommy. He’s maybe a year younger than you. You sixteen?” I nod, but really I’m seventeen today. Today is my birthday. “You a sophomore?” I nod. “He’s a freshman. You can meet him tomorrow.”

“Tommy McGill?” I ask, because there is something in the name that seems familiar. “Does he play soccer?” I am rewarded with a radiant smile that lights up the hallway.

“That’s my Tommy.” The pride oozes from every pore of her body, and I wonder what it would have been like to grow up with this woman as Mother. “He’s pretty good with that soccer ball.”

“Seems to be.” I only vaguely recollect the things I have heard over the last year, about how the soccer team was excelling and how it was due to this scrawny little freshman named Tommy McGill. I feel my mouth spreading in a smile, unable to contain it in the glow of this woman’s pride.

“You hungry?” she asks. We have reached the end of the hall, and she opens a door to the left and illuminates a room, dressed in pink roses from ceiling to bedspread. The blue carpet stops at the door and is transformed into a mauve-pink version, still just as soft.

I shake my head, taking in the roses peeking from the skirt of a dressing table and from the bowl of the lamp. “I guess you like roses,” I say, laughing just a little.

“Charlotte likes roses.”

“Who is Charlotte?”

“She was a girl who stayed with us for a time.” She smiles. “She has moved on now. Got a family of her own.” She pauses, a small smile on her face, “I’ve just never had the heart to change it.”

“Where did she go?”

“Oh, she’s just over in Mattoon. You’ll probably get to meet her.” She says “probably” like “prolly” and I decide right then and there that I am going to like this woman. I am going to like her and I am going to let her be kind to me, because apparently that is the thing she does best. Suddenly, I am weary on my feet; I’m so tired. She makes her way through the room, showing me that there are several options for clothing in the drawers and hanging in the closet. She tells me that she’ll be up for a while more, in the living room, if I need anything. I almost want to give her a hug, which may be the strangest sensation I’ve ever had, but I contain myself.

“Thank you for coming to get me.”

“Oh, darling,” she says, “we all need somebody to come and get us from time to time.”

She leaves me alone in the rose encased room and I open drawers, looking at the pajamas and sweatpants that fill them. The scent of lavender rises from the drawers and when I finally choose something to put on, I sit for a very long time just holding it up to my face, breathing in the clean of somebody else’s life

