



The Night
We Lost
Him

a novel

Laura
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#1 New York Times Bestselling Author of
The Last Thing He Told Me

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The Night We Lost Him

A Novel

Laura Dave

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*To Josh and Jacob,
They're all for you*

The way the high-wire walker
must carry a pole
to make her arms longer
You carried me I carried you
through this world

—Jane Hirshfield

Prologue

He knew any biographer would decide that the story of his life could be summarized by this: When Liam Samuel Noone began accruing his fortune, the first thing he did was buy a piece of land as far away from his hometown as he could possibly get.

Of course, there were places technically farther from Midwood, Brooklyn than the Central California Coast. But Liam felt reborn the first time he arrived in Carpinteria. His pulse quieted, his chest released—a small, yet seismic shift. He drove through the secluded beachside town in a haze—the world around him windy and soulful, cypress trees sweeping every which way, a messy canopy.

Liam was in the early days of taking over the company, and he'd flown out west to meet with a potential investor. They were in discussions to build a boutique hotel together eight miles up the road in Santa Barbara—a hillside retreat, private and luxurious, with forty-eight stand-alone cottages, winding mountain trails, outdoor fireplaces, and cobblestone walkways. A stone-wrapped restaurant.

He was meeting with the investment partner, a former classmate named Ben, at Ben's oceanfront vacation home on Padaro Lane. They sat outside on the back deck, eating poached eggs and studying blueprints, Liam's suit no match for the chill coming in off the ocean. He drank extra coffee, refusing Ben's offer to borrow a coat.

At some point, Liam looked east and spotted a cottage, perched cliffside at Loon Point. It was lit up by the rising sun—the incandescent yellow ricocheting off the bluff front, landing on its white rock and citrus grove. The rose gardens.

The property encompassed a large parcel of land, five exquisite acres, endless ocean views, the Santa Ynez foothills in the distance.

An old woman lived in the one structure on the property, a Craftsman bungalow, a white wooden sign by the front door with the bungalow's name, WINDBREAK. Liam knocked on the front door and asked her what she wanted for her home. She said she wanted to live there peacefully without people knocking on her door asking her what she wanted for her home. He smiled at her and apologized. *I can't afford it anyway*, he said.

Which was when she let him in.

Now, more than three decades later—how can that much time just *pass*?—he walks over to the northeast edge, his favorite vantage point, the ocean expansive beneath him, the ancient olive trees and the wind and the sharp breeze, wild all around him.

He takes a deep breath, swallows the tears pushing in from the back of his throat as he remembers that day.

He isn't normally so nostalgic and has never been much for fantasy. But he feels himself doing it: pretending, again, that he is still that riled-up young man, knocking on an old woman's door, wanting to start a new life. As opposed to the older man he now is, an empty house behind him, no one to

answer how he'd gotten it wrong. How he'd ended up here, emotional and weary, but willing to say out loud (to finally say out loud) all the things he wished he could undo. It isn't regret, exactly. It isn't anything as clichéd or inactive as regret. No. It is penance.

That is why he keeps playing the moments back on an unforgiving loop: the moments he is trying to return to, to relive. The first moment at eighteen, then at twenty and twenty-six and thirty-seven and forty-five. Fifty-eight. Sixty-one. Sixty-eight. In the ways that matter, it is all the same moment, isn't it?

The same choice. You move toward your destiny or you move away.

He digs his feet into the white rock, a light rain starting to fall. When exactly did this place become a referendum on what he'd failed to do? It would be easy (and probably wrong) to name that shift as a recent occurrence. But however it happened, slowly and at once, Windbreak is now the place that reminds him of himself the most. The irony of that! Instead of the escape he assumed it would be, a reprieve from the childhood home that he'd run from, it has turned out to be the opposite. It is his time capsule.

He turns and looks at Windbreak, the small Craftsman, all the lights on: two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a galley kitchen. A house, a cottage, that is smaller than the guesthouses on any of the neighboring properties, let alone the eight-thousand-square-foot main houses. Everyone assumed he'd knock the small house down eventually, build anew. This bungalow, perfect and misplaced, wasn't nearly big enough to house a large family. It wasn't big enough for his families certainly.

But it wasn't as simple as building a larger home. He was always nervous to bring his daughter here when she was small, and then the boys when they were. The palisades were no security from the drastic edges. That cliffside was too precipitous, eighty feet down to the ocean and the rock and the California coast. What if they fell? What if any one of them with their small quick legs and ready elbows went over the edge before he could catch them?

That's what he told himself, at least. Is it even the truth? Or is the truth simpler? He always liked to be here alone. Alone or with her.

He peers out over the edge, the waves lapping eighty feet below, the bluffs jagged and beautiful and strong. And he knows that, no, it isn't just selfishness. He's certain of that. He's certain that he was trying, in his way, to protect his children. Even when he failed (and he doesn't kid himself, he failed far more often as a father than he succeeded), he did want to protect them.

When, mere moments later, Liam Samuel Noone is pushed over that edge, airborne and pivoting, this is in fact his last thought. For all his faults, his very last thought.

Better me, than them.

— Part I —

The architect works in the territory of memory.

—Mario Botta

Open Houses

“So what do you think? Can it even be salvaged?” she asks.

I’m standing in the doorway of a five-story brownstone in Brooklyn, perched at the edge of Cobble Hill. In my professional opinion, the brownstone is remarkable as it is: an extra-wide with steel windows, original banisters, wainscot ceilings some twelve feet above. And an eighteen-hundred-square-foot rooftop garden, which looks over a lush and lovely corner of Henry Street.

I turn to look at Morgan, my client. “What do you mean by *salvaged*, exactly?”

“Well, you’re the expert, but the place obviously needs to be gutted. It’s dumpy, you know?”

Morgan shakes her head, apparently waiting for me to catch up. She is beautiful and young (twenty-five, maybe twenty-six) and wearing the same blue knee-high boots that she’s been clad in the few times we’ve met in person. Each time, she has seemed increasingly unhappy about being Brooklyn-bound. I don’t know if it’s this brownstone she doesn’t like, or the idea of leaving Manhattan in general. But this move is clearly not one she is excited for.

She is moving to Brooklyn, she keeps telling me, because her fiancé, a business guy of some sort, is pushing for it. He has decided he wants to leave Tribeca and their North Moore Street loft and flee to the outer borough. I have yet to meet Morgan’s fiancé, even though he was apparently the one who insisted that Morgan hire me. He wants to get married on the rooftop here. And, while they’re at it, to completely renovate the five floors beneath it.

“When do you think it can all be done?” Morgan asks.

“Which part?”

“You know. All of it.”

She motions to indicate the entire brownstone as she clips down the steps, down into the sunken living room.

“Let’s start by talking about what you’re imagining,” I say. “Then we can get more granular and make sure we’re on the same page in terms of schedule and planning. Sound good?”

“Sure...”

She sits down on the sofa, seemingly accepting this plan. But then she pulls her phone out of her bag—already bored with the details we haven’t begun to discuss. She taps into Instagram, her five hundred thousand followers staring back at her. And she is lost to me.

I start unloading the brownstone’s original blueprints anyway. The previous owner is an architect I’ve known since graduate school. He spent the better part of three years remodeling this space for his own family, not anticipating that his wife’s job would send them to Colorado shortly after they moved in. There are, of course, many ways to design a space, but I can feel the attention he paid to every detail—the way the living room is relaxed and spacious, the rounded corners, the olive tree balancing out the fireplace, the natural light coming in from three directions.

You may think of noteworthy architecture as constructing the most novel, sculptural buildings. But I lean first and foremost into how people's environments can positively impact the quality of their lives. I am focused, most fundamentally, on building spaces that can be healing. I specialize in neuroarchitecture. Most of my clients are interested in this particular architectural approach, which is all about designing spaces to benefit overall well-being.

Whatever Morgan means by *dumpy*, I doubt that she is interested in exploring this type of calculus.

"Is your fiancé still joining or is it just going to be the two of us?" I ask.

Instead of answering, she holds her phone out, in selfie position, and puckers up. I step out of camera view as quickly as I can.

"He should be coming."

This is when her fiancé walks through the front door, the winter wind following him in. He is good-looking—tall and broad with a strong jaw, intense eyes. He is older than Morgan, nearly thirty, and wearing a sports jacket, with a hoodie peeking out beneath it, making him look younger than he is.

He is also, it turns out, my brother.

Sam nods in my direction. "What's going on, Nora?"

"You've got to be kidding me," I say.

Morgan sits up and looks back and forth between us. "Do you two know each other?" she asks.

"Nora's actually my sister," he says.

"Your *sister*?"

I smile, motion between them. "Do you two know each other?"

It's a little unfair. I can count the number of times I've been in the same room as Sam. We didn't see each other often while we were growing up. We see each other even less now that we're adults. I'm the only child from our father's first marriage. Sam is one of two kids from his second. You could argue that Sam and his twin brother, Tommy, are the reason there was a second marriage—their mother's surprise pregnancy a small tip-off to the fact that my parents' relationship wasn't exactly working.

"*Sam*. What the fuck?" Morgan says. "You didn't think this was something you should've mentioned?"

I'm not sure if the "this" she's referring to is my brother hiring me without telling her who I am—or whether she's referring to Sam even having a sister in the first place. I'm leaning toward the latter, but before Sam can answer her, Morgan's phone buzzes with an incoming call. She mumbles that it's their wedding planner. Then she disappears into the hallway to talk with her.

I turn back toward Sam, who gives me a smile. "It's good to see you," he says. "How have you been?"

"Why do you have to be so shady?" I ask.

His smile disappears.

"I've been trying to reach you for over a month. You haven't returned any of my calls. But I'm the shady one?"

He has called me—that part is true. Since our father died, I've avoided his voice messages and a couple of cryptic emails. Our father hadn't wanted a funeral, so I've avoided seeing my brother in person too.

The truth of the matter is that I don't want to get into anything with Sam. History has shown me it's best not to get into anything with him—or anyone from my father's second family. From my father's third family, for that matter.

"I need to talk to you," he says.

"You bought an eight-million-dollar brownstone to have a conversation?"

"It's a pretty important conversation."

I start reaching for the blueprints, putting them back in their tubes. "I'm late for my next client."

"Morgan actually had you block out the rest of the afternoon, so..."

I don't often take on residential projects like this brownstone anymore. But Morgan had paid a hefty retainer up front—the kind of retainer that gives me the latitude to do more of the work that I love the most, the kind of retainer that allows her to request extra hours of my time.

"Happy to void the check," I say.

"Can we just sit and talk for a few fucking minutes?"

"I thought I made my position clear," I say. "I don't want Dad's money. I didn't want it when he was alive. I certainly don't want it now."

"I'm not here about that," he says.

I look up, meet his eyes. A familiar hazy-green. My father's green. They have the same eyes, same light hair, same skin. It stings, but I force myself to push that down.

It's easier when I remind myself that my brother is only ever here about that. Even on the other side of our shared loss, he's certainly not suddenly interested in us having a relationship. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is fine. I have no interest in having a relationship with Sam. And I have even less interest in having anything to do with my father's company.

As I replied when I forwarded Sam's latest email (Subject line: **We need to talk**) to my father's lawyers, Sam can have anything of our father's he wants. They all can.

"Take care of yourself, Sam," I say.

I start walking toward the front door. The door that will lead me outside and down the front steps and away from here.

"Would you wait?"

I keep walking and I'm almost free. I'm free of him again and his family again and the world of them again.

And then, my hand on the doorknob, my brother says one thing. The only thing that would stop me.

"Nora. Dad's death?" Sam calls out. "His fall..."

I stop moving. I don't take my hand off the doorknob. But I do stop moving.

"It wasn't an accident."

You Can't Pick Your Famil(ies)

The last time I saw my brother in person was more than five years ago.

We were at a dinner party to celebrate our uncle Joe's birthday. Joe is technically our father's cousin, but they grew up like brothers. They were raised together, went to high school together, lived together after they finished college, and spent the last several decades working together. If brothers tended to bicker, though—especially brothers who were as connected as they were—they managed to be mostly exempt from conflict. They weren't only brothers. They were best friends.

My father was hosting Joe's birthday dinner at Perry St, a restaurant just off the West Side Highway, one of his and Joe's longstanding favorites. Sam was seated next to me, at the far end of the table. He had recently started working for our father, and he was overseeing the rollout of a new property in Hawaii: a small beachside enclave on the North Shore of Kauai.

Sam flew back to New York for the dinner—which he seemed unhappy that my father had insisted he do, particularly because Tommy was spending most of the meal away from the table, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk on a work call.

Sam kept eyeing Tommy through the window. Tommy also worked for our father. He had been working for our father longer than Sam had. I couldn't tell from Sam's expression whether he was jealous that Tommy had a reason to not be at that table. Or whether Sam was feeling competitive that Tommy had a reason to be away from the table that didn't include him.

Either way, I was more interested in talking to Grace, who was seated on my other side.

"Your father tells me that you just opened your own shop?" she said. "That's really exciting."

I'd always liked Grace. She was quiet and whip-smart and had been working with my father since I was a little girl. She had been working there nearly as long as Joe—she and Joe, my father's two most trusted advisors. From the way my father described it, Joe helped him keep the trains moving on time, while Grace was more of a creative partner. This may be why it felt like she genuinely cared that I had managed to procure enough of my own client base to pay off my school loans (a BA in neuroscience and visual arts, followed by a MArch degree), leave my corporate architecture job, convert a garage in Cobble Hill into an open-floor studio, and become the principal at my own firm.

It felt like an accomplishment to have done that without a financial assist from my father. He'd certainly helped support me while I was growing up, but once I left home, it was understood I would do it on my own. I wasn't a martyr, but it was important to me to be self-made, and it was important to my mother. It was how she'd raised me. *Too much money causes trouble*, she used to say. And my father respected that this was how she (and later I) wanted to do it.

Grace certainly knew this, which was probably why she leaned in and gave me a smile, happy to see me on the rewarding end of a long road.

"We've started exploring a property on the Nayarit Peninsula," she said. "Has your father

mentioned?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“There are some geological complications, but it’s quite special. We want to integrate the landscape, really lean into sustainability and health. Not just giving a nod to it but taking a page from a resort your father just visited in Asia. Creating a wellness clinic, having a medical director on staff. Obviously that will all start with the property design...”

I smiled. It didn’t feel like a coincidence that Grace was raising this a few weeks after my father came to a trade talk I gave about the impact of built environments on health solutions and longevity. That was what my father did—he saw an opening to involve me, and he wanted to step into it.

“Anyway,” she continued, “your father was hoping that might hold some interest for you?”

I could feel the air shift, Sam suddenly tuning in. “Grace, you know Nora here isn’t interested in our little company...”

I looked over at Sam. “True,” I said. “I am, however, interested in speaking for myself.”

Then I turned back to Grace. This was a conversation I’d had with my father on many occasions, the answer never shifting from a hard and fast no. But I appreciated it all the same. I was grateful my father took pride in my work, in how I approached it. Even if I wanted to stay away from his.

“I’m fully committed at the moment,” I said.

“You sure? We’d all really love to do this with you.”

“I am. But thank you for asking.”

Grace nodded, happy to drop it, especially because it was my father’s mission to make me feel included, not hers. Also, because he was now motioning for her to come and join him and Uncle Joe at the other end of the table.

“I’ll be back,” she said.

And, with a squeeze to my shoulder, she was up and out of her seat, leaving me alone with Sam.

“Your own shop, huh?” he said. “Congratulations.”

The way he lingered on *congratulations* felt loaded, like he meant the opposite.

I forced a smile and busied myself smoothing out my dress. I’d come straight to the dinner from a client meeting, so I was still wearing my work clothes: a button-down dress and structured loafers, a corduroy blazer. My long hair pulled back in a loose bun. I could feel Sam’s judgment in the way he was eyeing me (in his suede jacket and Chelsea boots), like he’d decided I was somehow too dressy and not dressy enough.

I met his gaze, unbothered. My mother had modeled for me early on that the quickest route to unhappiness was to pay too much attention to anyone’s disapproval, particularly someone that you barely knew.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Dad said you were up for a big commission in Red Hook?” Sam said. “An art gallery or something?”

It was a primary school. I’d been working on it for the last two and a half years—collaborating with a team of engineers, educators, and neuroscientists. The school was right off the water, with large windows and open classrooms, everything centered on natural light and fresh air, on spaces for running and free movement. *The Record* had recently featured it in a cover story on buildings at the

forefront of neuroarchitecture and education. And the response to my work on it—the positive reception—was a main reason why I had the freedom to become the principal at my own firm.

“Something like that,” I said.

“How much money will you bring in a year?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

Sam kept his eyes on me. “I’m just wondering, from a business point of view.”

“Well, from a business point of view,” I said. “That’s not really any of your business.”

“Until you take Dad up on his offer...”

I looked out the window at Tommy—as if he was going to save me. But he had his back turned to me, rendering him completely oblivious to my stare. As if he would be showing up for me, in this instance, if he was paying attention.

I turned back to Sam, ready to ask him what I’d ever done to make him think I had any interest in following that path. In his job. In his life. In any of it. But then I reminded myself it wasn’t about me. Like everything Sam seemed to be concerned about, it was about himself.

“It’s cool with me if you do want to come in,” Sam said. “Contrary to what you might think, I’m not against you.”

“Why would you be against me? You barely know me.”

He picked up his tumbler of bourbon, tilted it in my direction. “That, right there, is reason number one.”

“There is just no way, he didn’t just *fall*,” Sam says now.

We’ve moved into the kitchen, the kitchen Morgan wants to strip down—despite its floor-to-ceiling windows that look out into the yard, its newly pitched ceilings, a playful hunter-green Bertazzoni range.

The center island separates us. Like an agreed-upon safety zone. Or an impenetrable moat.

Sam stands at one end of the island and I lean against the other end. Neither of us sits down on the countertop stools, keeping open an easier path to leave. Morgan has left already. She is on her way back into Manhattan and a cocktail at Gramercy Tavern with her wedding planner. At this moment, for many reasons, I envy her.

“So what do you think happened exactly?”

“That he was helped,” he says. “Over the edge.”

“Like pushed? Intentionally?”

“That’s usually how pushing works.”

I turn away from him. My father’s cottage, Windbreak, was his retreat, his private place. It wasn’t unusual that he’d been there alone that night. He was often alone there. And there had been a joint investigation with local law enforcement and the internal Noone Properties security team. Their findings were in line: It was a rainy night. The cliff’s edge was slick. There wasn’t anything notable to suggest foul play or self-harm. He simply slipped.

“I was told there was an investigation,” I say.

“Yeah. There was.” Sam shrugs, like he is unimpressed by this. By that investigation. By any of its conclusions. “And it must have been really thorough to be put to bed less than a month later.”

I take my brother in, his jaw clenched, his shoulders too tight. Sam was a ball player while he was growing up, an ace pitcher. And when I see him focused like this, intense and determined, it takes me back to that version of him. To the photograph of Sam on the pitcher’s mound on my father’s desk. To Sam’s game face. His devotion. His talent.

Sam was the starting pitcher for Vanderbilt the year they won their D1 championship. Shortly after graduation, he was drafted in the second round by the Minnesota Twins. But on his way to practice the second week, a midwestern rainstorm surprised him, as did a student driver—whose driving academy car plowed straight into Sam’s Jeep. Sam’s wrist went through his windshield and was punctured in two places. His MLB career over before it started.

“Look, Sam, I get that you’re concerned here...”

“Doesn’t sound like you do.”

“Well, do you have any evidence at all that someone else was there with him that night?”

“No,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean anything. You know how Dad was about privacy. There was limited security at Windbreak, except by the front gate. And just because someone didn’t come through the front gate doesn’t mean they didn’t get in there another way. I can think of several.”

“Sure. But... who would even want to do this?”

“Do you remember our father?” he says.

It’s a joke and it’s not. Even staying far removed from my father’s business affairs, I knew enough to know that he had a particular way of doing things, which made him respected by some, but disliked by others. Professionally. And personally. His supporters called him exacting, his critics exhausting. A famous story was that the day before he was set to open a property in Napa Valley, just outside of St. Helena, my father did his final tour of the grounds and was unhappy. There was a new construction project on Highway 29 that you could hear from the main pool. So he pushed back the opening by six months (until said construction would be completed), turned over the entire staff, and personally rebooked every opening-weekend guest at other luxury hotels in Napa Valley, footing the bill himself. Also, of course, he offered a complimentary weekend stay at the hotel as soon as he did open the doors. Once the pool was quiet.

Sam walks around the island and reaches into his messenger bag. He pulls out a blue folder, places it on the countertop in front of me. There’s a thick pile of papers inside. He motions for me to open it.

“What’s this?”

“The most recent copy of Dad’s will, among other things. Did you know he changed it earlier this year?”

I shake my head. I didn’t.

“I don’t know what it said before he made the alterations or why he made the changes. None of the lawyers will tell me anything, obviously.”

I look up at him, processing what he’s suggesting.

“Is there something weird in there now?”

“Not on the face of it,” he says. “No.”

“Then I don’t follow you.”

“My working theory is that there may have been something weird in there before he decided to change it.”

“That’s quite a theory. What does Tommy think about this?”

“At the moment, I’m not so interested in what Tommy thinks about anything.”

I clock the edge in his tone. “What’s that mean?”

He shakes his head, ignoring the question. “You’ve got to admit the timing is odd,” he says. “Dad changes his will for the first time in decades and then he just dies not too long after...”

I look down at the blue folder. I’m unwilling to open it just yet, as if doing so will make Sam think I’m agreeing with him. I don’t want to make any sudden moves that put us on the same side of this, a side he seems to be clinging to for air.

“How do you even know this?” I ask instead. “About the lawyers?”

“I have access to his calendar. Dad and Uncle Joe had eight meetings with Dad’s wills and estates team over the course of several weeks. That much time? That had to have been... a reimagining.”

He looks like this proves something, but all I can think is that a series of meetings with lawyers and an altered will (a will that could have been altered for a variety of reasons) sounds less like evidence of a murder plot and more like a grieving son reaching wildly for answers. A grieving son who is also a corporate heir.

“Look, Nora, before you go thinking that I’m stirring up trouble or trying to settle some personal score...”

I put my hands up in surrender, even though this is exactly what I was thinking.

“I wasn’t,” I say.

“Sure you were,” he says. “But, just so you know, there is no score for me to settle. If anything, opening this whole thing up will only cause problems.”

“How’s that?”

“Dad walked us through what he was planning. It was copacetic. No party fouls. We got equal shares. Me and Tommy...”

Tommy, who is two minutes older than Sam but has always behaved as though it is closer to ten years. He earned a JD/MBA straight out of college, married his long-term girlfriend, and rose to the top ranks at Noone Properties, all before his thirtieth birthday. Tommy, who, my father would joke, came out looking more like my twin than like Sam’s. The two of us have the same dark hair and eyes, same long legs and athletic build. It must have somehow come from our father’s side of the family, even though you’d think both of us looked more like our mothers. But the resemblance is undeniable—something identical weaving through our facial structure—the turnup around our mouths, our cheekbones. Though any other similarities, at least those that are readily apparent to me, end there.

Not that Sam and I are any more similar. Sam, who is standing in front of me now. Sam who, since that car accident, has been (how did my father put it?) *seeking*. He coached baseball at a boarding school in Connecticut, moved to Bristol for an assistant job at ESPN, wound his way back to New York City and our father’s company, working alongside Tommy.

For reasons I’m not unsympathetic to, the look that he is wearing now—suspicious, unhappy—isn’t that far off from how his face has looked the other times that I’ve seen him since his baseball career ended.

What isn't clear to me, just yet, is why he is so beside himself. Is it really because he thinks something happened to our father? Or is he searching for something else?

"The point is," Sam says, "he left me and Tommy in charge."

He shrugs. And I can see he is surprised that our father left the company to him as well as Tommy. A little surprised, and a little proud. He shouldn't be. My father would never have picked one son over the other. That's not who he was. If I were the least bit interested, he would have figured out a way to include all of us.

"That's great, Sam," I say.

"Sure. I mean, he's keeping Uncle Joe in the top job for consistency," he says. "It's a logical choice, but Uncle Joe is just in there for a finite period. Fourteen months. Just to keep investors calm, keep the operations steady. This was all specified by Dad. Then Tommy and I will run it together."

"So what's the problem? Isn't that what you want?"

"Ask me when Dad discussed this all with us? His plans for the company, the details..."

"When?"

"Eight days before he died."

I must wear my surprise on my face because Sam leans into it. "Strange, isn't it?" he says.

"Or a coincidence."

"A pretty strange coincidence."

I meet his eyes. "Sam, I just..."

"You just what?"

"I get that this is really tough. It's tough for me too. But just because you have a feeling..."

"It's more than a feeling," he says. "If you want to try and push back on the timing with the will stuff, chalk it up to a coincidence, fine. I can't prove it's more than that yet. But that doesn't change the fact that Dad had been acting weird."

"Define 'weird.'"

"Distracted, absent. Coming into the office less. You know how close to the vest Dad held everything, but he wasn't himself."

He looks at me like that seals it. But all it seals for me is that my brother has convinced himself that something was going on with our father. Something that, if he's right, I knew nothing about. It nearly breaks something open in me to think that I didn't know. To think *why* I didn't know. And I start to feel it, a drumbeat pulsing in my head, the skin growing tighter and hotter behind my ears.

"You still haven't said one thing that contradicts what happened on the cliff that night," I say.

He nods. "Except for the one thing I don't need to say to you."

I look away, the drumbeat getting louder. Windbreak was my father's favorite place. It was his private refuge. He knew it like the back of his hand. And rainy night or not, too much bourbon to drink or not, moonless sky or not, would he really forget where the rocks started? Where they ended?

"Would you just do me a favor?" Sam says. "I'm flying out to Windbreak tomorrow to look around. To meet with the caretaker and the local police. See what I can figure out about what exactly happened that night."

"What's the favor?"

"Come with me."

I laugh out loud, before I can stop myself. “To California? No. You’ve got to be kidding.”
“I’m not.”

He isn’t. And I start to double-down on my rejection of this plan when I see it in his eyes, those familiar eyes: his supreme discomfort to be standing here in front of me, asking me to be there for him. It stops me cold, partially because it’s the first time I’ve seen that color on him—the first time he’s been vulnerable with me. But also because of how it alters his face: the lines around the eyes creasing, his brow tightening up. Suddenly, like a magic trick, it feels like I’m standing in front of my father.

I open the folder, flipping through that thick pile of papers inside, neatly paper clipped and labeled. Color coded.

“The will’s reading was two weeks ago,” Sam says. “If you called anyone back, you would know he left it to you.”

I look up. “Left me what?”

“Windbreak.”

I try not to react, my face heating up and turning red. One of my last conversations with my father comes hurtling back. He called to ask me to come out to Windbreak with him. I didn’t often go to Windbreak with my father, only a handful of times while I was growing up, a handful as an adult.

It was the place where he went to recharge, where he often went alone. So I was surprised to get the phone call from him. A little less surprised when he said: *I could use your opinion on renovating it. I’m looking to make some changes.* But I put him off. I said I was too busy with work. And I was busy. But, if I were being honest with myself, it hadn’t been just about work. I was mad. I hadn’t wanted to give that to him.

I feel a pulling in my chest, my breath trying to quell it.

“Sam...”

“If you’re right, if this is totally crazy, we can be on the red-eye back tomorrow night.”

He thumbs the folder, turns to the first page. He points to the single piece of paper, on which the itinerary is written down.

“Would you just think about it?” he asks.

I stare at the information: airport, flight number, the flight time in bold. **10:08 AM.** Tomorrow.

I close the folder, ready to say no.

But when I look back up, my brother is gone.

Sheet Music

I get on the subway, decide to head home.

As I squeeze onto the corner bench, I pull out the blue folder. I start scanning the documents. There's a copy of my father's will inside, the deed for Windbreak, the full-page obituary that ran about my father in the *New York Times*. All the documents that, because there was no funeral, I haven't had to deal with yet. My father had wanted to be cremated, his ashes strewn across Windbreak, down into the ocean below. My uncle Joe was in charge of making that happen.

I pull out the obituary (the one document I've read before), focusing on the photograph of my father. He is standing with his arms crossed, on top of a lush hill, the San Ysidro mountains behind him. The caption beneath the photograph reads: **Liam Samuel Noone, founder of Noone Properties & Resorts, photographed at his flagship hotel, The Ranch.**

An asterisk next to my father's name explains that Noone is pronounced like *noon* (the time of day) and not pronounced like *no one*. Though I know my father liked that people got the pronunciation wrong sometimes. No one Properties, he would joke, could not be a more perfect place for someone to escape.

I zero in on the photograph. My father looks strong, intense, and virile against the mountainscape backdrop. I'm not surprised that this is the photograph the newspaper used.

For one thing, The Ranch was the first property my father built after taking over at Hayes. And this photograph leans into the mythical quality of how my father's rags-to-riches rise is often described: Liam Noone—Brooklyn born, the only child of Irish and Russian immigrants, his father a plumber and his mother, his father's bookkeeper. He was the first person in his family to go to college, let alone to attend Yale University, where he graduated first in his class, earning his MBA at Columbia, where he finished in the top three. He took a job out of business school as director of operations at Hayes Hotels, a family-run hotel chain, which had five properties along the eastern seaboard. An odd choice, one might think, to sign on to such a small operation. An odd choice to accept a position that was far less lucrative than entry level at any of the big consulting firms or fancy investment banks courting top students to join their ranks.

But when Walter Hayes died, he left the company to my father ("the most exacting young executive he'd worked with in forty-eight years"), and my father went on to turn the small hotel chain into the most sought-after luxury boutique hotel and resort empire in North America, with thirty five-star properties, eighteen more under development. A billion-dollar empire. He turned himself into an extremely wealthy man in the process. A mostly anonymous wealthy man who never wanted to be the face of the brand, letting his properties speak for themselves. Each of the properties had its own special story—its own mythical creation that made people long to stay there. Bucket-list properties that, Liam Noone worked tirelessly to ensure, always overdelivered.

I turn to the final paragraph, which focuses on his personal life, highlighting that my father was survived by his children: a daughter from his first marriage, two sons from his second. There is no mention of his wives (or that they are now all ex-wives), which would be how my father wanted it.

My father was married three times, but he never really got divorced. Even after he and my mother ended their marriage, he was a regular fixture in our home. He worked hard to maintain a good relationship with me and insisted it should disrupt my life as little as possible. It wasn't just about me, though. My father wanted to disrupt his life—all of his lives—as little as possible too: the one with my mother and me that he was trying to preserve; his life with his new family; and, then, the even newer family. It was as if he could only figure out a way for his worlds to never intersect; then he could get to pretend he was solely living inside each of them.

I wasn't mad at him for this when I was growing up, especially because I had a great childhood with my mother in Croton-on-Hudson. I loved our farmhouse and my friends at school—and the history of our small, sweet town, including the pride everyone took in the downtown “dummy light,” the oldest traffic light in America. And I didn't have any desire to spend my time shuttling to my father's New York City penthouse and a stepmother who didn't have any interest in my being there.

But even though I loved my father deeply, there is a limit to how much time you can spend with someone who compartmentalizes his life like that. We had our Friday nights together—and if I had a school play, or an art show, he rarely missed it. But he spent much of the rest of the time with the other families and in the other worlds he occupied. Worlds he also needed to tend to, worlds that I knew almost nothing about.

This is one of the reasons why I'm stunned at how hard a time I'm having on the other side of his death. I'm not surprised that it's painful, of course, but it's staggering how deeply whipped I feel by the loss of him.

It doesn't help that my father and I had been somewhat estranged since my mother's death last year. After losing her, I started pulling away from him. Maybe part of that was that she died so suddenly—a shocking bicycle accident during her usual evening ride home. A trucker who failed to turn on his headlights. And, like that, I was without her.

My most important person. My mother used to say that what you did first thing in the morning was what was most significant to you. While I was growing up, the first thing we did every morning was spend time together. Real time, uninterrupted time. We'd get up with the sun still rising and take a walk into town, head to the bakery when it opened for fresh bread and hot chocolate, sit by the river and talk. We kept up our morning ritual even after I left home for college—my phone ringing every morning at 8:00 a.m., wherever we both were in the world, so we could talk on my way to class, and then on my way to work, so we could have a coffee together, if a virtual one. So she could provide me with her daily reminder that nothing mattered to her more than I did.

How can I explain the way her loss has broken me open? I've spent the last fourteen months looking at my phone at 8:00 a.m. every morning, willing it to ring again.

In the aftermath, I've felt a twisted, long overdue loyalty to her—especially when it came to my father. I couldn't seem to help it, even knowing my mother never harbored any anger toward him herself.