



A NOVEL

fly away

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fly away

+



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*To Benjamin and Tucker, who show me every day what love really means;
To my family—Laurence, Debbie, Kent, Julie, Mackenzie, Laura, Lucas,
and Logan. Each of you keeps me going, and our memories tell our story;
And, lastly, to my mom. We miss you.*

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Also by Kristin Hannah
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*The charm, one might say the genius of memory, is that it is
choosy, chancy, and temperamental:
it rejects the edifying cathedral and indelibly photographs
the small boy outside, chewing a hunk of melon in the dust.*

—Elizabeth Bowen

*If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream,
and have a flower presented to him as a pledge
that his soul had really been there, and if he
found that flower in his hand when he awoke—Aye!
What then?*

—from the notebooks of S. T. Coleridge

Prologue

She is in a restroom stall, slumped over, with tears drying on her cheeks, smearing the mascara she applied so carefully only a few hours ago. You can see instantly that she doesn't belong here, and yet here she is.

Grief is a sneaky thing, always coming and going like some guest you didn't invite and can't turn away. She wants this grief, although she'd never admit it. Lately, it's the only thing that feels real. She finds herself thinking about her best friend on purpose even now, all this time later, because she wants to cry. She is like a child picking at a scab, unable to stop herself even though she knows it will hurt.

She has tried to go on alone. Really tried. She is trying still, in her way, but sometimes one person can hold you up in life, keep you standing, and without that hand to hold, you can find yourself free-falling no matter how strong you used to be, no matter how hard you try to remain steady.

Once—a long time ago—she walked down a night-darkened road called Firefly Lane all alone, on the worst night of her life, and she found a kindred spirit.

That was our beginning. More than thirty years ago.

Tully and Kate. You and me against the world. Best friends forever.

But stories end, don't they? You lose the people you love and you have to find a way to go on.

I need to let go. Say goodbye with a smile.

It won't be easy.

She doesn't know yet what she has set in motion. In moments, everything will change.

One

September 2, 2010

10:14 P.M.

She felt a little woozy. It was nice, like being wrapped in a warm-from-the-dryer blanket. But when she came to, and saw where she was, it wasn't so nice.

She was sitting in a restroom stall, slumped over, with tears drying on her cheeks. How long had she been here? She got slowly to her feet and left the bathroom, pushing her way through the theater's crowded lobby, ignoring the judgmental looks cast her way by the beautiful people drinking champagne beneath a glittering nineteenth century chandelier. The movie must be over.

Outside, she kicked her ridiculous patent leather pumps into the shadows. In her expensive black nylons, she walked in the spitting rain down the dirty Seattle sidewalk toward home. It was only ten blocks or so. She could make it, and she'd never find a cab this time of night anyway.

As she approached Virginia Street, a bright pink MARTINI BAR sign caught her attention. A few people were clustered together outside the front door, smoking and talking beneath a protective overhang.

Even as she vowed to pass by, she found herself turning, reaching for the door, going inside. She slipped into the dark, crowded interior and headed straight for the long mahogany bar.

"What can I get for you?" asked a thin, artsy-looking man with hair the color of a tangerine and more hardware on his face than Sears carried in the nuts-and-bolts aisle.

"Tequila straight shot," she said.

She drank the first shot and ordered another. The loud music comforted her. She drank the straight shot and swayed to the beat. All around her

people were talking and laughing. It felt a little like she was a part of all that activity.

A man in an expensive Italian suit sidled up beside her. He was tall and obviously fit, with blond hair that had been carefully cut and styled. Banker, probably, or corporate lawyer. Too young for her, of course. He couldn't be much past thirty-five. How long was he there, trolling for a date, looking for the best-looking woman in the room? One drink, two?

Finally, he turned to her. She could tell by the look in his eyes that he knew who she was, and that small recognition seduced her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I don't know. Can you?" Was she slurring her words? That wasn't good. And she couldn't think clearly.

His gaze moved from her face, down to her breasts, and then back to her face. It was a look that stripped past any pretense. "I'd say a drink at the very least."

"I don't usually pick up strangers," she lied. Lately, there were only strangers in her life. Everyone else, everyone who mattered, had forgotten about her. She could really feel that Xanax kicking in now, or was it the tequila?

He touched her chin, a jawline caress that made her shiver. There was a boldness in touching her; no one did that anymore. "I'm Troy," he said.

She looked up into his blue eyes and felt the weight of her loneliness. When was the last time a man had wanted her?

"I'm Tully Hart," she said.

"I know."

He kissed her. He tasted sweet, of some kind of liquor, and of cigarettes. Or maybe pot. She wanted to lose herself in pure physical sensation, to dissolve like a bit of candy.

She wanted to forget everything that had gone wrong with her life, and how it was that she'd ended up in a place like this, alone in a sea of strangers.

"Kiss me again," she said, hating the pathetic pleading she heard in her voice. It was how she'd sounded as a child, back when she'd been a little girl with her nose pressed to the window, waiting for her mother to return. *What's wrong with me?* that little girl had asked anyone who would listen, but there had never been an answer. Tully reached out for him, pulling him close, but even as he kissed her and pressed his body into hers, she felt herself starting to cry, and when her tears started, there was no way to hold them back.

September 3, 2010

2:01 A.M.

Tully was the last person to leave the bar. The doors banged shut behind her; the neon sign hissed and clicked off. It was past two now; the Seattle streets were empty. Hushed.

As she made her way down the slick sidewalk, she was unsteady. A man had kissed her—a stranger—and she'd started to cry.

Pathetic. No wonder he'd backed away.

Rain pelted her, almost overwhelmed her. She thought about stopping, tilting her head back, and drinking it in until she drowned.

That wouldn't be so bad.

It seemed to take hours to get home. At her condominium building, she pushed past the doorman without making eye contact.

In the elevator, she saw herself in the wall of mirrors.

Oh, God.

She looked terrible. Her auburn hair—in need of coloring—was a bird's nest, and mascara ran like war paint down her cheeks.

The elevator doors opened and she stepped out into the hallway. Her balance was so off it took forever to get to her door, and four tries to get her key into the lock. By the time she opened the door, she was dizzy and her headache had come back.

Somewhere between the dining room and the living room, she banged into a side table and almost fell. Only a last-minute Hail Mary grab for the sofa saved her. She sank onto the thick, down-filled white cushion with a sigh. The table in front of her was piled high with mail. Bills and magazines.

She slumped back and closed her eyes, thinking what a mess her life had become.

"Damn you, Katie Ryan," she whispered to the best friend who wasn't there. This loneliness was unbearable. But her best friend was gone. Dead. That was what had started all of it. Losing Kate. How pitiful was that? Tully had begun to plummet at her best friend's death and she hadn't been able to pull out of the dive. "I need you." Then she screamed it: "*I need you!*"

Silence.

She let her head fall forward. Did she fall asleep? Maybe ...

When she opened her eyes again, she stared, bleary-eyed, at the pile of mail on her coffee table. Junk mail, mostly; catalogs and magazines she

didn't bother to read anymore. She started to look away, but a picture snagged her attention.

She frowned and leaned forward, pushing the mail aside to reveal a *Star* magazine that lay beneath the pile. There was a small photograph of her face in the upper right corner. Not a good picture, either. Not one to be proud of. Beneath it was written a single, terrible word.

Addict.

She grabbed the magazine in unsteady hands, opened it. Pages fanned one past another until there it was: her picture again.

It was a small story; not even a full page.

THE REAL STORY BEHIND THE RUMORS

Aging isn't easy for any woman in the public eye, but it may be proving especially difficult for Tully Hart, the ex-star of the once-phenom talk show *The Girlfriend Hour*. Ms. Hart's goddaughter, Marah Ryan, contacted *Star* exclusively. Ms. Ryan, 20, confirms that the fifty-year-old Hart has been struggling lately with demons that she's had all her life. In recent months, Hart has "gained an alarming amount of weight" and been abusing drugs and alcohol, according to Ms. Ryan ...

"Oh, my God..."

Marah.

The betrayal hurt so badly she couldn't breathe. She read the rest of the story and then let the magazine fall from her hands.

The pain she'd been holding at bay for months, years, roared to life, sucking her into the bleakest, loneliest place she'd ever been. For the first time, she couldn't even imagine crawling out of this pit.

She staggered to her feet, her vision blurred by tears, and reached for her car keys.

She couldn't live like this anymore.

Two

September 3, 2010

4:16 A.M.

Where am I?

What happened?

I take shallow breaths and try to move, but I can't make my body work, not my fingers or my hands.

I open my eyes at last. They feel gritty. My throat is so dry I can't swallow.

It is dark.

There is someone in here with me. Or *something*. It makes a banging sound, hammers falling on steel. The vibrations rattle up my spine, lodge in my teeth, give me a headache.

The sound—crunching, grinding metal—is everywhere; outside of me, in the air, beside me, inside of me.

Bang-scrape, bang-scrape.

Pain.

I feel it all at once.

Excruciating, exquisite. Once I am aware of it, of *feeling* it, there's nothing else.

* * *

Pain wakens me: a searing, gnawing agony in my head, a throbbing in my arm. Something inside me is definitely broken. I try to move, but it hurts so much I pass out. When I wake up, I try again, breathing hard, air rattling in my lungs. I can smell my own blood, feel it running down my neck.

Help me, I try to say, but the darkness swallows my feeble intent.

OPENYOUREYES.

I hear the command, a voice, and relief overwhelms me. I am not alone.

OPENYOUREYES.

I can't. Nothing works.

SHESALIVE.

More words, yelled this time.

LIESTILL.

The darkness shifts around me, changes, and pain explodes again. A noise—part buzz saw on cedar, part child screaming—is all around me. In my darkness, light sparks like fireflies and something about that image makes me sad. And tired.

ONETWOTHREELIFT.

I feel myself being pulled, lifted by cold hands I can't see. I scream in pain, but the sound is swallowed instantly, or maybe it's only in my head.

Where am I?

I hit something hard and cry out.

ITSOKAY.

I am dying.

It comes to me suddenly, grabs the breath from my lungs.

I am dying.

September 3, 2010

4:39 A.M.

Johnny Ryan woke, thinking, *Something's wrong*. He sat upright and looked around.

There was nothing to see, nothing out of place.

He was in his home office, on Bainbridge Island. Once again, he'd fallen asleep working. The curse of the working-from-home single parent. There weren't enough hours in the day to get everything done, so he stole hours from the night.

He rubbed his tired eyes. Beside him, a computer monitor revealed a frozen image, pixilated, of a ratty-looking street kid sitting beneath a crackling, on-and-off neon sign, smoking a cigarette down to the filter. Johnny hit the play key.

On-screen, Kevin—street name Frizz—started talking about his parents.

They don't care, the kid said with a shrug.

What makes you so sure? Johnny asked in the voice-over.

The camera caught Frizz's gaze—the raw pain and angry defiance in his eyes as he looked up. *I'm here, aren't I?*

Johnny had watched this footage at least one hundred times. He'd talked to Frizz on several occasions and still didn't know where the kid had grown up, where he belonged, or who was waiting up at night for him, peering into the darkness, worrying.

Johnny knew about a parent's worry, about how a child could slip into the shadows and disappear. It was why he was here, working day and night on a documentary about street kids. Maybe if he looked hard enough, asked enough questions, he'd find her.

He stared at the image on-screen. Because of the rain, there hadn't been many kids out on the street on the night he'd shot this footage. Still, whenever he saw a shape in the background, a silhouette that could be a young woman, he squinted and put on his glasses, peering harder at the picture, thinking: *Marah?*

But none of the girls he'd seen while making this documentary was his daughter. Marah had run away from home and disappeared. He didn't even know if she was still in Seattle.

He turned off the lights in his upstairs office and walked down the dark, quiet hallway. To his left, dozens of family photographs, framed in black and matted in white, hung along the wall. Sometimes he stopped and followed the trail of these pictures—his family—and let them pull him back to a happier time. Sometimes he let himself stand in front of his wife's picture and lose himself in the smile that had once illuminated his world.

Tonight, he kept moving.

He paused at his sons' room and eased the door open. It was something he did now: check obsessively on his eleven-year-old twins. Once you'd learned how bad life could go, and how quickly, you tried to protect those who remained. They were there, asleep.

He released a breath, unaware that he'd drawn it in, and moved on to Marah's closed door. There, he didn't slow down. It hurt too much to look in her room, to see the place frozen in time—a little girl's room—uninhabited, everything just as she'd left it.

He went into his own room and closed the door behind him. It was cluttered with clothes and papers and whatever books he'd started and stopped reading and intended to pick up again, when life slowed down.

Heading into the bathroom, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper. In the bathroom mirror, he caught sight of himself. Some days when he saw himself, he thought, *Not bad for fifty-five*, and sometimes—like now—he thought, *Really?*

He looked ... sad. It was in the eyes, mostly. His hair was longer than it should be, with fine strands of gray weaving through the black. He always forgot to get it cut. With a sigh, he turned on the shower and stepped in, letting the scalding-hot water pour over him, wash his thoughts away. When he got out, he felt better again, ready to take on the day. There was no point in trying to sleep. Not now. He towel-dried his hair and dressed in an old Nirvana T-shirt that he found on the floor of his closet and a pair of worn jeans. As he headed back into the hallway, the phone rang.

It was the landline.

He frowned. It was 2010. In this new age, only the rarest of calls came in on the old number.

Certainly people didn't call at 5:03 in the morning. Only bad news came at this hour.

Marah.

He lunged for the phone and answered. "Hello?"

"Is Kathleen Ryan there?"

Damned telemarketers. Didn't they ever update their records?

"Kathleen Ryan passed away almost four years ago. You need to take her off your call list," he said tightly, waiting for: *Are you a decision maker in your household?* In the silence that followed his question, he grew impatient. "Who is this?" he demanded.

"Officer Jerry Malone, Seattle police."

Johnny frowned. "And you're calling Kate?"

"There's been an accident. The victim has Kathleen Ryan's name in her wallet as an emergency contact."

Johnny sat down on the edge of the bed. There was only one person in the world who would still have Katie's name as an emergency contact. What in the hell had she done now? And who still had emergency contact numbers in their wallet? "It's Tully Hart, right? Is it a DUI? Because if she's—"

"I don't have that information, sir. Ms. Hart is being taken to Sacred Heart right now."

"How bad is it?"

"I can't answer that, sir. You'll need to speak to someone at Sacred Heart."

Johnny hung up on the officer, got the hospital's number from Google, and called. It took at least ten minutes of being transferred around before he

found someone who could answer his questions.

“Mr. Ryan?” the woman said. “I understand you are Ms. Hart’s family?”

He flinched at the question. How long had it been since he’d even spoken to Tully?

A lie. He knew exactly how long it had been.

“Yes,” he answered. “What happened?”

“I don’t have all the details, sir. I just know she’s en route to us now.”

He looked at his watch. If he moved quickly, he could make the 5:20 ferry and be at the hospital in a little more than an hour. “I’ll be there as quickly as I can.”

He didn’t realize that he hadn’t said goodbye until the phone buzzed in his ear. He hung up and tossed the handset on the bed.

He grabbed his wallet and picked up the phone again. As he reached for a sweater, he dialed a number. It rang enough times to remind him that it was early in the morning.

“H-hello?”

“Corrin. I’m sorry to call you so early, but it’s an emergency. Can you pick up the boys and take them to school?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to go to Sacred Heart. There’s been an accident. I don’t want to leave the boys alone, but I don’t have time to bring them to you.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I owe you one.” Then he hurried down the hallway and pushed open the boys’ bedroom door. “Get dressed, boys. *Now.*”

They sat up slowly. “Huh?” Wills said.

“I’m leaving. Corrin is going to pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You’re going to Tommy’s house. Corrin might need to pick you up from soccer practice, too. I don’t know when I’ll be home.”

“What’s wrong?” Lucas asked, his sleep-lined face drawing into a worried frown. They knew about emergencies, these boys, and routine comforted them. Lucas most of all. He was like his mother, a nurturer, a worrier.

“Nothing,” Johnny said tightly. “I need to get into the city.”

“He thinks we’re babies,” Wills said, pushing the covers back. “Let’s go, Skywalker.”

Johnny looked impatiently at his watch. It was 5:08. He needed to leave now to make the 5:20 boat.

Lucas got out of bed and approached him, looking up at Johnny through a mop of brown hair. “Is it Marah?”

Of course that would be their worry. How many times had they rushed to see their mom in the hospital? And God knew what trouble Marah was in these days. They all worried about her.

He forgot how wary they could sometimes be even now, almost four years later. Tragedy had marked them all. He was doing his best with the boys, but his best wasn't really enough to compensate for their mother's loss. "Marah's fine. It's Tully."

"What's wrong with Tully?" Lucas asked, looking scared.

They loved Tully so much. How many times in the last year had they begged to see her? How many times had Johnny made some excuse? Guilt flared at that.

"I don't have all the details yet, but I'll let you know what's up as soon as I can," Johnny promised. "Be ready for school when Corrin gets here, okay?"

"We're not babies, Dad," Wills said.

"You'll call us after soccer?" Lucas asked.

"I will."

He kissed them goodbye and grabbed his car keys off the entry table. He looked back at them one last time—two identical boys who needed haircuts, standing there in their boxer shorts and oversized T-shirts, frowning with worry. And then he went out to his car. They were eleven years old; they could be alone for ten minutes.

He got into his car, started the engine, and drove down to the ferry. On board, he stayed in his car, tapping his finger impatiently on the leather-covered steering wheel for the thirty-five-minute crossing.

At precisely 6:10, he pulled up into the hospital's parking lot and parked in the artificial brightness thrown down by a streetlamp. Sunrise was still a half hour away, so the city was dark.

He entered the familiar hospital and strode up to the information desk.

"Tallulah Hart," he said grimly. "I'm family."

"Sir, I—"

"I want an update on Tully's condition, and I want it *now*." He said it so harshly the woman bounced in her seat as if a slight current had charged through her body.

"Oh," she said. "I'll be right back."

He walked away from the reception desk and began pacing. God, he hated this place, with its all-too-familiar smells.

He sank into an uncomfortable plastic chair, tapping his foot nervously on the linoleum floor. Minutes ticked by; each one unraveled his control just a little.