

Chapter One

When Vic called, I thought my dad had died. Vic's first phone call had been to tell me that my mom had died; my dad had been too distraught to make the call himself. Vic's second call caused me to pack up everything from my dorm room into my Toyota and drive back home.

Vic said my dad had had a nervous breakdown, though I don't think that's the term people use anymore. It's been almost three months since that call, but the heart-pounding feeling of disaster I experienced that day filters its way into my mind as I sit in first-period physics.

Mr. Lemmon takes attendance and starts talking about the syllabus and his expectations. I pull my cell phone out of my backpack and let out a small breath when I see there are no notifications. I keep my phone on my lap as Mr. Lemmon reviews the class weight of each type of assignment.

Today is the first day I've left my dad alone since I came back from boarding school, and this overwhelming thought keeps creeping into my mind, making it impossible to pay attention to Mr. Lemmon: *I shouldn't be here right now.*

I should be at home. School seems like such a triviality in light of what real life has to offer—a dead mom and broken-down dad.

Mr. Lemmon is explaining the projects he expects us to complete when my phone buzzes. I think about Vic's phone call, but it isn't him. It's my retired neighbor, Wanda.

WANDA: Sarah, where are you? Are you home? Your father is outside howling. Can you hear him?

SARAH: No. I'm at school.

WANDA: Well, someone needs to make him stop. He's scaring all the dogs in the neighborhood. Buddy won't stop yelping.

SARAH: Okay, I'm coming home.

WANDA: Hurry. I don't want to have to call the police.

I should've stayed home today. I knew it. Being absent on the first day of your junior year in a brand-new school is less suspect than walking out in the middle of physics. I am currently walking out in the middle of physics. I hear Mr. Lemmon's voice trailing me down the hall.

"Sarah? Sarah!" he calls from the open door of his classroom.

But I don't turn around. I just keep up the half-walk/half-run that's going to get me to the main entrance. My phone vibrates, and I know it's Wanda again. I pick up my pace and run past the cold-colored lockers. I bolt through the front doors, leaving behind the frigid hallway and

plunging right into the stifling Texas heat. The sun is searing, and I put up a hand to block it while I try to remember where, in this football-field-sized parking lot, I left my car.

I slow down, trying to catch my breath in the suffocating morning air as I approach the student parking. I answer the phone, which hasn't stopped buzzing. "Wanda?"

"I am outside trying to talk to him over the fence, but he won't stop howling. If you don't get over here, I'm calling the police."

I hear my dad in the background. He's crying in the same way he was when I first came home three months ago.

"Wait, Wanda. I'm coming. You know he won't do anything. Just wait." I spot my car and sprint over to it.

"You better hurry, Sarah. I'm sorry, but my nerves can't take it."

"I'm coming." I toss the phone onto the passenger seat and speed through the flashing lights of the school zone. I go over a speed bump too quickly and feel the effects as the bottom of my Toyota grinds against it. As I pull up into my driveway, Wanda is looking through the curtains of her front door.

I mouth *I'm sorry*, and Wanda shakes her head and pulls the curtains closed.

I hear him wailing in the backyard. I jog across our lawn and go around the side of the house.

He's lying on our old, weathered trampoline. His wails have turned into sobbing.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I climb onto the trampoline and sit in front of him.

"Sarah?" He opens his teary eyes and looks up at me.

"Wanda called me. She said you were crying so loudly that it was scaring her dog."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just came out here to clean the trampoline off so Steven could jump on it after school, but all I could think about was the day we bought it. She was so scared that Steven would fall off and get hurt, but I told her, Sarah will jump with him. Sarah will take care of him."

She refers to Mom. That's what he calls her now. It's as if the pronoun exists only to refer to Viviana Mosley.

"Remember, you used to jump with him? He would sit in the center and you would bounce him up and down."

"Yeah, I remember, Dad. Look, it's not good for you to be out here, okay? Wanda almost called the police."

"I'm sorry, Sarah. She's so unreasonable."

I suppress a frustrated sigh. "I had to leave school early for this."

“I’m sorry,” he repeats. He pulls himself up, and we sit at the edge of the trampoline, our feet dangling over the side. “It’s just so hard, Sarah. Everywhere I look, I’m reminded of what we lost.” He wipes his face and turns to look at me. “You have her eyes.” I’ve heard this a hundred different times from a hundred different people.

“Let’s go inside,” I say. I jump off the trampoline, and he follows me into the house. He goes straight upstairs to his room and throws himself into the recliner next to his unmade bed. I hover in the doorway.

“Dad, you can’t keep going on like this.”

No response.

I sit on the edge of his bed, grabbing the corner of the bedspread Mom bought two years ago in Amish country. “Should I ask Vic to come over?”

Vic is one of Dad’s best friends, and one of the only people who stepped up for us when Mom died. He checks in regularly, drops off meals without making it feel like charity, and almost has Dad convinced to see a therapist. He and Dad worked together at UTSA, both of them history professors. He’s the one who called me after Dad walked out of a class full of hundreds of students and Vic found him in his office, sobbing under his desk. His wife, Laura, was a big help right after Mom died, but I haven’t seen her for a while. I know she keeps busy with their twelve-year-old twins.

“No, Sarah. Don’t call Vic. I’m fine now.”

Fine? I want to ask him what his definition of *fine* is. How can he say he’s fine if he can’t even make himself go back to work? We’re basically living off dwindling savings, early withdrawal of retirement funds, and CDs that were meant to help pay my college tuition. At the rate I’m cashing out the CDs, there will be nothing left when I finally make it to college. We are definitely not fine. Dad’s actions are out of my control, but they control me. I don’t know how I’ll even feel okay about going to school tomorrow.

A familiar bottle on his bedside table catches my eye. Some Scotch that my parents received from friends for Christmas years ago. It’s been sitting on their small wine cabinet in the living room ever since. They’d always been mostly wine drinkers. Now the bottle is here in Dad’s bedroom, half empty.

He turns on the television as the History Channel narrator introduces a documentary on ancient Chinese super ships.

I get up and close the door of his room.

After retrieving my backpack from my car, I pull off my ankle boots and drop onto the couch in the living room. My heart finally beats at its normal rate. I wipe my sweaty hands on my

shorts, and I pull up my curly black hair with an elastic band I keep on my wrist. I considered cutting it before school started, but it's the same length as my mom's hair before she died. It's exactly how I want it right now. From my Mexican American mom, I inherited my rich skin tone and dark, curly hair. From my English American dad, I inherited my last name, Mosley, and that's about it.

With my fingertips, I dab at the back of my damp neck. I melt into the middle seat of our brown leather couch, facing Mom's bright red wingback chair. Next to it is the white basket of yarn and knitting needles that haven't been touched since before she died.

Today, it is six months and two days since she died. I gave Dad time to mourn, but it wasn't enough. No amount of time will ever be enough; I understand that. I don't feel any better about her death than I did six months ago, but I haven't stopped living. He doesn't want to live this life without her, though.

Nothing matters to him anymore. The children he helped create and nurture for years are only ghosts to him. Whatever affection he had for us seems to have died when she did. Maybe those feelings only existed because of her, and now that she's gone, we're gone to him too.

I stare at Mom's wingback chair, at the small square throw pillow that sits on the cushion. Mom would always put that pillow behind her lower back. It's kind of lost its shape from years of being tugged and pushed to make her more comfortable. On the front is a fading image of a red Gerber daisy with long petals and a pale yellow center.

I grab my backpack and take out a set of Sharpie markers I keep inside. I pull out a red Sharpie and take its lid off. I trace narrow petals on the top of my thigh and then color them in with a lighter shade of red. I draw one after the other in a circular shape, taking my time to color them in carefully.

Mom hated my Sharpie tattoos. After eight years of art lessons, Mom wanted me to do oil on canvas or watercolors, but this is my favorite medium. I like the idea of my art walking around rather than being stuck on a wall inside a room.

I color in the center, making it a bright yellow rather than the pale yellow showing on the aging throw pillow. After it's had enough time to dry, I dust it with baby powder from my small container, rubbing the powder in with my finger. I spray it with hairspray and rub some more. I look from the flower on Mom's throw pillow to the one on my thigh, taking in the details.

I close my eyes for a minute to rest them. I couldn't fall asleep last night—thinking about starting at a new school, wondering how Dad was doing, nervous about my brother's first day of third grade. Mom would've made Steven's first day amazing with her Texas toast for breakfast.

I jolt awake. I've been passed out on the couch all morning. I look at the clock and think of Steven. His bus will arrive in about three hours.

That gives me time to catch up on work. I go upstairs to my room and clear off some space on my desk. I pull out a pencil sketch I've been working on. I've been running an Etsy shop for about four months. My account has twenty-eight reviews, each with five stars. Customers send me photographs of their families, and I draw pencil portraits from the pictures. The more people in a portrait and the larger the size they choose, the more I'm able to charge. Currently, I'm drawing a portrait of a family of four—mom, dad, sister, brother—and they've requested a twelve-by-sixteen image. The money they paid for it is gone already, used for this week's groceries. I have two more orders waiting after this one.

I stare at the three-by-five photo I printed out. The mom has long blond hair, and I've been trying to perfect her bangs, but my pencil keeps stumbling over this one strand right above her left eye. Skipper wears a high bow, nearly covering part of her brother's hair, and has the most freckles I've ever tried to draw. The girl's name isn't really Skipper, but I've been calling her that since I started the portrait. She just looks like the mini version of her Barbie mother.

I finish most of Skipper, opting to procrastinate on the mass of dots splotched across her face. I set the portrait aside and decide to go meet Steven's bus.

I walk outside and sit on the curb. Across the street, Robert is weed-whacking Ms. Maldonado's path. I wave and receive a nod in return. Robert is retired and lives one street over. He makes his way up and down the streets trimming people's weeds wherever he finds unsatisfactory lawns.

I'm constantly amazed by the stamina and energy that comes from this more-than-seventy-year-old man. I heard Wanda say that he had bypass surgery a few years ago, but it doesn't slow him down. The only sign of his age is the thick patch of white hair on his head that matches the hair on his saggy chest—a chest I'm forced to look at way too often. He only wears a shirt when the temperature is below seventy.

I glance at our own lawn and wonder when he might make his way over here. Robert moves on to the next house, and the loud humming of his gas-powered weed-whacker begins again. Do we even have a weed-whacker in the garage? Probably, under all of Dad's gardening tools. He used to keep our yard beautifully manicured. Every year, he'd grow a huge garden in the back with tomatoes, peas, squash, peppers, zucchini, and a dozen different kinds of herbs.

Steven's bus comes into view at the corner, and I stand up and walk toward it. I wring my hands and pull on my fingers as I watch the kids descend from the bus one by one. My lanky brother steps off and watches his feet as he walks toward me.

“Hi, Steven. How was your first day?”

He looks at me and blinks. “Sarah? You said your school doesn’t get out until four.” He holds up his Astros key chain. “You said I had to let myself in and be sure to close the door behind me.”

“I know. I just got out early today.” I put my arm around him, and we walk together to the house.

At the front steps, Steven bends down to pick up the newspaper. Mom has always insisted on keeping a newspaper subscription despite Dad and me telling her it’s better online. Steven shares her fondness for an actual newspaper that can be held in one’s hands. Lately I’ve thought about canceling the subscription since it’s so expensive, but I can’t bring myself to take it away from Steven.

Inside, he lets his backpack fall to the floor and takes the newspaper over to the table, discarding all the sections except for the sports. He scans the baseball scores. “The Phillies beat the Cubs, seven to two.”

“That’s a good score.”

“The Mets won again. That’s five games in a row. That’s called a winning streak. Beat the Braves four to three.”

I open a cupboard and scan its contents. “How about spaghetti for dinner?”

“Spaghetti sounds good. Can you melt some cheese on it?” Steven asks without taking his eyes off the newspaper. He continues running his finger along the box scores, his fingertips blackening with the action. “The Astros scored six runs in the top of the ninth. Six runs. The Astros pitcher had eight strikeouts.”

“Do you like your new teacher?”

“Yeah, she’s cool, but a little corny too. She thinks we’re still little kids, tells us to put a bubble in our mouth when we walk down the hall. We’re third-graders now.”

“But other than that, she’s cool?”

Steven folds the newspaper in fourths. “Yeah. She let us pick our own seats, so that’s cool in my book. I get to sit next to my friend Ryan. We just have to make sure we don’t talk too much or she’ll move us.” He’s still scanning the box scores, nodding and shaking his head at intervals. “The Astros pitcher almost pitched a perfect game last night. That would’ve been number twenty-four in MLB history, and the first time in Astros history.” Steven loves numbers; everything makes more sense to him with numbers.

I retrieve a jar of off-brand tomato sauce from the pantry to go with the spaghetti and fill a pot with water. There should still be a half-full package of ground beef in the fridge that I can use for meatballs. They'd be better with some fresh garlic, but we don't have any.

"How's Dad?" Steven asks abruptly, as if he just remembered there's more going on in the world than just baseball.

"Okay, I guess. He had a rough day."

"I'm going to go say hi to him." Steven bounds up the stairs, and I follow.

"Hey, Dad," Steven says, entering the room. He goes over to Dad's recliner and gives him an awkward half-hug.

"Hey, Steven. How was school?"

"Good. The Astros won last night, beat the Twins. Did you see Javier almost pitched a perfect game?"

"No, I guess I missed that," Dad says, not taking his eyes off the TV.

"Mom says make your bed every day, Dad," Steven says, noticing the quilt thrown messily on the bed. "It's supposed to be the first thing we do in the morning when we wake up. She would want us to make our beds."

Dad stares at him for a minute before turning back to the TV.

"Bye, Dad," Steven says as he leaves the room. "I have to go type up the baseball scores." He keeps a spreadsheet with the box scores from all the baseball games, just to study it.

Back downstairs, I boil spaghetti and make meatballs as Steven consumes the newspaper. After I set the table, I take a tray into Dad's room. The History Channel is replaying a documentary on the Japanese internment. Dad is dozing in the recliner, the half-empty bottle of Scotch perched precariously between his legs. I pull it out of his weak grasp, screw the lid on, and put it on his dresser. The movement startles him awake, and he sits up with a gasp.

I bring a small folding table over to his recliner and set the tray down on it, handing him extra napkins.

"This looks really good," he says, taking a voracious bite.

I nod and walk toward the door. "You need something in your stomach besides booze."

"Sarah," he says, and I turn around. "Thank you."

I nod again and rush out. I hate taking care of him. Steven is different—he's my little brother, a boy with one parent dead and the other one nearly there. I take care of Steven happily, but a teenager shouldn't have to care for a parent. He's still supposed to be taking care of *us*.