

The Final Four

10,000 word sample

Chapter One

On the news, we are called “The Final Four,” and people train their focus mostly on us. Maybe it’s because we are young. Maybe it’s because we are female. Or maybe it’s because, after The Sutcliffe collapses and three hundred and twelve mothers, fathers and children are buried under a thousand tons of rubble, people need hope.

The photograph of us, captured mere seconds after we were extracted, is on TV, social media, and the digital billboards that line Times Square. We are a daisy chain of dirty hands, torn clothes and matted hair. Four incredible bodies who have brushed against death. Everyone agrees—to survive without a concussion, compound fracture, or memory loss is a miracle. And it is true: between the four of us, not a thing is broken.

Except for our hearts.

Part One

July 16th

Chapter Two

In the basement of The Sutcliffe, tucked within a storage unit housing furniture, gold-rimmed plates and a broken antique mirror, there sits a honeycomb stuffed animal named Biscuit.

Next to Biscuit, is the bomb.

For the last decade, Biscuit has lived in a dusty corner between cookbooks and Halloween decorations. His neighbors are a pumpkin-shaped basket and a bat made from a black sock. Bat irks them all with his constant gloating. None of them have been upstairs for many years, but Bat was the most recent. He brags endlessly of being smushed to the apartment window for thirty days. He talks of tree-lined streets, the glittering sunset, and the threaded blue of the Hudson.

A moment ago, Biscuit watched the human place the bomb delicately on the ground. As the human backs away from the shelf, she hesitates, making eye contact.

Biscuit knows her. She makes him think of grape juice matted in his fur; of toasty merry-go-rounds in the dryer; of his hind legs dragging on the sidewalk; of being squished into welcoming arms. And then years later, of hurried footsteps; of fingers whispering patterns on cool brick walls. Her tears, hot and wild on his chest.

The human blinks. Where seconds ago there was nostalgia, now there's only fear. Her footsteps echo as she leaves.

Biscuit wishes he could extend a paw to Pumpkin and Bat. That they could hold on to each other for what's about to come.

Chapter Three

Montgomery

Age 21

Thankfully, The Sutcliffe is Montgomery's last stop, and she's been here before; she knows what to expect.

It's humid; July in Manhattan is like biking through mashed potatoes, and the Upper West Side with its too-clean sidewalks freak her out. She smells like grease and the ketchup that exploded over her earlier. As she chains her bike, her body vibrates with exhaustion. She wakes up with her bones banging impatiently against her skin, their constant rattle reminding her that until things are right, she can't be still. She is unable to turn it off, this need to fix everything to how it used to be.

Up until now, her life has been a series of successes. Excelling at school and sports. Landing a full ride to Colgate University. She is the first in her family to go to college, and until her father's heart attack, her future was streaked with every imaginable color. Delivering food is not forever. This is a temporary solution, the sacrifice she has made to carry her family. But her body is bent by it, as she limps into the lobby.

Her phone buzzes, and it's her mother, texting that her father is out of pain pills. Montgomery closes her eyes. In her mind, she is already biking to the drug store before it closes. She weaves through one-way streets and erratic drivers, calculating the best route. Her desire to

plan multiple steps ahead is one that has become painful as she continues to push at a life which hardly budes. She's so lost in her imaginary race that it's another moment before she notices the argument happening.

A man with graying hair and a fitted blue suit has his back to her. "Stop it, MaryAnne. You're making a scene."

He's talking to a wisp of a woman who is drowning in a black linen dress. Her pale face is framed by a dark bob; the tendons in her forearm flex as she claws at a young girl's shoulder. The girl blinks rapidly behind clear-framed glasses. Ladybug earrings dangle on either side of her freckled face.

The man steps forward. With a magician's flick of a wrist, he wrenches MaryAnne's arm away. "Stay back, Serena. Your mother's crazy."

"I'm *not* crazy," MaryAnne says. "Todd, give me my daughter!"

"*Our* daughter." Todd pulls Serena closer.

"I won't let you have her."

Todd sighs. "The lawyers decided—"

"I don't care!"

Normally, Montgomery might find this entertaining. These buildings are usually disturbingly quiet. She sometimes finds herself rattling off deliveries in whispers. Today though, she doesn't have time for this. She's got to get to the pharmacy before it closes; her dad is counting on her.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ventura, please." Reggie maneuvers from behind the large mahogany front desk to stand between them. The gold buttons on his uniform gleam in the lobby's low light.

With a jerk, Serena twists away from her father's arm. "What do you think you're

doing?” Todd says.

“Stop fighting,” she screams. “Please!”

Montgomery squeezes around the warring family and tosses her cooler onto the desk. It lands with a thwack that echoes across the marble floors. “Food delivery,” she announces. Todd turns at her voice. Montgomery clocks his long nose and scruffy eyebrows. “I know you,” she blurts out. “You’re that comic. On the Late Night show.”

It’s like she’s flicked a switch. Todd smiles. “Guilty as charged.”

Montgomery’s skin prickles as Todd’s gaze moves over her sweaty skin, violet hair, and gold septum hoop. It’s his mouth she recognized, that smile. One side of it hitches higher than the other. “My dad loves you,” she says. “His name’s Henry Bates.”

“I’m flattered,” Todd says. “Would he like an autograph?”

She pictures Henry launching into his favorite Todd Ventura bit, the one about a rat and bagel she’s heard a million times. “That would be—”

“You lied!”

Montgomery’s words die on her lips. Todd pivots to face an apoplectic MaryAnne. “Calm down!” Todd thunders. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

MaryAnne shakes like she has a fever. “I won’t let you have her.”

“I won’t discuss this here,” Todd says firmly.

“I’m not afraid anymore.”

“What are you talking about?” Todd’s eyes widen. “MaryAnne?”

Serena stands with her arms hugged around her middle. Reggie calls for security, and Montgomery instinctively backs away.

Chapter Four

Becca

Age 22

Walking into Bubbie's apartment at The Sutcliffe is like settling in for tea and a cozy book on a blustery winter's day. The wooden floors creak happily as Becca pads through them, and the walls explode with colorful, eccentric art. Her favorite is the hallway with the framed vintage covers of *The New Yorker*. She thinks it makes a part of the apartment that would otherwise be forgotten beautiful. "I'm here," she calls.

Bubbie bustles from the kitchen to greet her, white hair springing from her head like a fern. She envelopes Becca in a hug. "Where's your other half? Never mind, the latkes are on the table!" She flutters behind Becca like a hummingbird, flapping her arms toward the dining room. "Sit! Eat! They're only good when hot."

"Thanks, Bubbie. I'm starving." Becca takes a seat in one of the high-backed chairs. "Rachelle's on her way."

Bubbie places an enormous latke on Becca's plate and throws dollops of applesauce and sour cream next to it with the intensity of a major league pitcher. "I'm surprised they let you eat at all, with how skinny models are these days." She licks her fingers and narrows her eyes. "Now, what is this you're wearing? A suit jacket and—shorts?"

Usually, after a shoot Becca changes into normal clothes, but by the time they wrapped, she was ravenous, and hadn't wanted to waste time. Now, as she dives into the latkes, she thinks

she's never tasted anything so good. No matter that with her blue eyeshadow, pink blazer and crimped blonde hair, she looks like an eighties Barbie. "It's for an Italian designer's new campaign," she says. "What do you think?"

Bubbie raises an eyebrow. "They don't care about an old woman's opinion. But I don't like it."

"It's like a mullet." A voice drifts into the room. "Business up top, party below."

Bubbie brightens. "Finally, my Rachelle is here! Come quickly. Latkes are hot!"

Rachelle emerges in a blue patterned shift dress. Tight curls of dusky-blond hair frame her face. She drops her purse on the floor, hugging Bubbie. "There was a mix up with your call time for tomorrow, Becca."

"Now, that's a nice dress," Bubbie says to Rachelle when they part. "Flattering. Hides your hips."

Becca winces. "Bubbie!"

"What? We have the same hips. Good for child bearing, hard to buy pants."

"Gee, thanks." Rachelle says. "Can we please change the subject?"

"What about my call time tomorrow?" Becca asks.

"They wanted you there by eight. I told them they'll see you at ten."

"I could kiss you," Becca says, "but that would mean I'd have to stop eating." Bubbie's latkes are the perfect amount of fluff and oil, grease and starch. She groans as she takes another bite.

"Don't let the paps see you massacring that plate." Rachelle gestures toward the window. "I think I scared them all away, but you can never be sure."

Bubbie huffs. "Don't they have anything better to do than snap a picture of your tush?"

“Apparently not,” Becca says.

“Well, you ignore them, sweetheart. But don’t get too big for your britches.”

Becca pauses mid bite. “Are you being figurative or literal?”

“Today you’re a hot shot, tomorrow you’re schmutz,” Bubbie continues. “But you know where you come from. And if you forget, your older sister will remind you.”

“That’s right.” Rachelle says. “Don’t worry, Bubbie. Her head can’t get any bigger; the contracts forbid it.”

Becca smiles at Rachelle. The truth is, the constant media attention does get to her. She’s landed some highly visible campaigns that mean she is able to live a comfortable lifestyle while employing an amazing team. But that has come with heightened scrutiny; it means that now, when she rolls out of bed to get coffee at the corner bodega, she ends up makeup free on Page Six.

New York is a good place to live if you’re famous—not because people don’t recognize you, but because they don’t care. Still, as Becca’s career continues to grow, so do her fans. As strangers from across the globe become interested in her life, her circle tightens. Her parents, Bubbie, and her boyfriend remain enclosed tightly inside, but the most important is Rachelle.

Bubbie glares at their plates. “Eat before it gets cold!”

“You made way too much,” Rachelle says.

“That’s why you come over here, isn’t it? For full bellies?” With a heavy sigh, she settles into her own chair and places her hands on her abdomen. “Now that you’re both here, I’ll get straight to the point.”

Becca exchanges a glance with Rachelle as their grandmother picks at her apron.

“I’m dying,” Bubbie says.

Chapter Five

Ellie

Age 21

Ellie teases her hair so it spins, luminous, in a frenetic orb around her face. The color is a luscious, pearly white, a hue that practically glows in the dark; it is exactly what she hoped for when she bought the box of dye this morning.

She wonders how Raf will react. She tries to see herself as he sees her, but lately, it's been hard. The hair is something to distract her from the shredded toes that hide beneath her sneakers and the flashes of pain in her hip and knees. She pads into the kitchen to find their chef stirring something on the stove. Charlene's eyes widen as she notices Ellie's hair.

"I know." Ellie says. "They're gonna flip."

Charlene clicks her tongue. "Want to try?"

Ellie licks the thick red sauce off the spoon. "Amazing," she says. "I can't wait."

"You'll have to, but only a little longer." Charlene squeezes the back of Ellie's neck, and Ellie thinks of her doing this to her son, Hector, nestled in their cozy Harlem apartment. Her eyes fill with tears.

"Elizabeth?" Her mother's voice carries from the living room. "Will you come here, please?"

Ellie winces. "They're home?"

Charlene nods and releases her hand. "Go on."

Ellie walks as slow as possible. She pictures the scene: her father, still in his suit and tie,

the day's paper spread in front of him. Her mother, laptop open with an untouched glass of wine. They are home from work early tonight, and that is not a good sign.

Sunset pours through the living room, casting it in honeyed amber. As Ellie enters, her parents' shock at her appearance blows like a cold wind. Her dad loosens his tie and purses his lips. He's stocky with a thick neck, and the sleeves of his blue dress shirt are rolled to the elbows. He tilts his head at her, his graying temples glinting in the fading light. "What did you do to your hair?"

Ellie stares at the window. "Just trying a new look."

Her mother fingers the edges of her own chestnut brown waves. "But your natural color is beautiful."

Ellie doesn't say anything. She shares the same narrow face and long nose as her mother. They also have the same hair.

Her dad clears his throat, and gets the sort of serious look that Ellie imagines he uses when speaking to a board of advisors. "Ellie, we've given you time to recover from your surgery, but we need to talk about next year."

Ellie puts a hand on the wall to steady herself. "There's nothing to talk about. Raf thinks I'll be back on stage by mid-autumn."

Her dad shakes his head, looking at her mom. "Here's the problem. Rafael's been planting these dreams inside her head for years."

"What are you talking about?" Ellie says. "He hasn't planted anything. He wants what's best for me."

His face hardens. "*We* want what's best for you! And I'd like to think your parents know you better than your teacher."

“Honey,” her mother warns.

Ellie's feet feel so heavy they might as well be screwed into the floorboards. This is the conversation she's been dreading, even before the sesamoid bone in her right foot fractured and had to be operated on.

Her mother tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “We know that the last year has been hard on you. We know ballet is your dream, and we've been happy to support you...but it's time to think about the future.”

Beneath Ellie's baggy sweatshirt, her skin itches. “Give me another year. Please.”

Her dad swipes at his nose. “And how much else will go wrong? You've had three different surgeries in two years, and you've only got one body.”

In response, Ellie's injuries ring in tandem—a bell of agony in her feet, hips, knees.

“You're only twenty-one,” her mom says. “There's so much more you could do.”

“Stop. Please.”

Her father stands. “I'm not going to stand here and watch as you continue to *mutilate* your body.”

“Then don't,” Ellie says. Her new hair makes her feel combative. Fierce. She stands where she is, imagining her gorgeous white strands writhing like Medusa. Instead of snakes circling her head, there are flames.

Ellie will not back down, and neither will her father. He works for a hedge fund where he spends his days battling back eager entrepreneurs who want a sliver of his money. This is where he thrives. He rolls his shoulders like a boxer warming up. “It's time to grow up. You gave ballet your best shot and it didn't work. Going to college, building a sustainable career—that's what you should be focusing on. That's what will last.”

“My best shot? That’s what you call seventeen years of my life?” Ellie knows exactly what this is about, and it isn’t her parents having her best interests at heart. “Be honest. You say you want me to go to college, but what you mean is Princeton.”

“Elizabeth...”

“Don’t try to deny it.” Ellie thinks of all those reunions she was dragged to as a child, the orange gear her parents outfitted her in, the stuffed tiger that sat in her room until she was fifteen. When she was a kid, she’d thought the campus looked like a castle. Now, it seems like a prison. “You had the best time of your life there. I get it. But that’s not what I want.”

Her father takes a step forward. “May I remind you whose roof you’re living under?”

Her mother stands, resting a calming hand on his shoulder. She’s in her houndstooth blazer; the pattern makes Ellie dizzy. “I know change scares you, but you’ve got to think long term.”

Ellie wishes her mother was like the rest of the Upper West Side moms, flitting aimlessly from museum to pilates to Botox. Those kinds of moms had *pushed* their kids into dance, dreaming of this for their daughters. But her mother is a partner at a law firm. Her parents measure success by rungs climbed on the corporate ladder. They will support the arts philanthropically until the day they die with their checkbook, not their child.

The scarlet sun slashes through the room. Ellie tastes the red sauce she just ate, listens to the blood snapping beneath her veins. She tugs at her hair and a piece rips from her scalp. It lies, white hot, on her palm. “You wanted me to fail.”

Her mother blanches. “Of course we didn’t!”

“This is my career, and I’m not going to throw it away. Raf believes in me.”

Her dad groans. “Here we are with that teacher again! What’s so special about this Raf,

exactly, huh? What makes you think he's telling the truth?"

Her father is used to dismissing people, and sometimes Ellie thinks he sees her as one of his portfolio companies and not a human who shares fifty percent of his DNA. Outside, the sun scoops the moon. Soon, the day will disappear and Ellie will wonder if she dreamed it. "Because we're in a relationship," she says. "Because we're in love."

Chapter Six

Montgomery

A sheen of perspiration sprouts like seeds across Reggie's forehead. Montgomery presses herself against the wall as she makes for the exit. She feels bad for him, but has her own shit to worry about. She glances at the revolving door, then at MaryAnne, who blocks her way. Panic blinds her; the pharmacy is about to close.

"Serena's the only good thing in my life. You know that," MaryAnne says. She releases a high-pitched sob.

Todd scoffs. "You're hysterical."

"Mrs. Ventura, are you unwell?" Reggie asks. "Can I call a doctor?"

"I'm not sick." MaryAnne pulls at her hair. "Serena, we need to go."

"Listen," Todd says, "I've tried being reasonable, but as the primary guardian now, I have to look out for Serena's best interests. She's not going anywhere with you."

Montgomery's stress dangles like the cheese of a mozzarella stick in her throat. She thinks about tonight, how Henry will pat her hand and disappear into the chair that dwarfs him these days, eyes flickering with pain. He'll tell her it's fine. They can get the medication tomorrow. It isn't a big deal.

But it is, and they know it.

She bolts toward the door. As she does, Todd takes a step toward MaryAnne, who

scrambles out of his way. The back of her head knocks into Montgomery's shoulder.

MaryAnne screams. "Don't touch me!"

"I didn't do anything," Montgomery stammers. "I'm just trying to leave."

MaryAnne groans, clawing at her face. Serena rushes to her as the fire alarm goes off.

Todd clamps his hands over his ears. "Jesus, what else?"

Reggie waves to get Montgomery's attention. He points at two security guards who have appeared from the side door. "They'll escort you out," he shouts. "Go."

She hopes Reggie sees the gratitude sparking from her. *There's still time to do it all*, she thinks as she edges toward the guards. *I can fix this*. MaryAnne and Serena curl into each other like snails, and Montgomery gives them a wide berth.

She almost believes it's over. Until MaryAnne pulls at Serena in one blurry moment, and they sprint towards her.

Chapter Seven

Becca

“Bubbie, you’ve told us you’re dying for years,” Becca says, body unclenching.

“This time’s different,” Bubbie says. “Marcella said it’s close.” Abruptly, she stands.

“The rugelach!”

As she disappears into the kitchen, Becca sighs. “This, again.”

“Yeah.” Rachelle says. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. That she’d stop spending all her money on a tarot reader, maybe.” Becca realizes she’s cleaned her plate. She glances guiltily toward Rachelle, who yesterday, she’d found drinking bone broth for lunch. “Don’t tell me you’re turning into one of *those* people now,” she’d joked. She was referring to the models who subsist on shrimp and lemon water, who brag about starving themselves to the point of passing out. She thought Rachelle would laugh. Instead, she got quiet. “Not everyone’s got a body like you,” she said.

Becca was stunned, and Rachelle immediately realized her mistake. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Bubbie returns to the table with a tray of pastries, and Becca takes one. “Marcella mentioned you in my reading.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” Bubbie says. The tick of the ancient wall clock is deafening. “As someone who defied death.”

Becca is horrified; amidst the chariots and priestesses and other ridiculous things written

on those cards, her body has been a topic of conversation with her grandmother and her witch doctor.

“What?” Bubbie frowns at her expression. “I can’t talk about my granddaughter? It’s not every day someone beats cancer.”

Becca rubs her eyes. “I’m twenty-two. We’re talking about something that happened when I was five.”

Bubbie gazes at the ceiling. “Your parents were so worried. Your immune system didn’t know how to fight. Your mother started planning your funeral, you know.”

And here it is, the crux of it. Long ago, her body found a way to heal itself in a world where many didn’t. Her family constantly reminds her of how miraculous it is. Her body rescued her before she understood what it meant to be saved, and now, it has rewarded her with this career. *Not everyone’s got a body like you.* Rachelle’s comment yesterday was innocent enough, but it had struck a nerve. Becca feels like an imposter. She doesn’t know what she did to deserve a body that has given her this life. It’s powerful. But it’s also terrifying, not understanding it.

“I’m not feeling well.” Rachelle says. “Excuse me.”

Becca hopes Rachelle will meet her gaze as she walks away, but she doesn’t. The bathroom door slams, the pipes behind the wall gurgling to life.

“Your sister has always been sensitive,” Bubbie says.

Becca doesn’t answer, lost in a memory from seventeen years ago, when a nurse with swooping eyelashes leaned over her. “You don’t have to look at this, sweetie,” she said.

“I want to.” Becca watched the needle sink into the port in her chest. The chemotherapy that made her tired and nauseous was also killing the bad cells in her body. She thought of it like

the bug zapper at camp that hissed and sizzled whenever a mosquito got sucked into its light.

Her parents stepped into the hallway to speak to the doctor, and Rachelle, hovering in the corner, came forward. Her hair tumbled over her mouth as she stared at the needle. In her right hand was a dented box of crayons. A dusting of Blue Violet shimmered where she'd swiped fingers across her cheek.

Becca adjusted her body so Rachelle could climb into bed. Her sister's body was warm and solid. "Where to today?" Rachelle asked.

Becca closed her eyes. Instead of chemo, she imagined the needle was injecting magic powers into her; the burn she felt in her veins was glitter, not chemicals. "Wizards?"

"We just did that one."

"Flying?"

Rachelle's breath tickled Becca's bare neck and she had to stop herself from touching the scarf that was hot and crinkly against her scalp. At night, she dreamed about fairy tales and princesses, golden dust spilling out of ivory towers. When she woke, she reached for cornsilk hair that was no longer there.

"Let's go to the beach," Becca said. Together they soared out of the hospital through periwinkle mist, diving between skyscrapers and skimming through clouds.

"Look, an eagle!" Rachelle pointed and Becca saw its marigold beak and hulking shoulders. They hopped on its back, the bird's creamy feathers whispering love songs against their bare legs, delivering them to where the ocean spiraled crunchy blue. The salt air hushed their lips. The water rose and fell like Becca's own breath, tugging so surely at the world.

The ocean fell away as she opened her eyes. Rachelle did too. "Does it hurt?"

When the port was open there was magic, fast and dizzying. When it closed there was

only the quiet rattle of what used to be. Becca was afraid one day it would break. “No,” she lied.

She took her sister’s hand and settled against the pillow. And then they were off. Back into the sky they believed into being, somersaulting through a silken thicket of stars.

Becca emerges into the present, where Bubbie looks at her expectantly. “It’s hard for her.”

“What, because she didn’t spend years in a hospital bed? Because she’s not a size two?”

Rachelle has always been there for her. It’s why, once she graduated NYU, Becca wanted her as her manager.

Not everyone was supportive. “She’s going to get clobbered,” her agent said. “Don’t trust your career with a novice.” What no one understood was that Becca *needed* Rachelle. Her sister is the only one who can anchor her; the only one who makes sure that in this world where strangers tell her who she is and how she is supposed to look, she doesn’t lose herself.

“Becca?”

“Yes?”

Her grandmother twists in her chair. “Did you hear that?”

A groan comes from the bathroom, followed by a thud as Rachelle’s body hits the floor.

Chapter Eight

Rachelle

Age 23

“Rachelle?” Becca knocks frantically. “This door locks from the inside, remember? What happened? Are you okay?”

Rachelle flushes the toilet. In her hurry to get here, she plunked down on the tiles so hard her knees throb. “Give me a minute.”

She sits on the edge of the tub, staring at the lavender soaps. When her parents used to stay overnight with Becca at the hospital, she came here. Fresh out of the bath, a fluffy bathrobe wrapped around her damp skin, she’d sit in this exact position as Bubbie stood behind her, a bottle of rosemary conditioner in her hands. “We pat hair; we never tug,” she’d say as she worked out her tangles.

It’s always like this when the subject of Becca’s cancer comes up. The last seventeen years are eviscerated and all she sees are the mint-green walls, a box of crayons missing a yellow, the blue scarf with yellow sunflowers covering her sister’s head. Becca claims she was too young to recall much about that time, but Rachelle is a year older, and it makes all the difference.

“Come on, let me in.” Becca knocks on the door again.

“I’m fine. I’ll be right out.” Rachelle makes no move to stand.

You'd think she'd be less prone to throwing up when the memory is raised. Becca beat cancer a long time ago. They're adults. In fact, Rachelle's life is pretty damn cool. She manages the career of a famous model and shares her two-bedroom Tribeca apartment. She's been to the Met Gala and met Amal Clooney. Without Becca, Rachelle would be hustling like the rest of the twenty-somethings in the city: working a boring administrative job, shacking up with three roommates in a studio-sized apartment. Her life is fucking great. So why does the cancer talk rattle her? Why does it make her feel incapable, like nothing's changed?

"Let's go home," Becca says through the door. "We can wrap up your latkes."

"You know Bubbie won't like that. I'll get a lecture on reheating."

Becca smothers a laugh. "Oh my God, will you open the door?"

When Becca first asked Rachelle to be her manager, she'd laughed in her face. "In what world, other than the one where I'm not in danger of sleeping with you, am I qualified?" she'd asked.

Becca had frowned. "I'm not the first one to do this. Gisele's twin is her manager, and look how that's turned out!"

As Rachelle quickly learned, you can't argue Gisele.

Gisele or no Gisele though, she's had a hard time being taken seriously given her age, gender, and the obvious nepotism. Rachelle has owned up to it, but that doesn't stop people in the industry from gossiping behind her back. For the most part, she ignores it. Becca needs her to thrive personally and professionally, and Rachelle is fully committed. She has molded her life to fit inside her sister like a tiny nesting doll, and as long as she folds it tightly enough, she can almost forget how close she was to losing her. But then there are moments like these where her fears come racing back. What if it's not enough? What if *she's* not enough? And then she's

six-years-old again, an older sister unable to protect her younger one, lost.

“I’m not leaving you,” Becca says.

Rachelle pictures her face through the wall—lips slightly pouted, eyes narrowed, cheeks sucked in. What a fucking model. She would hate Becca if she didn’t love her so much.

“I know,” she says. As her worry recedes, she takes a deep breath. She will do anything for her sister. Anything. Including giving Becca her boyfriend.

Six months ago, Rachelle hooked up with Henley (yes, his name was Henley) for a specific purpose. And it had worked out: the clumsy sex they’d had in his dust-covered apartment had finally confirmed she was, in fact, gay.

“I really respect you,” Henley said after it occurred. “But it just feels like this”—he’d gestured between them—“isn’t happening.”

“I don’t disagree,” Rachelle had replied.

In a chivalrous gesture, Henley walked her to the restaurant where she was meeting Becca for dinner. After one look at her sister’s beach waves and spray tanned skin—she’d been fresh off a swimwear photo shoot loosely described as “vintage Baywatch”—he’d decided that although Rachelle wasn’t happening, Becca definitely was.

“Can you introduce me?” Henley asked.

Rachelle did a careful check and felt no stirrings in her mind, heart or vagina. “Sure,” she said.

Becca’s beauty was in the way she wore it—understated, haphazardly, kind of like a favorite cashmere sweater. Rachelle wasn’t worried. She knew her sister’s type, and although Henley met the physical requirements with his brown hair, broad shoulders and five o’clock

shadow, he was also someone who had flicked at Rachelle's boobs, cross-eyed, for twenty minutes. He would be fun for a while, but he wouldn't last with her sister. None of them did.

As Henley introduced himself to Becca, Rachelle felt relieved. Her sexuality had been dangling for years, unresolved, like a string on the back of her shorts. An hour of scraggly chest hair and sticky tissues later and that thread was finally cut.

She hasn't come out to her family yet. Her parents are liberal, but it's not exactly something she can just slip out during Shabbat. Her worst nightmare is that when she finally announces, "Family, I am gay," no one hears her because they are so absorbed in Wordle.

It's not that she's scared; she's lazy. She hasn't found the right moment to do it, so she hasn't. But she needs to.

"Rachelle," Becca says. "Bubbie's calling for you."

If Bubbie is on her dying tangent, they have no choice but to let it play out. Two weeks ago, she spent forty minutes describing the precise chocolates to serve at her shiva. Rachelle wonders if this obsession with mortality is an old person thing, or if it flares in the summer, another byproduct of the heat. Her bruised knees protest as she stands. She does not want to think about dying. Not Bubbie. Not her sister. Not anyone.

"Coming—" Her words are lost in the furious wail of the fire alarm.

Becca pounds on the door. "Get out of there. What if something's happening?"

They grew up a few blocks away in a building similar to this one. The Sutcliffe is old, its smoke detector sensitive. The last time it went off was because Bubbie turned the oven to self-cleaning mode and forgot to open the windows. The apartment smelled like burnt onions for a week. "Nothing's wrong," she assures Becca, reaching for the lock. "It's a false—"

Chapter Nine

Ellie

The fire alarm shrieks, but Ellie doesn't move and neither do her parents. They know the smoke detector goes off for a million reasons that have nothing to do with a fire, and what Ellie has just said qualifies as an actual disaster.

"What did you say?" Her dad asks.

"We're in love."

Her mom smiles like her face is about to crack in half. "But...isn't he married?"

"Legally," Ellie says, "but not emotionally." *It's just a matter of making the time*, Raf's told her. *It's more complicated with kids*.

Her father's mouth opens so wide she sees the glint of a filling on his back molar. "He's legally married?"

"Don't keep repeating questions back to her," her mom says.

"How old is this jerk? I'll have him arrested!"

"He's forty-two, and we are consenting adults," Ellie says.

"It was his idea, wasn't it?" Her father begins to pace, his face dark cherry. "He groomed and manipulated her, Tanner!"

Her mother's strange grin falls, and blooms of red crawl like spiders up her neck. "This is lust you're feeling, honey. It's not real."

Ellie clenches her jaw. "Don't tell me what I feel."

When she imagined this conversation with her parents, Raf was here. He was holding her hand and telling them everything he's told her about her talent, intellect and kindness.

Charlene pokes her head in the room. "The noise isn't stopping. Should we go outside?"

"Ignore it," her father barks.

An ache behind Ellie's temples pounds in time to the alarm. This isn't how it was supposed to go. She needs to start over, at the beginning. But she can't get the words out as her parents surround her, determined to dismantle her dream, the daughter they can't understand.

They can't take ballet away. They can't take Raf.

Ellie backpedals, into the foyer and out the front door, where the emergency lights flicker in the hallway. A voice overhead tells her to use the stairs. She ignores it, stabbing at the elevator.

"Elizabeth!" Her mother follows. "Where are you going?"

"Leave me alone!" Ellie shouts. The elevator opens with a ding. As the doors begin to close, her mother reaches out.

"Wait. Ellie!"

For one moment, Ellie hesitates. She pictures looping her fingers around her mother's, sinking into her chest like she did when she was a child, feverish and scared.

"Ellie," her mom repeats.

The moment passes. She isn't a kid anymore. And her mother is on her father's side, not hers. Ellie swats her mother's hand away.

Chapter Ten

Montgomery

As MaryAnne and Serena charge toward her, Montgomery is dimly aware of the alarm pulsing, of a girl with white hair bursting through elevator doors, of sweat dripping sweet like ice cream down her face.

Get out of here, she commands, but her body isn't moving, until one of the security guards pulls her out of the way. The other guard pushes MaryAnne and Serena toward the door, releasing them outside.

"What the fuck?" Todd paces in circles, his hands digging into his hair. "Can someone shut off this damn alarm?"

On the sidewalk outside the building, Serena pulls at MaryAnne's arm like her mother is a lamp she's turned on.

The alarm blares in circles, and the pharmacy closes, and her father, Henry, is in pain. Devastation seeps into Montgomery's bones like a cold rain. She stares helplessly as MaryAnne and Serena break into a run.

Chapter Eleven

Ellie

Ellie stumbles into chaos. In the lobby, the famous guy her dad always fist bumps is freaking out. His wife and daughter are outside, screaming. She barely knows Serena, but the look on her face right now is exactly how Ellie feels.

“I came here to get my daughter, not get harassed by my crazy ex-wife,” Todd shouts. “Why is this fucking alarm still going?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Reggie says. “I’m speaking with the management team now. We’re trying to isolate the source of the alarm. In the meantime, I’d ask you to please exit the building.”

“I’m not leaving until I have Serena’s things. In the storage unit, right?”

“Yes sir.” Reggie clasps his hands as several annoyed residents head toward him.

Todd utters another string of curses. He stalks past Ellie toward the elevator. When he presses the button and nothing happens, he bangs through the door to the basement stairs. Another swell of residents spill into the lobby. More and more people are coming downstairs as their frustration turns to concern.

Ellie wonders if something is actually wrong. She tries to get Reggie’s attention, but now he’s helping guide an elderly couple outside. She thinks about going against the flow of traffic to get her parents. She considers the crowded elevator. The even more crowded stairs.

They’re stubborn, but not stupid, she decides. Angry, but logical. They’ll be down any minute. She clasps her hands over her ears in an effort to blot out the sound, and as soon as she

does, she realizes something.

“I named you Elizabeth for a reason,” her mother always says. “Why would I shorten it?”

But just now, before the elevator closed, her mother called her Ellie, maybe for the first time ever.

She’s wondering what this could possibly mean when the ceiling explodes.

Chapter Twelve

Eight weeks earlier

The Sutcliffe is a pre-war building which, like many in New York City, is full of character—and neglect. The charm that draws wealthy residents through its doors masks decades of sloppy repair work. Most recently, this can be tied back to Brian Hoffman, who works at the property management company.

At his desk, Brian lays his head in his hands and lets out a heavy sigh. He's just back from The Sutcliffe's annual inspection. *Keep them good enough to be good enough*; that's his motto. His portfolio is full of these dinosaurs.

Brian has been distracted all day. Fifty-seven and twice divorced, he has recently returned from an ill-fated Vegas trip where the only thing he's won is chlamydia. His daughter's college tuition bill is smoking in his pocket and his hair has begun to fall from his scalp in large, grassy clumps. Suffice it to say, he was not fully present at the inspection.

When he gets invited out for a beer that evening, he has no qualms about rushing the paperwork. The inspection notes get passed to his boss, and his boss's boss, and no one wonders if not everything that needed finding was found. It's a lot of extra work to doubt, and Brian's an alright guy, and a beer at five o'clock sounds good to them, too.

In the end, it's all a matter of timing and placement and physics. In a perfect world, the bomb wouldn't bring The Sutcliffe down. But as Brian can tell you, that world is not this.

When the bomb detonates, it explodes through the lower part of the building, eviscerating support beams and wrenching plaster from steel. By the time the first responders arrive, The Sutcliffe has sunken into itself, smoke rising in plumes of slippery lambswool to the sky.

Firefighters worm their way into the building, searching for life. Flames swallow stairwells; apartments shred like ribbons. As they fight their way down fire-clogged hallways, hope turns to despair. They know from the utter destruction that no one could have survived.

Chapter Thirteen

Montgomery sees the desk first. Massive, mahogany, it's tipped on its side like a sunken ship. In all the times she's delivered food to The Sutcliffe, she's never seen the desk without Reggie behind it. The floor coughs and she dives for it, hurtling through the curl of flames until she's wrapped beneath its outstretched legs.

Becca is second to find it. She crashes down two stories and lands in the lobby, screaming for Rachelle. Around her, the building shrieks. She scrambles through the swirling debris for the desk, wedging herself under, still crying for her sister. Then, she realizes she's not alone.

Montgomery is too stunned to be shocked at another person. She focuses on something moving in the crackling haze. "You see that?"

"What?" Becca's eyes sting from the smoke.

Montgomery extends her arms into the crumbling world. "Hold my legs!"

A second ago, Rachelle was in Bubbie's bathroom, and in the next, she's wrenched and squeezed, her stomach clogging her throat. The world has shattered. She crawls forward, her breath catching like Velcro. When something latches onto her leg, she kicks against it, but it presses down, and the earth slurps her like an oyster. When she opens her eyes, she's under what used to be The Sutcliffe's front desk. The tremors she feels is Becca's body against her own.

"Are you okay?" Becca can hardly get the words out, her relief is so fierce.

"Listen," Rachelle says breathlessly. "I saw someone else."

Across the room, a beam capsizes with a thunderous crash. Montgomery strains to see.

She shakes her head. “No one’s there.”

Something yawns open inside Rachelle. When she took gymnastics as a child, the instructor would stand behind her and push her into a somersault. It’s like that now; something physically shoves her forward as she rolls away from the desk.

Becca yells and rubs at her eyes, which feel like exploding fireworks. Montgomery scratches at the air. “I can’t see her,” they shout at each other. “Can you?”

In the initial blast, Ellie is launched into the air, bouncing like a football to the far side of the lobby. The heavy wooden doors, the Tiffany lamp, the mosaic tile floor—all of it gone, spinning and gusting in a furious rain of fire and brick. To stay still is to die, so she forces herself to stand. She grasps her way forward until something wraps around her. She gives in. She thought death would be worse than this. When she lands on the ground, a warm fluttery sensation against her skin, she realizes she’s alive, and what she’s feeling are hands.

Becca and Montgomery watch as Rachelle’s fingers curl around the desk, ghostly pale against the reddish-brown grain. They pull her and Ellie underneath.

“Thank God,” Becca repeats. “Thank God.”

Montgomery can barely see. The other women are hazy, rimmed in red. Their backs are pressed against the desk which is perched like a shield, protecting them from the end of the world. “No one leaves,” she says. “It’s not safe.”

Ellie wonders if maybe this *is* death; it smells like the bowels of the earth. “Who are you?”

Before anyone can answer, there is another explosion, and the mahogany desk cracks open like an egg.

Chapter Fourteen

Aditi

Age 36

Aditi Singh arrives to find dozens of first responders already on the scene. She jumps off the fire truck and into utter madness. Smoke is everywhere. Blood coats the ground. Firefighters run back and forth, shouting. A hose thick as an elephant trunk rears up, throwing water into a sky ripped with red.

Aditi stops a cop sprinting by. “Any survivors?”

He pauses only for a second. “Nothing,” he says, before breaking back into a run.

A faucet of despair twists on inside her. She woke up this morning ready to quit. After months of resisting her parents’ urgings to pursue the more stable career path of doctor—or ideally, surgeon—she had finally been prepared to throw in the towel. Her family’s disappointment was only one of the factors. It was also the low pay and long hours. The sexism she faces in her mostly male crew. Aditi became a firefighter because when catastrophe happened, she wanted to be where help mattered, in the thicket of sadness and pain. She couldn’t have the same impact, not truly, from an office, or a sterile operating room.

Dread darkens the edges of her vision. She reminds herself it is hard work to save lives. Not everyone can do it.

She trudges ahead, through bits of bodies. A foot here. An arm over there. Scraps of clothing, dusty eyeballs, a finger with a wedding ring still on it—this is all that’s left. Full

humans with full lives, reduced to this.

Determination swoops like a bird, low in her chest. These are the moments she's trained for. She can't get anywhere close to the epicenter; the fire is simply too hot. The heat penetrates the thick layers of her gear as she climbs a jumble of iron and stone.

Then, she sees it. A flicker of movement.

Firefighters are still working to control the blaze. The heat is causing metal to twist, sheets of plastic to expand and warp. What she saw is probably nothing.

But then it happens again. A ripple, like a mermaid thrashing under the rubble.

"I've got something," she screams.

Chapter Fifteen

The women grasp each other, their cries sucked into grainy dust that coats their mouths. The desk is melting, wood peeling away like skin from bone. Montgomery covers her head, thinking only of her father. Becca is numb, marveling at her body with no scrapes or bruises. Rachelle clings to Becca, knowing she can do nothing to protect her. And Ellie dreams of her parents: angry faces and hands that cannot be returned.

Flames devour the mahogany; the desk twists like a gnarled beast as it heads for them.

Chapter Sixteen

Aditi

Other first responders follow Aditi's lead, their boots crunching as they navigate the rubble.

There's a burst of fire, and she sees it again. "There!" she shouts.

She watches impatiently as they douse the flames. When all that is left is thick, black smoke, she thrusts her hands beneath the rocks. "Help me!"

A firefighter joins. Another comes, and another, and together they dig. Beneath these heavy boulders and piles of bones there is *someone*—and they are alive.

Aditi claws at the mountain until finally, a small gap appears. There's that ripple again, the earth shimmering, and her voice dies in her throat as a head appears.

It takes three of them to lift the woman from the rubble. Behind the woman, another emerges, and then another, and another.

It's like someone being born, Aditi thinks. She tries to make sense of how none of them appear grievously injured, and her brain short-circuits before her training kicks back in. "Count them off," she screams, but no one is listening. Everyone is distracted. In disbelief.

Aditi is used to hard work. It's how she's risen the ranks of this male-dominated industry. It's why she's stayed as long as she has. In situations like these, she knows, shit needs to get done.

So that's exactly what she does.

Chapter Seventeen

Montgomery

Montgomery is conscious of a heat that writhes and bares its fangs. It grips her and she falls forward, into a scorching world. Hands are on her, mouths speaking, panicked, urgent, demanding answers to questions she doesn't yet have. One voice cuts through it all, clear and steady.

ONE.

Chapter Eighteen

Becca

Becca blinks back the fog, expecting to find herself in Bubbie's apartment, belly full of potatoes, jazz playing softly on the living room speaker. Instead, color and light is smeared, flung to the edges of the earth. She tries to touch it, and then it's crawling down her fingers, curling the edges of her hair. Her ribs slam like doors as the voice calls out.

TWO.

Chapter Nineteen

Rachelle

Rachelle buzzes. A million tiny bees are in her ears, building nests, burrowing and glittering. She sees the sharp blast of sky and perfect, golden Becca, in the midst of it all, knowing where to find her, always. A voice booms as she reaches for her sister.

THREE.

Chapter Twenty

Ellie

Ellie knows she belongs where there is light. Something lifts her, and she floats in the delicate space between sun and clouds. Then she slams to the ground. A voice splinters and she covers her ears against what falls around her.

FOUR.

Part Two

Chapter Twenty-One

Three hundred and twelve people perished on July sixteenth, including Todd Ventura, famed late night TV host and lifelong New Yorker. It is unfathomable; devastating. But there is also a reason for gratitude: four survived, and the world wants—and needs—to focus on them.

The Final Four are celebrated. The iconic image of them, dirty and defiant, clasping hands as a tornado of smoke spins behind them, circulates worldwide. The world agrees: the Final Four represent the strength and resilience of America. Some say these four symbolize the struggles women have long fought; that their rise from the earth is a metaphor for the societal bricks that have long pinned women to a world of misogyny and inequality. They are the future.

But for all the attention they receive, an obvious fact has been—perhaps intentionally—omitted. The two who caused this are a mother and a daughter.

They are women, too.

MaryAnne and Serena are arrested in Katz's Deli on the Lower East Side, while they're eating a pastrami sandwich and tuna melt. "It's strange," the arresting officer is later quoted. "They didn't even try to hide."

When approached, MaryAnne falls to the floor and cries. The authorities have to drag her out of the restaurant.

Serena comes willingly. She confesses right away.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A Chilling Confession

By Hector Velazquez | New York Daily News | July 18

When sixty-two-year-old Ralph McFarland of Plano, Texas, visited New York City for the first time, he'd expected excitement—but not of this magnitude.

Mr. McFarland spent his three day trip to Manhattan walking through Central Park, catching a Broadway show, and taking selfies with the Naked Cowboy in Times Square. The last day of the trip included a trip to the Empire State Building, followed by a sandwich at famed Katz's Delicatessen. "That's one of the things I was looking forward to most," Mr. McFarland said. "In Texas, we like our beef."

The pastrami wasn't the only thing Mr. McFarland experienced. As he was beginning his meal, the door to the restaurant flew open. He described a chaotic scene in which two women in the booth next to him were dragged from their seats.

According to Mr. McFarland, Miss Ventura told the authorities everything. "The words were pouring out of her. I was taken aback by the force. It was angry, almost. Like she was picking a fight."

At the time, news of The Sutcliffe hadn't yet spread, and Mr. McFarland wasn't aware of what had happened. When Mrs. Ventura fell to the floor, he began to piece it together. "I knew it must be bad," he said. "But I never could have imagined how bad."

Mr. McFarland said he'll remember his trip to New York City for the rest of his life. "You don't get stuff like this back home," he said.

Part Three

Three Months after The Sutcliffe

Chapter Twenty-Three

Montgomery

Montgomery watches her father pick at his green beans as her mother says a prayer.

“Lord, bless us with the will to forgive those who have wronged us.” Gloria says.

“Amen.” Henry takes his time wiping his mouth with his napkin. As he sets it on his lap, he sighs. “Monty. I’m fine.”

Montgomery stiffens. She tries to drag her eyes away, but they are stubbornly stuck on him. “I never said you weren’t.”

“You don’t need to. Your worry is written clear as day all over your face.”

He has said it kindly, yet heat skids up her neck. She looks at her plate, no longer hungry. It’s become second nature, staring at him, constantly reminding herself he is still here. She hadn’t realized he’d noticed.

She remembers the exact moment, eleven months and four days ago, so clearly. She was at Colgate, the end of the first semester of her senior year. As she walked to the library, the sun smoldering orange against the mid-November clouds, her phone rang. She answered without knowing everything was about to change.

“Aunt Rhonda?”

The tenor of her aunt’s voice made her chest collapse like a popped balloon. The sun tucked itself behind a giant cloud, like it was protecting itself from the hurt about to come.

“Monty,” her aunt said. “It’s your dad.”

She remembers falling on the uneven ground that seemed to ripple, her backpack wedged like a stake into the ground, the only thing keeping her upright.

“He’s alive?” All she could hear was that word—*alive*—dangling, spinning on a carousel. She thought her aunt had already said it, but she needed to hear it again.

“Yes. We’re at the hospital, your mom, Tyson, everybody.”

“I’m coming home,” she said. “Tell him to hold on, okay? I’ll be there.”

She still remembers the feel of the pavement under her sneakers as she ran, the pumpkin moon rising as her backpack bumped in time to the whisper in her heart. *Wait for me, wait, wait.*

After they’ve eaten dinner, Montgomery helps Gloria with the dishes. The steam from the water coats her face and hands; the window over the sink fogs, obscuring their building’s small courtyard. This apartment felt crowded when she was growing up; by the end of high school, she couldn’t wait to leave. But now, the thick smell of spice and clutter of shoes by the door brings comfort. She is grateful for the closeness of the rooms and the soft chatter of her brother and father on the couch. These routines are all Montgomery has.

Home is the only place she’s safe; the Bronx, an island removed from the ugliness of the rest of the world. Every time she tries to leave, she’s terrified something will go wrong. She has visions of buildings slamming to the ground, of concrete sidewalks splitting her down the middle. The Sutcliffe has destroyed her confidence, her ambition, her *drive*.

Gloria dries her hands and passes Montgomery the dish towel. Her auburn hair curls like fire down her back. “Join your father and I in the living room for a minute, okay?”

Montgomery follows her mother to where Henry sits on the couch, hands folded in his lap. “Tyson,” Gloria says, “go to your room for a bit.”

Tyson strokes his pre-teen jaw like a wizened old man. “What about the movie?”

“Soon,” Henry says. “We’ll call you.”

Tyson slings a curious glance over his shoulder as he slinks to his room.

Henry pats the seat next to him and Montgomery melts into the worn out cushions. Gloria settles on the other side, and there is something so nurturing about this physical connection with both her parents that Montgomery closes her eyes, leaning into it.

“Your mother and I waited to have this conversation because we wanted to give you time.” Henry grasps her hand with warm, calloused fingers. “But things aren’t getting better, and we need to discuss it.”

“There’s a reason you were saved, honey.” Gloria rests her palm lightly on Montgomery’s thigh. “And it wasn’t to sit here every night and keep us company.”

Montgomery turns her head quickly, and something cracks. “That’s not what I’m doing. I’m helping. With Dad.”

Henry sighs, heavy and deep. In it, Montgomery hears when her future first changed.

Until his heart attack, she knew her mom as a lover of pink lipstick and banana milkshakes. The loudest cheerleader at Tyson’s basketball games, the first call their neighbors made when they needed advice, and the only person in the world to get Henry to actually back down on something when he dug his heels in. She was the mother who spent hours braiding Montgomery’s hair and dancing to Beyonce and the one who taught her that loving yourself meant standing up for yourself. Henry was the pillar of their family, but Gloria was the very foundation.

Until she’d broken.

When Henry had to go on disability after his heart attack, he’d felt so much shame.

Montgomery had just started delivering food at that point, and her quads burned as she arrived home after a long day pedaling around the city. She froze at the sound of Gloria sobbing. When she entered the kitchen, she saw her aunt rocking her mother like an infant.

That night, Montgomery listened to Henry's snores darting and shifting as she relived the pain on her mother's face. The force of her new future slammed into her like a subway car, and she cried at how badly it hurt, but she held both hands over her mouth and pushed it back in.

When she told her parents she was dropping out of school permanently, Gloria was silent.

"Oh hell no, you're not," Henry said, but Montgomery stood strong, the way they'd taught her to, and told them she'd made up her mind. When Gloria cried and Henry lowered his head she felt their sadness in the cracks of her feet. She absorbed their defeat into her heart and carried it with her. It was the least she could do. As much as she loved herself, she loved her family more.

Between disability checks, Gloria's nursing income and Montgomery's deliveries, they have made these last eleven months work. But now, Montgomery is petrified of everything and unable to contribute. Since The Sutcliffe, she has done nothing but worry: mostly for Henry, but also for herself.

"You've been a great help," Henry says gently. "And having you home has been a true blessing. But I'm getting stronger every day. And you've got to get on with your life."

She stares at the fissures in his face that weren't there before. He's sixty, his hair white at the temples. Every night after Gloria slips to bed, he asks for a glass of whiskey he knows he shouldn't have, and Montgomery says no. Last night, for the first time, she gave him the whiskey. They sat on the couch, watching the Mets. Henry glanced at her and turned the TV off. "This was not your fault," he said in the sudden silence. "Me. The Sutcliffe. None of it."

When she didn't answer, he restarted the TV. The whisky disappeared, and they went to sleep. Montgomery dreamt of long, dark fingers slithering like spiders under her bed.

"We're not kicking you out," Gloria says now. "We just want you to think. What about graduating? Or law school? You used to want that."

"I get that you feel like you need to carry this family," Henry says, "but that's *our* job. Your job is to take advantage of the opportunities in front of you, and that starts with education."

It's like they are peering into Montgomery's brain with a flashlight, exposing every doubt and fear, her wishes for the future that swoop like flies in her peripheral, just out of reach. *I want this*, she thinks, and it tears at her. "But you need me," she says instead.

"Not more than you need you, honey." Gloria says. "What we need is for you to live your life. Not ours. *Yours*, Montgomery. You have our blessing. You have our permission. Now all you need, baby girl, is yours."

* * *