

FLIGHT

Kate Christie



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DEDICATION

To the latest additions to the family, Sydney and Ellie: May you and big sister Alex run fast, play hard, and always look out for each other. And when you fall, because you will on occasion, remember what Mama likes to say: *Fall down seven times, get up eight.*

PROLOGUE

Lately I've been thinking a lot about family. Maybe that's not so surprising given that in a few weeks, I'll be traveling to Chicago with my wife and children to observe the thirty-fifth anniversary of the plane crash that killed my parents. Our daughter and son are young still, so they won't be present for the official ceremony of remembrance. Instead, my wife will take them downtown to the Chicago Children's Museum to draw and play while I return to the airport for only the fourth time in thirty-five years. At O'Hare, the families of those lost will once again mingle with airline representatives, rescue workers, and other airport personnel who were there on the sunlit October afternoon when Flight 108 from Orlando crashed on landing, killing everyone on board except a three-year-old girl—me.

Outwardly, I suffered only a broken leg, second-degree burns, cuts, and bruises. But after the paramedics pulled me out of the wreckage, I didn't talk for ten whole days. I didn't cry, either, my aunt told me later. I just stared straight ahead, unmoving and unresponsive in my hospital bed as doctors and psychiatrists and social workers tried to break through the protective walls my immature brain had raised. At last, exhausted and lonely, I woke to life again, missing my parents with a pain I still associate with the flames that consumed much of the crash site.

I don't remember the crash itself, or my week of silence. Intellectually, I know what happened, but I can't remember the instant the plane struck the runway, rose up again, and cartwheeled

across the air field. Which is just as well, everyone has always assured me. There's a reason I can't remember, but even without the memory, I am marked by the accident in a way that I know I'll never fully escape. Up to that point, it had never occurred to me that I could lose my family. But in the few seconds it took the landing gear on an aging jet to fail, my parents were gone, leaving me in a world that no longer felt safe. Like anyone who experiences tragedy, I am a different person because of the crash. I will never know the person I might have become, nor the people my parents might have already been.

"And I alone survived..."

The melodramatic statement, also the title of an actually quite good book about, of all things, the sole survivor of a plane crash, occurs to me semi-frequently, though less and less as I get older. Three and a half decades have changed me so much that I no longer feel like the same person who, as a young child, survived a tragedy too immense for her brain to grasp. I don't feel like the rebellious teenager I grew into, either, or the motivated college student or, later, the young adult with a wedding album and mortgage.

Technically, in fact, I am no longer any of these people. According to my college biology professor, the human body is made up mostly of water that is replaced on a monthly basis, while many other human cells have a life cycle measured only in days or months. Our bodies are constantly changing, evolving, shedding bits and pieces of who we once were. We couldn't remain the same person from year to year, decade to decade, even if we wanted to.

This transitory nature of the body makes sense to me. Most days I simply feel like the current me—half of an old married couple, full-time parent to two lovely kids under the age of five, and part-time writing instructor at the local community college, with never, seemingly, enough time to get much of anything done.

We haven't told Madison, the oldest at four going on forty, or Jack, our plucky yet wobbly toddler, the reason for our upcoming trip to Chicago. They know they have only one set of doting grandparents to Skype with and to visit at the holidays. But they don't know details. Those will come later—perhaps at the next Flight 108 reunion, or the one after that. We meet in Chicago, survivors of our common tragedy, every five years to share stories and photos of the dead, and to celebrate our own lives, too, for

FLIGHT

most of us have managed to move forward in spite of the loss we all keenly still feel.

Lost loved ones never go away completely, of course, particularly those ripped away in violence. Your heart never fully heals. But you do go on, if you're lucky, to become someone almost recognizable—a person with different loves and losses, new families and friends, hoping all the while that the swift injustice of tragedy won't target you again; that untimely death will leave you in peace forever after.

I wasn't that fortunate, myself. But when loss decided to set up shop on my front stoop again, I didn't stop talking this time. I kept moving away from who and what I had been, hoping my new life would find me sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER ONE

~SUMMER 1993~

A year and a day after he left home for good, Austin Taylor knocked on my front door and strolled right in. It was June 1993, and I'd owed him a letter for months now. Apparently he'd gotten tired of waiting.

"Hey there, Ash," he said, dropping his sea bag and smiling at me across the living room as if it had been no time at all since we had last seen each other.

"Austin! What are you doing here?" I lowered the dust rag clenched in my right hand and stared at him.

"What does it look like? What—no hug?"

He crossed to where I knelt beside the once-busted rocking chair my aunt, Selma, had restored and refinished years before in her garage workshop. Half an hour earlier, I had discovered a thick coat of dust on the lower support rails, which had led to a concerted attack with a can of Pledge and an old T-shirt that had long since been repurposed.

I stood up and let him embrace me, my arms loose about his waist as a lump rose in my throat. I swallowed hard, trying without success to force it away. In general, I was not a fan of crying. Lately, I'd done more than my share. Not that Austin would know.

We'd been best friends ever since his family moved in next door when he was ten and I was nine. Nearly a decade later, life was not as simple as it had been when we first met. For one thing, Austin

had graduated from high school a year ahead of me and joined the Navy, leaving behind Signal Mountain, Tennessee, and me in one fell swoop. The day he left, he promised to come back some day and steal me away from our hometown. I told him he was dreaming—I would never need rescuing.

“I swear, girl, you are even skinnier than last time I saw you,” Austin said, pulling away to give me the once-over.

“That’s slender to you.”

I returned the perusal. He had filled out in his year at sea, shoulders broader than I remembered, biceps straining the short sleeves of his white T-shirt, features more chiseled than delicate now.

“What are you doing here?” I asked again. “Aren’t you supposed to be out on a boat somewhere in the middle of the ocean?”

“They call ’em ships, you know.” His gaze slid away and settled on my half-full glass on the coffee table. “Hey, is that lemonade?”

For a moment, I pictured Selma standing at the kitchen counter running lemons through her beloved juicer, her shock of prematurely white hair disheveled from the habit she’d had of lifting her bangs away from her face when the Tennessee swelter got to be too much for her Northern blood.

“It’s Minute Maid,” I said.

Austin ducked his head in the way girls at our high school had always found endearing. Boys, on the other hand, had usually wanted to kick the crap out of him.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be here for the funeral,” he said. “Did you get my letters?”

I nodded. Throughout the spring, he had written long letters full of bittersweet remembrances that only he and I, now, shared.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” he added, “just like that? Feels like she should come walking in any minute in that bandanna and those ratty old gloves of hers.”

I smiled at the image he’d conjured of Selma in her gardening uniform, half-expecting to look out the back window myself and see her wiping the sweat from her eyes with her faded blue bandanna as she toiled over the raised beds she’d built back before I could remember. As far as I was concerned, the garden had always been there, just like Selma herself. Now it was wasting away, no matter how hard I worked to keep the neat plots watered and

weed-free—as if the plants, sensing Selma’s absence, had given up on life; as if photosynthesis and cell division were impossible without the plant food she brewed from scratch, the songs she crooned as she worked in the garden, her whispered words not intended for human ears.

Those songs had led some of the less progressive people in town to whisper the word “witch” behind her back. Or maybe it was the informative display on the history of paganism she’d created a few years back, smack dab in the middle of Lent. Being director of the local library had its perks, she’d told me, her serene smile never faltering as even the liberal Christians on the library board of trustees privately expressed their concerns with this rather “creative” exhibition.

“Want some lemonade anyway?” I asked Austin. “Even if it is from a can?”

“Totally. I forget how hot it gets here.”

In the kitchen, I poured Austin’s lemonade and leaned against the stove, watching him. When he’d left the summer before, Selma had been alive and supposedly well, the cancer cells attacking her body as yet undetected. A year later, she was gone and the house, a cozy Craftsman cottage on half an acre at the edge of the town’s historic district, was now mine to do with as I chose, along with the shockingly large sum of money Selma had left me. As of yet, I had put off choosing.

He fingered a pot holder hanging from a hook on the side of the fridge, then peered down at the counter. “Jesus, Ash, it’s cleaner in here than the flight deck on my ship.”

“I’ve had a little time on my hands,” I said, and folded my arms across my chest.

His eyes scrunched at the corners. “I really wanted to be at the funeral. I practically begged my CO, but he claimed it was out of his control.”

“It’s okay. I knew you couldn’t help it.”

“Then why didn’t you write back?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t know what to say.”

To tell the truth, I still didn’t. The last few months were a blur. For my high school graduation two weeks earlier, Claire, Austin’s mother and Selma’s best friend, had bought me a dress to wear to graduation. Even though I was more of a sweats and T-shirt kind of girl, I’d worn the dress to the ceremony down at U-T

Chattanooga, and then again to the party Claire had thrown for me. I'd put my hair up the way Selma had always liked, and I'd smiled at the people I'd known my whole life, classmates and teachers and the parents of schoolmates and former teammates, most of whom regarded me now with even more pity than they had before Selma got sick, their kind eyes and offers of assistance making me grit my teeth and long to be someplace—any place—else.

In the days since, I'd tackled house and yard chores that seemed to multiply like kudzu vines, while at night I lay awake for hours trying to piece back together a future I had once regarded as immutable. I had been accepted into three universities for the fall—two here in Tennessee and one in Chicago—but I couldn't seem to choose between them. It didn't help that not one of the track coaches at these fine institutions had expressed anything more than tepid interest in my athletic abilities. So much for my dream of becoming another Wilma Rudolph, triumphing over early tragedy to flourish on the college and international track scene.

Orphan—I had always hated the word the would-be bullies and mean girls whispered loudly in my hearing, taunting me on the playground before they learned better. When I was little, Selma had been there to kiss away my tears of rage, to bandage my skinned knuckles as she explained to me why violence was never an acceptable response.

Now she was gone, too. Ever since the day in April that Claire and I had sprinkled Selma's ashes from the overlook at Signal Point, I'd been sleepwalking through the scenery of my old life, waiting for something to come along and wake me up.

"What are you really doing here?" I asked Austin. "If they wouldn't let you come home for Christmas or the funeral, how are you here now?"

He held his glass in both hands. "It's a long story."

"I have time." A thought occurred to me. "Your parents don't know you're here, do they?"

They would have told me if they had, would have joyfully announced his impending arrival as if he were able to dispel storm clouds with a single smile. To them, that was what he had always been—their golden-haired child, their sunny son. During his final year of high school, Austin's parents had appeared to overlook signs of the increasingly troubled boy I'd recognized beneath his compulsively cheerful surface. No wonder they'd been stunned

when he announced he was putting off college to join the Navy.

He shook his head now and glanced guiltily out the window, as if his family would somehow be able to detect his presence despite the mature stand of trees and the eight-foot wooden fence—*deer obstacle*, Selma had liked to call it—that lay between his house and ours.

“You’re my first stop,” he admitted. “I actually have to tell you something.”

But instead of continuing, he set his empty glass on the counter and spun on his heel all military precise-like, angling for the living room.

Selma had used that same portentous phrase the day after Halloween when she sat me down at the kitchen table to tell me that she had metastatic pancreatic cancer. Stage IV. The oncologist down in Chattanooga was very sorry, but he didn’t think she had much time left. She was welcome, of course, to seek another opinion.

“I’m going to fight it,” she’d insisted, holding both of my hands, her blue-gray eyes darker than I’d ever seen them. Normally she reminded me of Santa Claus with her white hair, rosy cheeks, and easy belly laugh. That fall, though, she’d moved more and more slowly about the roomy bungalow she’d bought just before I came to live with her. The cancer diagnosis made everything click into place—that was why she seemed tired all the time, why she sometimes moaned in her sleep as she dozed on the couch after a dinner she’d only picked at. Cancer was the reason my aunt, the only mother I could remember, wouldn’t live long enough to see me finish high school.

As a distance runner, I thought I understood pain. But in the months that followed that talk, I learned what a body was capable of withstanding. And, simply, what it couldn’t.

In the living room, Austin and I sat on the antique wicker couch, and I folded my feet under me while he rested his on the cherry wood coffee table I had helped Selma refinish the summer I turned twelve. Half a dozen magazines lay strewn across the surface, subscriptions I hadn’t yet been able to bring myself to cancel. *National Geographic*, *Journal of the Smithsonian*, *National Gardener*, and *American Heritage* occupied the place usually reserved in Southern homes for colorful books on plantation architecture and the War Between the States. Selma, raised with my mother in

Wisconsin, had steadfastly refused to give up her Yankee roots. Maybe that was why I didn't feel like a true Southerner, either.

Austin, on the other hand, could trace his ancestors back to the Civil War—mostly gray-jacketed Rebs, though not all, as Eastern Tennessee had seen its fair share of divided loyalties—and beyond. So what was his excuse? Except I thought I knew why he had always held himself slightly apart from the other kids.

“Dude,” I said, regarding him evenly, “what’s up?”

He slouched down on the couch. “It’s not that big of a deal, really. Not after everything you’ve been through.”

“You’re not dying, are you?”

“No.” He looked at me quickly. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Just checking.” I plucked at a loose thread on one of the cushions.

“Honestly, this whole thing is idiotic. I don’t even know why the stupid government has half the rules it does.”

“Spill it, Austin.”

“Same old Ash.” He cleared his throat. “Okay. So, um, I kind of got kicked out of the Navy.”

“You did?” I pretended to be surprised.

“Yeah.” He paused, squinted, seemed to hold his breath. “For being gay.”

I shook my head. “Stupid-ass military. Why do they even care?”

He stared at me, blinking. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“Austin, I’ve known you half your life. I even used to think we’d get married someday. It’s cool if you’re gay.”

His shoulders visibly relaxed. “I used to think we’d get married, too. I like women, I really do. I’m just not, you know, attracted to them.”

“Fine with me. It’s not like kissing me turned you off girls permanently.”

In middle school, during an ill-advised game of “Spin the Bottle” in Mitch Allen’s basement, Austin and I had landed in the designated make-out closet for six whole minutes. Curious what the fuss was about, as soon as the door swung shut I’d leaned forward and kissed him. After an awkward moment, we’d both pulled back. Clearly there was nothing to be found between us other than a warm, fuzzy sort of affection.

“If you recall, you kissed me. And I’m pretty sure that’s exactly

what made me gay.”

“Liar!” I slugged him, my fist connecting with solid muscle.

Austin recoiled. “Ow! Jackass.”

“I’m the jackass, Mr. I-Have-A-Huge-Confession-To-Make? Like I wouldn’t know.”

Just before her diagnosis, Selma and I had rented *Torch Song Trilogy*. Afterward, I’d asked her if she thought Austin might be gay. She’d turned the question back on me, only allowing that it was possible after I admitted I believed he was queerer than a two-dollar bill. Looking back, she’d probably brought the movie home as a conversation-starter. A transplanted Midwesterner, Selma wasn’t exactly the direct type.

Although maybe her preference for subtlety was innate rather than a product of geography—I’d been raised nearly entirely in the South, the land of good manners, and my mouth had gotten me into trouble too many times to count. *Just like your mother*, Selma used to say.

“You really knew?” Austin asked. “Seriously?”

“I suspected. So did Selma.” I hesitated.

His eyes narrowed. “What?”

“We weren’t the only ones. Selma said Claire—your mom thought you probably joined the Navy because of it. You know, to escape the Bible Belt bangers.”

“Jesus H. Christ. Here I’ve been trying for the past month to work out a way to tell you guys, and you already knew?”

“Not everyone. Your mom wasn’t sure about your dad.”

He exhaled noisily and rubbed his head, palm grazing the short blond hairs standing up seemingly at attention. “He’s the one I’m most worried about.”

I looked a little closer, noticing that while his hair was short, it wasn’t military issue. “Wait. You’ve been out of the Navy for a month?”

He winced. “I know, I’m a jerk. I just didn’t know how to tell you guys.”

“You could have been here for graduation,” I said, folding my arms across the front of my T-shirt again.

“I know,” Austin repeated. “I’m sorry, Ash. I was going through a rough time, mooching off the friend of a friend. I finally found a place to live this weekend, so I caught a Greyhound and here I am. I don’t have long, though. I have to be back in a couple

of days to start my new job. Nothing fancy, just waiting tables. Work is hard to come by in the city without a college degree.”

“And which city would that be?”

“*The city.*” He grinned. “New York, of course.”

Just like Austin to hope his dimple would smooth things over.

“New York City?” I shook my head, most definitely not smiling.

His grin slipped. “Come on, now. What’s wrong?”

I stared at him, recalling the sleepless nights when I lay in bed listening to Selma moan in pain on the other side of the wall; the trips down the mountain to the oncology clinic at Chattanooga General, the news inevitably worse each time; the abysmal day we drove into the city to check her into the hospital for the last time; the final hour of Selma’s life when her breathing slowed to thirteen breaths a minute and twice her heart stopped only to restart itself as Claire and I sat on opposite sides of the hospital bed each holding onto a hand that was already deathly cold, waiting; all while my supposed best friend was thousands of miles away trying to decipher a part of himself I’d long since figured out.

“Gee, I don’t know, Austin,” I said. “You take off because you can’t deal, and all this shit comes down and you’re not here and now you come back and just expect—I don’t know. What do you expect?”

He looked at me levelly. “I don’t expect anything. I was hoping—my mom wrote me after the funeral and said you might not go to college right away. I’m subletting this apartment in the West Village for a year, and it’s amazing but seriously expensive. I could use some help with the rent. What do you say?”

I frowned. “About what?”

“About moving to New York. That’s why I’m here, Ash. Come back with me.”

At the earnest look in his eyes, the urgency in his voice, my anger ebbed. I looked around the living room, a familiar emptiness coiling in my stomach. I still expected to see Selma tending to her many indoor plants or relaxing on the patio out back. I still listened for her voice belting out one of the Janises—Ian or Joplin—in the kitchen as she cooked, for her footsteps creaking on the wood floors at night, even as I reminded myself these sounds would never—could never—come again. I had freed all that remained of her physical body myself, jettisoning her dusty, gritty ashes out into

the air high above the Tennessee River. Yet somehow I still felt her all around me in this home we had shared for so long.

Could I leave her now? Someday I would have to, but someday could still be a long way off. Or it could be tomorrow.

“Up north, huh?” I said. “You livin’ with a bunch of Yankees?”

“Shoot, they put their pants on same’s me ’n you,” Austin said in his best redneck accent.

“I still can’t believe you.”

“Why not? I told you I’d come back and rescue you from this old mountain.”

“It’s a ridge, not a mountain, fool. Besides, I told you I wouldn’t need rescuing.”

“How’s that working out for you?” He waved an arm presumably in reference to the house, Signal Mountain, my current state of being.

My eyes narrowed. “You can’t just waltz back in and expect me to jump at the idea of moving up north with you.”

“Why not? You’re more of a Yankee than I’ll ever be.”

“It’s not that easy, Austin, and you know it.”

He nodded. “I get it, Ash. Really. But will you at least think about it? I only have a couple of days before I have to head back.”

I hesitated, glancing again around the bright living room. This house, with its exposed beams and well-crafted built-ins, had been my home ever since I could remember, its light and smell and feel the most familiar things to me in the world. But without Selma there to complete the picture, even home didn’t feel right anymore.

“I’ll consider it,” I said at last.

“You will?” He leaned forward and held up his hand for a high-five. “Dude, that’s awesome!”

I ignored the gesture. “In the meantime, have you thought about how you’re going to tell your dad?”

His hand sank. “Only for the last month, and I still have no idea.”

Austin’s father was a good person, but Tennessee born and bred. And Southern men, even more so than other American men, are rarely pleased to discover they have a homosexual in the family, particularly when the gay is their only son.

“More lemonade?” I offered.

He leaned back against the couch. “Yes, please.”

CHAPTER TWO

After Austin left, I was too restless to stay in watching yet another Braves game, so I made myself a sandwich and went for a drive. I backed the station wagon down the long driveway, pulled out onto our tree-lined road, and headed east across the mountain, which isn't, as I'd reminded Austin, a mountain at all. Walden's Ridge occupies the southern edge of the Cumberland Plateau. Signal Mountain, our town, was named for Signal Point, the promontory that overlooks Chattanooga and the Tennessee River Gorge, the so-called Grand Canyon of Tennessee. Our ridge has been used by various factions—Creeks, Cherokees, Confederate soldiers, Federal troops—throughout the centuries to signal important messages and to observe enemy movements along the Tennessee River.

Herself a Yankee descendant of Midwestern abolitionists and Union soldiers, Selma had first traveled to Walden's Ridge in the mid-'70s when an old professor from library school had recommended her to his cousin, a prominent physician who was then President of the Signal Mountain Library Board of Trustees. Selma had worked for ten years already as a librarian in Milwaukee, and only accepted the invitation to interview for the library directorship out of respect for her one-time mentor. She'd fully intended to say no if they offered her the job, she told me later. But then she spent a lovely autumn weekend at the Signal Mountain Bed and Breakfast in the historic district, with its attractive cottages and stately summer homes. Almost against her will, my aunt found

herself charmed by Signal Mountain's leisurely pace, its Southern hospitality, and the unexpectedly progressive area residents who were ardently committed to community arts and, most importantly, to their library.

As her old professor had promised, directing the Signal Mountain Library was a dream job, and Selma knew she would probably never again be offered such an opportunity. By the time she returned home to busy, working class Milwaukee, she was ruined both for city life and urban library work. A small town girl at heart, she accepted the job even though it would take her far away from her baby sister in Chicago—and her sister's young daughter, barely walking and already a handful. Natalie, my mother, encouraged her to go, even though Selma, who was ten years older, had practically raised her after their mother died of breast cancer and their grieving father buried himself in his work. For someone who had never conceived, I'd always thought that Selma had managed to pack more than her share of mothering into her short lifetime.

Was dying young something you could inherit, like freckles or a receding hairline? This question had shadowed me in the aftermath of Selma's diagnosis. My mother, father, and maternal grandmother had all died before their thirty-fifth birthdays, while my maternal grandfather had managed to drink himself to death in the decades after the loss of his wife. We went to Wisconsin for his funeral when I was ten, the summer after Austin and his family moved to Signal Mountain. In Oshkosh, on the shores of Lake Winnebago, Selma and I attended the memorial service with scores of people who seemed to know all about me. My father's parents, Judy and Sherman Lake, stayed close throughout the services, stealing glances at me with their customary looks that even as a child I could tell featured a mixture of joy and pain.

Selma had told me that I looked just like my dad, lean and tall for a girl and brown-skinned from the sun just like he always was, swimming in Lake Winnebago and camping out under the Wisconsin stars with his older brother and their buddies. My dad, Ben, an avid outdoorsman, had loved growing up in Wisconsin, as had my mom, according to everyone who loved them. High school sweethearts, they planned to move back to their hometown someday, Selma told me. My father's law career was just taking off when we took that vacation to Disney World. Sometimes I think I

can remember the amusement rides and the giant stuffed characters featured on the camera that, along with my mother's purse, managed to survive the crash the same way I did—tucked between my parents' sheltering bodies, their arms about each other and me as the plane disintegrated around us. A rescue worker found me among the debris immediately after the crash, still clinging to my mother's body.

Thank God I can't remember anything about that. Denial ain't just a river in Egypt, as one of my therapists used to say. Turns out it's also a sophisticated coping mechanism.

Blessed be denial, Selma repeated often, offering me a hug when I was little, an affectionate pat or squeeze as I got older and started ducking her embrace. It hurt now to remember the petty slights I'd slung at her. Typical teenager, I'd assumed she would be around forever. But I of all people should have known better.

My arm hanging out the open car window, I turned up the stereo—Whitney Houston alternately crooning and belting out lyrics to her beloved bodyguard—and drove alongside the golf course at the northern edge of town. The Old Town district had originally been built by Chattanoogaans fleeing urban outbreaks of yellow fever and cholera in the late nineteenth century. Fortunately, the ghosts that lurked along the ridges and trails of my adopted hometown didn't feel personal to me. They were part of a world that had existed without me or anyone else whose DNA I shared. Growing up, I'd never had to wonder about intimate connections to the stories that made up Chattanooga and Signal Mountain's rich anecdotal history. In Southeast Tennessee, I could just be me—Ashley Lake, Selma Bishop's Yankee kid. We were a family; perhaps not a traditional one, but a happy one nonetheless.

And then we weren't. Like Austin had said, *just like that*.

Whitney Houston still doing her thing, I cruised past the local country club, where I'd worked a couple of summers waiting tables; past the stately homes that graced the land around the country club; and finally on to the unassuming public library where Selma had worked for seventeen years. Well, not this building, exactly—six years earlier, work had been completed on what I still thought of as the “new” library, a structure funded entirely by local donors. I slowed as I passed the familiar building, memories of Storytime and leisurely strolls among the stacks competing with those of Selma holding court at the central counter or bent over

the cluttered desk of her glass-walled office. Accompanying all these images was the familiar smell of books—the musty, dusty scent of thousands upon thousands of books bound with thread, glue, wood, crowding the library shelves from floor to ceiling.

The nostalgic sights and scents still dancing in my head, I drove on about my hometown, passing my old elementary school where I had often reigned supreme during games of kickball or King of the Mountain; the pizza place where my cross country teammates and I would hold court as we proceeded to demolish pie after pie in the wake of an autumn meet; and, of course, churches of all persuasions: Latter-Day Saints, Methodist, Church of Christ, Baptist—American and Southern, Episcopal, and the grand Presbyterian Church in the old part of town, just to name a few. They don't call it the Bible Belt for nothing.

My agnostic aunt's daughter, I bypassed all of these traditional spiritual havens and guided Selma's car instead toward what had always been our mutual favorite place of worship: Signal Point. The sun was sinking in the pale summer sky, tingeing the clouds pink and gray while darkness crept in from the east. I parked the station wagon and followed the paved path to the low stone wall that edged the cliff hundreds of feet above the Tennessee River. I came here when I wanted to be alone. Of course, with Austin and Selma both gone, recently I'd been alone most of the time whether I liked it or not.

Stepping over the wall, I sat down, my back against the mortared stones, my feet pointing toward empty space as the clouds overhead changed colors. The sky darkened, while in Chattanooga and over on Raccoon and Lookout Mountains, the opposite walls of the gorge, yellow lights blinked on a handful at a time like lightning bugs in a field at dusk.

When I was little, I used to catch lightning bugs in a jar and put them on my dresser, using their faint glow as a nightlight as I drifted off to sleep. A few months before she died, I mentioned this memory to Selma, telling her I had always been a little shocked that she had allowed me to kill creatures as amazing as lightning bugs. She'd thrown back her head and laughed, as in days of old, and assured me that she had freed any and all creatures I'd ever caught, waiting until I fell asleep to sneak into my room and replace the natural nightlight with my trusty electric one.

Did you ever even once wake up in the morning to find a jar of lightning

bugs on your dresser? she'd asked. And I'd had to shake my head, wondering as I did what other important clues I'd failed to notice during our too-short time together.

Now I gazed out across the gorge, thinking of my mother-aunt and her love of the birds and bats and trees of Signal Mountain. Almost daily, as long as it wasn't too hot, she and I would walk one of the many trails Walden's Ridge offered. Weekdays, with work and school constraining our time, we stuck to after-dinner walks on the golf course if the sun had already set, or opted for the one and a half mile loop around Rainbow Lake if the light still held. That was how I started trail-running—at ten, I could run two full loops of the lake in the time it took Selma to walk one. Later, as I grew taller and faster, my two loops became three. Afterward, we would walk home together, sharing the water bottles she carried in her fanny pack and remarking on the natural beauty of our home.

This wasn't to say that her passion for "the mountain" had been entirely unswerving. Not far below my current perch, leaf-clad trees hid an old rock quarry from view. Long since abandoned, the quarry was filled with water, making it a natural draw for kids and the worst fear of some Signal Mountain parents, including Selma. In high school, Austin and I had often smuggled a boom box and a six-pack of beer down to the quarry on summer nights. We would sit on the edge of the cliff, thirty feet up over the water, listening to Top Forty and jawing about anything and everything while the sun set and the air cooled. In the distance, a thousand feet below, we could see the river snaking toward downtown Chattanooga, once distinguished as the EPA's Most Polluted City. The 1980s had seen a rash of renewal projects sweep the region, though, and tourism was beginning to pick up again. Now, in the early '90s, people were coming from all over again to see Rock City, hike to Ruby Falls, and ride the Incline Railway up Lookout Mountain where, on a clear day, you could see seven states from the bluff at Lover's Leap.

On those summer nights way up above the world, Austin and I would talk about high school, our families, The Future. We complained about how little our parents understood us as we predicted endlessly wonderful destinies for ourselves far from Signal Mountain. I was going to be a great runner, with NCAA titles and Olympic medals aplenty. Austin wasn't sure yet what he wanted to do with his life, but he knew that whatever he achieved, it wouldn't be anywhere near Chattanooga. All we wanted then,

both of us, was to get as far away from Signal Mountain, from Tennessee, from the South, as we could.

Funny thing, though—now all I wanted was to return to those lost days of drinking illicit beers in the quarry, knowing that our parents would be waiting for us when we got home. Knowing that Selma would have fallen asleep on the couch, a blanket around her legs, newsletter of the National Audubon Society or the World Wildlife Fund open on her lap. Waiting for me.

Except she hadn't waited. She had gone on without me, just like my parents. The only person waiting for me now was Austin, the boy I had loved most of my life. My brother, my friend. He had left without me, too, but unlike the others, he had come back. He'd come back for me, and he was waiting for me even now, assuming his father hadn't kicked him out.

When dusk fell in earnest, the early summer darkness carrying with it the usual mosquito blitzkrieg, I left Signal Point and headed home. But as I approached my dark, silent house, I didn't stop. Instead, I pulled over on the gravel shoulder at the foot of a different driveway. There, I got out and headed up the long drive, brushing away buzzing insects and sticking to the silent grass at the edge of the gravel-strewn pavement. Around the back of the house, a two-story Colonial with an attached garage and vinyl siding, I saw a light on in a familiar window. I held a few pieces of gravel in my left hand and, with the other, tossed a pebble upward in a nearly forgotten motion. It took a couple of tries, but soon Austin's head appeared behind the screen, backlit by the overhead lamp. Still here, at least for now.

"Ash," he said. "Where were you? I tried to call."

"Did you mean it?" I asked, ignoring his question. "Are you serious about me going back with you?"

He seemed to perk up a little. "Totally."

"Okay then," I said, "I'm in."

And then I spun on my heel, all military-precise-like myself, and strode away into the darkness. I had to blink back tears as I guided Selma's car up our driveway. I couldn't stay here indefinitely with only her ghost to keep me company, but it was difficult to think about abandoning the only home I had ever known for the city of all cities a thousand miles away. Still, I had a year to figure out how to jump-start my stalled college plans. New York City was as good a place as any to do the figuring. Better, even, because it contained

Austin, my once and future—I hoped—best friend.

I parked Selma's car in the carport and went inside, accidentally banging the kitchen screen behind me. I froze, half-expecting to hear a familiar, mildly admonishing voice: *Ashley, dear girl, please don't slam the door.*

But the only sounds that reached me were the steady hum of the refrigerator and the velvety call of an owl echoing through the summer-thick trees.

The next morning, Austin called early to make sure I hadn't changed my mind and to see if I could be ready to leave in twenty-four hours. I swallowed a bite of toast, said I hadn't and I could.

"Good," he said, and then again, "good."

"How did things go with your dad?"

"You know," he said evasively.

"Um, no, I don't."

"It was okay. But you'd better get packing. Do you need help?"

"Not yet. Maybe later?"

"Okay." He sounded disappointed, and I knew then that things at the Taylor house were not good.

I didn't press him, though. I had a lot to do, and there would be plenty of time to hear the details once we hit the road. *Hit the road*—holy crap. I was moving to the North. To New York City, even. Hadn't seen that one coming.

When the screen door banged a half hour later, I looked up from the silverware drawer, expecting to see Austin. Instead, it was his mother.

"Good morning," Claire said. "Okay if I join you?"

"Of course."

I turned back to the drawer, resuming the search for pieces of flatware that had belonged to my parents. They were easy to pick out, wide and rounded and engraved with loopy, cheerful daisies. The subplot was fully furnished, Austin had told me, but I wanted to have some of my own things there to make it feel more like home.

"You're packing, then?" she asked, clutching her elbows with her hands.

"Yes." The thought of everything I had to do in the next twenty-four hours made my heart pound like I'd just run a mile for time, so I changed the subject. "Did Austin tell you what happened with the Navy?"

“He did,” she confirmed, pulling up a chair at the kitchen table.

“How did it go?”

“Not well.”

Briefly I pictured Austin’s response if he knew his mother and I were discussing their private family affairs, but he had left town and not looked back until now. Meanwhile, Claire and I had shared the intimate moments of Selma’s illness and death. At this point, I almost felt closer to her.

“I wasn’t surprised,” Claire said, “but Bruce was stunned. He refused to accept it. In fact, he went off to work this morning operating as if it was all just one big mistake that needed sorting out.”

I faced her, silverware in hand. “You’re kidding.”

“Didn’t Austin tell you?”

“Not exactly. I figured I’d get the details of who said what tomorrow.”

Claire leaned her elbows on the table. “There wasn’t much discussion, really. Austin informed us that another boy on the ship turned him in during a ‘witch hunt,’ as he called it. Bruce insisted that it had to be a mistake, that his son couldn’t possibly be one of *those people*. Austin tried to speak up, but Bruce wouldn’t listen. He kept blustering on about the Navy and its byzantine bureaucracy, about what a long, distinguished record of service to their country the Taylors have. He swore he would go to Washington himself to petition the government to withdraw its claim, if he had to. And do you know what? I didn’t stop him. I just sat at the dining room table and watched him rant and rave. I didn’t say a word.”

She passed a hand over her eyes. A marriage and family therapist by profession, she was accustomed to capably managing the upheaval in other people’s lives. Why, then, hadn’t she broached the subject of Austin’s sexual orientation with her husband before now? But just as Austin couldn’t have predicted Selma’s death, Claire couldn’t have known that the US Navy, in all its wisdom, would suddenly decide that their son was no longer welcome to risk his life for his country solely because he found other men attractive.

“Just give it some time,” I offered, recycling one of the many platitudes I’d heard in recent months.

“I don’t think we have any choice. You know what I keep thinking? Austin must have suspected his father would react this

way, or he would have confided in us sooner. Maybe he knows his father better than I do after all.” She shook her head. “They didn’t even speak this morning, just passed politely in the hall. I don’t know if I can fix this one. I don’t know if they’ll ever forgive each other.”

“Of course they will,” I said. “They’ve always been so close. Besides, nothing’s forever.”

She blinked and seemed to focus right on me for the first time. “I’m sorry, honey. I don’t mean to dump this on you. I’m just so used to heading over here when I need to talk.”

“You miss her, too, don’t you?”

“I sure do.”

The woods beyond the window were lit by morning sunshine. This would be my last afternoon on the mountain for an indeterminate time, I reminded myself. On cue, my pulse quickened again.

“Well, anyway,” Claire said, “Austin told me that you’re planning to go up north with him, so I came over to see if you need any help packing.”

I hesitated, wishing I could accept her offer, but this was Austin’s last afternoon on the mountain, too. “No, thanks. I’ll be fine.”

I was still holding my parents’ silverware. Turning away, I dropped it into an open Ziploc bag. Next on my list was cleaning out the refrigerator, a task I was not looking forward to. Fortunately, it wasn’t exactly full these days, given my predilection for sandwiches and pizza.

“What do you want to do about the house?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know. I was thinking I could rent it out, maybe.”

“You could. It would have to be packed up, but I suppose that wouldn’t be too difficult, given...”

She paused, but I knew what she meant. Together, she and I had gone through Selma’s things a few weeks after the funeral. The boxes were still in the attic, waiting for me to decide what to do with them. The night we lugged the last box up the rickety old drop-down ladder, Claire had asked me to move in with her and Bruce and Julie, Austin’s younger sister who was a year behind me in school. I’d refused, mostly because I couldn’t bear to leave Selma’s house.

Now here I was six short—or abysmally long, depending on

your perspective—weeks later, ready to leave at the drop of a sailor’s hat.

“I could probably pay someone to move everything into storage,” I suggested.

In fact, Selma and I had discussed this exact course of action when it became clear that her efforts to fight the cancer were failing. She hadn’t wanted me to sell the house right away, but at the same time, she knew I would be leaving for college soon. I ignored the flicker of guilt this memory elicited. I could go to school anytime; it wasn’t like there was an expiration date on undergraduate education. Eighty-year-olds earned degrees all the time, didn’t they?

“A realtor would know what to do,” Claire said. “I could call Janet Gothard, if you’d like. She should be able to recommend next steps, along with a good property manager.”

“Is that too much to ask? I mean, I don’t have to leave tomorrow. I could always wait a little while if all of this is too fast.”

“It is quick,” she agreed. “But you know Bruce and I worry about you alone over here. It’s not healthy. I don’t know that New York City necessarily is, either, but you need to get on with your life, Ashley. And to be honest, I’m relieved to think of you and Austin together, even if it is so far away.”

“Thanks, Claire,” I said, aware of the pale yellow light filtering into the kitchen, illuminating the normally invisible dust motes floating in the air between us.

“You’re welcome, hon. I just want you both to be happy. You know that, don’t you? And Austin? He knows that too, doesn’t he?”

I nodded.

After a moment, her voice grew brisk again. “All right, then. I’ll let you know what Janet says about the house. Right now, however, I’d better get back.” She set her hands palms-down on the old pedestal table and pushed herself up out of the wood-backed chair, one of a mismatched set Selma had rescued over the years and lovingly restored, one chair at a time. “Come over for dinner tonight, will you?”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, her smile purposely cheerful. “It’s your last night on the mountain. We’d love to have you. Say, six-thirty?”

FLIGHT

“Okay.”

She nodded once, business-like almost, and strode from the house, waving briefly through the kitchen screen before disappearing around the side of the station wagon. I went back to packing, crossing off “Kitchen” from the list I had hastily scrawled after Austin’s breakfast phone call. By the end of the day, I would be ready to leave Selma’s house.

Despite the heat of the summer day, I shivered.

CHAPTER THREE

That night, after a tense, awkward dinner at the Taylors, I tossed in my comfortable, familiar bed and wondered what the hell I had been thinking. I may have been born and lived my first few years in a skyscraper-bedecked city of millions, but I had spent the past decade and a half in a forested suburb where seventy percent of the residents were college-educated, as Selma liked to point out whenever I complained about the backwoods quality of our town, and where deer, coyotes, and the occasional bear and mountain lion still roamed. The residents of New York City promised to be of a very different, far more intimidating nature, if *Law and Order* was even a smidgeon accurate.

It was scarcely light out when I rose and pulled on my running gear. Carrying my shoes outside, I sat on the front stoop to tie my laces, listening to the cheerful trills of the resident summer songbirds. Then I rose and did a few push-ups and jumping jacks to get my blood pumping before heading down the long gravel drive to the road. It would be too dark yet for the tree roots on the trail around Rainbow Lake, so I started out across the golf course, sticking to the paved walkways and keeping an eye out for any early risers. The sun slowly rose over Chattanooga as I ran, but it wouldn't top the trees here on the ridge until well after Austin and I had hit the road, assuming everything went as planned. Even so, there was enough light to see where I was going and to pick out the khaki pants of the occasional country club member.

As I ran, my heart rate increased and my anxiety slowly ebbed,

unable to compete with the endorphins flooding my addled brain. I chanted my mantra as I ran: “Pain is weakness leaving the body,” timing the words to my foot strikes, my breath to the words. For a while, when Selma was going through chemo and radiation, my mantra shifted to “If she can do it, I can do it.” In the wake of her death, I had gone back to the old tried and true, a phrase I’d learned under the tutelage of Butch Halvorson, former Marine, current P.E. teacher, and longtime coach of the Redbank High School track team.

I’d known since I was ten that I wanted to be a runner. Sophomore and junior years of high school, my times in the 1500, 3000, and 5000 meters had helped get my team into the All-State meet at Tennessee State University, storied alma mater of Wilma Rudolph and her Olympic teammates. Sophomore year I surprised everyone by winning the 3000 and taking second place in the 5000, attracting the interest of regional scouts. But the following spring, I ignored Butch’s advice, over trained, and had to withdraw from the 1500 prelims with a groin pull. Senior year, I missed most of the cross country season with a hamstring injury. Then Selma got sick and I quit the track team outright, offering only a vague excuse about “personal obligations.” Running could wait. Cancer couldn’t.

Butch didn’t say much when I told him I was leaving the team. Even before that, we’d barely gotten along. Privately he let me know he thought I was a selfish runner who didn’t give a whit about anyone but myself. Privately I let him know that I ran in spite of his role as coach, not because of it. Looking back, I may not have had the best attitude when it came to high school team sports. Hadn’t helped that Butch was a small-town—and small-minded, in my opinion—good ole Southern boy, while I was the smartass tomboy daughter of a Yankee librarian. It may have been wiser to cultivate his support rather than his enmity, but with me, what you see is usually what you get. Unfortunately, as a direct result of my inability to coexist with Butch, I now had as much likelihood of achieving my long-term running goals as a crow did of flying a mile upside down.

There was a lesson here, no doubt. But I wasn’t in the mood to learn from past mistakes. I didn’t want to think about Butch or what might have been; I didn’t even want to think about what might still yet be. As the sky slowly lightened and my vision sharpened, I murmured my mantra wordlessly and focused on the

dew sparkling on bright green blades of grass; on the slap of my rubber soles against the paved path; on the sound of my own breathing steady in my ears. I felt good again, finally, running. Throughout the spring I had backed off my usual punishing training routine, cruising around the mountain on my bike instead, a lightweight ten-speed I had bought in eighth grade with babysitting money. The cross-training—another of Butch’s ideas—had worked. My hamstrings were strong again, my quads more powerful than ever, my groin back to normal.

“Pain is weakness leaving the body,” I reminded myself, repeating the phrase over and over again until the past and future faded and the only sights and sounds accosting me were of my hometown on a summer’s morning, coming to life around me.

By the time Austin and I got the car packed and our goodbyes proffered to those we were leaving behind, the sun was threatening to break through trees on the eastern horizon. With a final wave at the Taylors, who stood on the front walkway of Selma’s house watching us, we backed down the long driveway and onto the main road in a sputter of gravel.

“You ready?” I asked Austin.

Busy pretending not to watch his family out of the corner of his eye, he missed the question.

“Guess so,” I said to myself, and then paused the car for a long moment, gazing back at the house I’d shared with my aunt. I couldn’t remember another home, or another parent, for that matter. But Selma had joined my mother and father in some other place, and now all I had left of any of them were a few photos destined to fade and crack.

Although that wasn’t true, not really. Selma had told me again and again that I was part of my parents, physical evidence of their existence. My presence made them both come alive again for her—my father’s physique, my mother’s temperament, my grandfather’s eyes, even. While she was alive, I could feel that connection because she saw them in me. Now I was left without even that tenuous hold on a family I couldn’t remember.

Tears filled my eyes, and I felt Austin’s hand on my arm.

“You okay, Ash?”

“Fine,” I said quickly. I sniffed back my tears, waved at Claire and Bruce and Julie, and hit the gas.

One hand on the steering wheel and the other on the gear shift, I guided Selma's car down from Signal Mountain to the edge of the city, where we followed the Olgiate Bridge over the brown-green Tennessee River. Soon we were crossing Chattanooga, Signal Mountain receding behind us, to I-75 at the far eastern edge of the city. The last time I'd been on this interstate with Austin had been almost exactly a year before, coming back from Hilton Head the day before he went into the service. We'd raced the sun from Atlanta to Chattanooga, driving all night so that he would make his bus to land-locked New Mexico where he was scheduled to be inducted into the United States Navy. Now we were headed north again, but toward Knoxville this time along the edge of the Cumberland Plateau, the Appalachian Mountains an imposing yet unseen barrier between East Tennessee and the Atlantic Coast.

"You okay?" Austin asked again, looking over at me as Chattanooga, the Tennessee River Gorge, and our hometown slipped from sight in the rearview mirror.

It wasn't forever, I told myself. It *wasn't*.

"Totally," I said. "But what about you? You still haven't told me what went down with your parents."

"Not much to tell."

"Really? Didn't seem like it at dinner."

The night before, Bruce Taylor had stared morbidly around the table at everyone except his son throughout the meal, brandishing the blank school administrator's expression that I had only ever observed on him in public. Almost even before the meal was over, he had excused himself and vanished into his study, where I heard the murmur of the television set to low, the unmistakable rhythms of a baseball broadcast audible in the momentarily quiet dining room. Julie, a smart, popular girl who I liked well enough, had offered me a raised-brow look while Austin glowered at the tablecloth and Claire sighed quietly, her eyes on the closed study door.

As dinner wound down, I'd found myself thinking that there were perhaps some very minor advantages, after all, to losing one's parents at a young age—such as never having to watch your father shun you for becoming the very person his genes and upbringing had made you. The person you couldn't help but be.

Austin drummed his fingers on the car door frame. "Huh. I didn't notice."

“Come on, I’m not blind, and neither are you. Anyway, your mom told me that you and your dad weren’t exactly thrilled with each other over this whole thing.”

“Dude,” Austin said, leaning against the passenger door, “that is so not cool. You’ve been my best friend since we were ten, and now you’re talking to my *mom* about our family stuff?”

“A lot happened after you left,” I pointed out.

He didn’t know about the hospital visits when his mom and I had talked or read while Selma slept the day away. He didn’t know that when Selma checked into the hospital in April for the last time, I’d stayed at his house, sleeping in his bed and eating at his dining room table, the same table I’d helped Claire and Julie clear the night before while Austin retired to his room to pack. That was the South for you—even in supposedly “liberated” households, men didn’t often do housework.

Which reminded me: If Austin thought I was moving north to be his glorified maid, he had a whole other thing coming.

“I know a lot happened,” he said. “It’s just hard to picture you guys as, like, *friends*. I wish I could’ve—well, anyway. If you talked to my mom, you probably know more about what happened the other night than I do.”

“I doubt that,” I said, speeding up to pass a semi. The station wagon was filled to the hilt, my bike lying flat across the pile like a steel-framed king of the mountain, which meant I had to rely on my mirrors.

“Did she tell you he pretty much refused to believe anything I said?”

I shook my head and turned on my blinker.

“Well, he did. At first he didn’t even want to accept that I’d been kicked out of the Navy. Then he kept asking me what I was going to do, how I would ever be able to get into a good school or get a job with this on my record. I told him the discharge was honorable, but he didn’t care. He said I was ruining my life.”

“That doesn’t sound like your dad.”

I knew Bruce as my former middle school principal, a man who seemed to genuinely care about the teachers and kids at his school. He was soft-spoken and always looked a little ruffled in dress shirts with the sleeves rolled up. I couldn’t imagine him getting worked up about much of anything.

“Honestly, he was better than a lot of dads,” Austin said.

“Fathers aren’t exactly known for their tolerance. That’s why most guys come out to people they barely know long before they come out to their families.”

“That sucks. But he’ll come around eventually, won’t he? It just takes time, right?”

The mind-numbing cliché I had heard so many times since Selma’s death that sometimes I thought I ought to have it tattooed to my forehead, and here I was repeating it for the second time in twenty-four hours.

“Sure.” But he didn’t look at me as he rifled through my padded cassette carrier. “Damn, girl, even your tapes are organized. What did you do, alphabetize them?”

I had, but that didn’t stop me from smacking him.

Rubbing his arm and grumbling good-naturedly, he put in the Eagles and we sang along to “Take it Easy” as we drove along the tree-lined interstate, leaving the Tennessee River Valley behind. We’d looked at Selma’s beat-up road atlas before starting out, and I knew that a little ways up the road was Knoxville where we would switch over to I-40 and then to I-81, the road that would take us all the way to Pennsylvania. From there, we would make our way to New Jersey, and then Austin would take the wheel. He was planning to drive us into Manhattan—which I hadn’t actually realized was an island until he pointed this out on the map—via the Holland Tunnel. A tunnel under a river into New York City struck me as an almost too-perfect terrorist target. After all, it had only been a few years since the Pan-Am bombing over Lockerbie, and less than a handful of months since the “unsuccessful” World Trade Center attack. But I didn’t share my fears with Austin. I was old enough to understand that most people didn’t anticipate disaster quite the way I did.

The morning grew hotter as we continued on toward the land of Yankees. Technically, as Austin had reminded me, I was one. In grade school, I used to take out the road atlas and stare at the map of Illinois with its half-page spread on Chicago: Sears Tower, Shedd Aquarium, Navy Pier, University of Chicago, Midway, and O’Hare. O’Hare, where our jet had crashed on the way back from Orlando. I didn’t remember Chicago as a city where I had once lived, but rather as the place where my parents had died. In all of our educational wanderings, Selma had never planned a trip that included the Windy City. Washington, DC, yes, and Jefferson’s

Charlottesville, including Monticello and the Blue Ridge Parkway, and even once a tour of New England where we ate lobster and walked the Cape Cod beach where the *Mayflower* had landed in 1620. As a result, the route Austin and I traveled now was not entirely unfamiliar to me, only our ultimate destination. Selma had not liked cities, and worried that New York, with its skyscrapers and hordes of pedestrians, might trigger long-buried memories of the Second City. So we'd avoided the Big Apple on our journeys, along with Boston and Philadelphia and any other urban center that could possibly remind me—and her, though she never said as much—of Chicago.

Would the streets of New York suddenly set my memories to flowing, as Selma had feared? Somehow I doubted it. Nothing else ever had. But still, as we headed north, I wondered.

Captive audience members that we were, Austin and I caught each other up on the goings-on since he'd left for the Navy. I filled him in on Signal Mountain gossip: who had married whom, who'd gone to college or otherwise left the mountain, and who had died, while he told me about the places he'd gone and the guys he'd dated in the ten months since he'd come to terms with being gay. He told me about military witch hunts, when they cracked down on specific units and tried to get gay soldiers to rat each other out. One of his friends, threatened with a dishonorable discharge and possible jail time, had turned Austin in.

"It's ridiculous," he said, looking out the window at the land rushing by. "Some of the best sailors on our ship were gay."

"The whole thing doesn't make any sense. It'll change eventually, won't it?"

"Maybe. But I wouldn't hold my breath." He paused, fiddled with the tape case handle while he chose his next words. "The thing is, Ash, I know about Selma from my mom. I know she tried to fight it, and that you and my mom were with her at the end. But I don't know how it was for you. I can imagine, but I can't really know. I guess what I'm trying to say is that if you want to talk about it, I'm here, okay?"

I blinked, surprised that such a roundabout inquiry could nonetheless leave me with watering eyes and a tightness in my throat yet again. Would I always be dealing with Selma's cancer, the way I seemed unable to escape the aftereffects of Flight 108?

"Okay," I said, my eyes on the gray road before us. "Thanks."

“You’re welcome.”

A little while later he fell asleep, leaving me alone with my thoughts and a Sting tape. In sleep Austin looked more like the kid I used to know, less like the grown man he’d morphed into over the past year. Even at the age of ten, when his parents abandoned low-lying Chattanooga for the friendly community of Signal Mountain, Austin had seemed different from other boys. *They* were miniature versions of their fathers, future Vanderbilt frat boys who’d known how to throw a baseball and swing a golf club almost before they could walk. But Austin wasn’t a clone of his father or any other man, for that matter. He seemed sweeter than the other boys, with slender hips, long eyelashes, and a mouth made to smile. The first time we met, when Selma and I walked next door bearing welcome tidings and a homemade cherry pie, I knew that Austin wouldn’t last long in the crowd of boys at school. Jimmy Walters and Tad Berghorst would knock the laughter right out of him. I decided then and there not to let that happen.

“Want to ride bikes tomorrow?” I’d asked him after we finished our pie that first night. His sister Julie had already earned my disgust by asking if I wanted to play Barbies. I hated Barbie dolls with a passion that pleased Selma. After promising Julie that I would *never* want to play Barbies, I’d turned back to Austin, who was trying to balance a spoon on his nose the way I’d shown him.

At my invitation, Austin glanced at his mother, who was laughing with Selma about something beyond our grasp.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back at me. “Sure.”

And that was the start of Austin and me. The month before school we played in the woods and on our bikes and in my tree house. By the time school started, I’d taught Austin secretly how to box. Tad Berghorst’s father, a Golden Gloves champ who had given up fighting for a lucrative surgeon’s career, had taught Tad and me the summer before, back when we were still best friends.

At the end of third grade, Tad and I had gotten into a fight. Trying to do the right thing after he punched me for beating him on the monkey bars, I punched him back, magnanimously pronounced us even, and turned to walk away. He kicked me in the back, knocking me to the ground so hard I was sure I would never walk again and causing my immortal humiliation—I actually cried in front of all of the kids on the playground, a first and only, as it turned out, for me. A couple of days later, again on the playground,

I hit Tad in the face so hard he fell down and his nose bled and he cried like a little kid. We hadn't spoken a friendly word to each other since. To a kid one month feels more like a year, so to my mind, it had been ages since Tad and I had been buddies. Austin was my new best friend. Anyone who messed with him would be messing with me, too.

Fortunately, half the boys at school were afraid of me. For one thing, everyone in Signal Mountain knew that I had survived a fiery plane crash with barely a scratch, which, it was said, must indicate that I possessed mystical powers of some sort—just like my Yankee witch aunt. For another, I wasn't like most other girls in Signal Mountain. I didn't play hopscotch or jump rope or wear pink. I rode my bike all over, if I wasn't running, and I wrestled and played tackle football during recess with the boys. In gym class, I played a mean game of kick ball.

Then Austin came along, his head full of poetry and his body unskilled in the territorial battles of the playground. We were good for each other, Austin and me. With my help he learned to tolerate math and how to hold his own with the boys. Under his influence, I learned to like the game of Pretend and most musicals, especially anything with Garland or Streisand. We helped balance each other out, so that we weren't such misfits in a part of the world that didn't approve of sensitivity in its boys or stubbornness in its girls.

"You okay driving, Ash?" Austin was awake and watching me. "I can take a turn if you want."

"I'm fine," I said. "Don't you worry your pretty little head, darlin'."

He snorted. "You'll fit in fine in the Village. They have a saying there—'Greenwich Village, where the men are pretty and the women are strong.'"

"Why doesn't that surprise me? Dude, this tape's putting me to sleep. How about some Abba?"

"Now you're talking."

As we sang along to the music, it occurred to me that our roles had reversed since the day Austin had moved to Signal Mountain. When we got to New York, it would be his turn to teach me the games everyone else already knew.

Late that night, we emerged from the neat New Jersey farm fields into the industrial wasteland of Newark and its sprawling

suburbs. Despite the industrialization of Tennessee, I'd never seen such a mass of twisted metal structures, smoke stack after smoke stack billowing clouds of white gases into the air, the smell of rotten eggs and burning rubber wafting across the highway.

"Night's the best time to see the city," Austin told me as we headed up I-95 along the Hudson. It was almost midnight, and we still hadn't reached the New York state line. But we were close. Over a small hill, beyond the complicated steel structure of some type of factory, I got my first look at New York City, a mass of lights across the river. The twin towers of the World Trade Center presided over the rest of the buildings at the southern tip of Manhattan. I had seen photos, of course, but in person the towers' sheer dominance of a skyline filled already with buildings taller than any I'd previously encountered was stunning.

As planned, Austin was at the wheel for the final leg of the trip. But at the last minute, he bypassed the Holland Tunnel exit.

"We're going to take the GW instead," he announced, keeping his eyes on the traffic flitting restlessly around us.

"What's the GW?" I asked, hoping it wouldn't be another tunnel.

"It's a bridge. This way you'll see more of the city instead of just the Village."

A bridge sounded much safer than a tunnel. I say *sounded*, because once I saw the George Washington Bridge, I sort of wished we'd taken the tunnel. The bridge, like the city itself, was immense. As we crossed high above the Hudson amidst a sea of roaring, honking cars, I decided that what I really wished was that Manhattan wasn't an island. Building the free market capital of the world on a slip of land that could only be reached by tunnel, bridge, or ferry struck me as perhaps not the best example of urban planning.

I stared out the window, looking out upon the city that stretched southward below us. Hundreds, maybe thousands of buildings poked up like an irregular forest from the thin slab of land. From my vantage point on the bridge, it seemed as if the island should surely sink beneath all of that weight, tipping like the Titanic into the water that lapped at its southern edge.

"What do you think?" Austin asked as we exited onto Henry Hudson Parkway. "Isn't it amazing?"

I nodded, staring across the river at the yellow lights of New

Jersey. “Amazing is a good word. It’s gigantic.”

“I know. Isn’t it fantastic?”

I didn’t answer as I watched black Cadillacs, yellow cabs, and old, wide Chevys fly past us on a narrow-laned parkway that had seen better days. Once again, I was only too happy to have Austin at the wheel.

To the left of the highway, up a hill, were lights, buildings, concrete roads, and walkways. A train rumbled past on a track built above the city streets, graffitied sides revealed in sporadic streetlights. I couldn’t get over how light it was at midnight. On cloudy nights Signal Mountain was as dark as a windowless room. Sometimes the moon might light the way through the wooded paths near my house, but usually you needed a flashlight to see where you were going.

“The apartment’s on the west side,” Austin said as we careened down the highway with buildings and billboards to our left, the river and New Jersey to our right.

I just nodded. All at once I couldn’t wait to go to sleep in a bed, any bed, anywhere.

“Don’t worry,” Austin said, looking away from the road to flash me a quick smile. “We’re almost there.”

I’d assumed we would be living in the midst of fifty-floor buildings, but the highway turned into a regular road and we soon turned left at a stop light. Then we drove through a series of twisting, winding one-way streets. People were out in shorts and tank tops and sandals walking the streets on this, a Tuesday night. Grocery stores seemed to occupy every other corner. Most were still open. Back in Signal Mountain everything closed by ten o’clock, even in the summer.

Eventually Austin turned the car down a quiet residential block with trees and the occasional tiny grass yard. The buildings were all the same size and built one next to the other, but the stairs and exteriors varied. New York brownstones, I realized—just like on *The Cosby Show*.

We double parked in front of a four-story building with flower pots in the front windows and a wide brick stairway with a wrought iron handrail.

“This is it,” Austin said as he turned on the hazards and turned off the car engine.

“It looks nice,” I said. “A little loud, though.”

“For Manhattan, this is about as quiet as it gets unless you’re forty stories up.” He slipped out of the car and stretched. “Let’s go. Time to unpack.”

I felt like a zombie, exhausted from the trip and already overwhelmed by the noise of the city. I needed darkness and quiet, and was afraid I would find neither.

“It’s almost one,” I said. “Can’t we unpack in the morning?”

“Only if you don’t mind seeing your stuff for sale on a blanket at St. Marks.” As I stared at him blankly, he clarified: “We can’t leave your car on the street as it is, not even in a good neighborhood, or someone else will unpack it for you.”

“Are you serious?”

“Come on, Toto,” he said, unlocking the hatchback as I climbed out of the car and wrinkled my nose at the sour stench I would come to recognize as the mingled odor of trash and urine. “We’re not in Tennessee anymore.”

It took forever to move my stuff into the apartment on the first floor of the brownstone, given that Austin insisted on staying with the car while I lugged everything up the steps and inside. I piled my bags, boxes, and bike in the spacious, high-ceilinged living room, careful not to soil the tan linen couch or the Persian rug that covered most of the wood floor.

I was almost unconscious on my feet when Austin said, “That’s it. I’ll move the car if you want to head to bed.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I turned away, yawning, and climbed the steps for the last time that night.

“Lock the door!” Austin called after me.

I waved over my shoulder and went into the apartment, turning one of the many bolts behind me. Then I trudged past my boxes and bags to the small bedroom off the living room. I had an impression of peach walls and cool air and what I thought at first was a bunk bed. Then I remembered that New Yorkers called it a “loft.” I climbed the ladder to the bed, lay down fully clothed, and sighed at the unquestionably lovely feeling of being prone.

We definitely weren’t in Tennessee anymore.