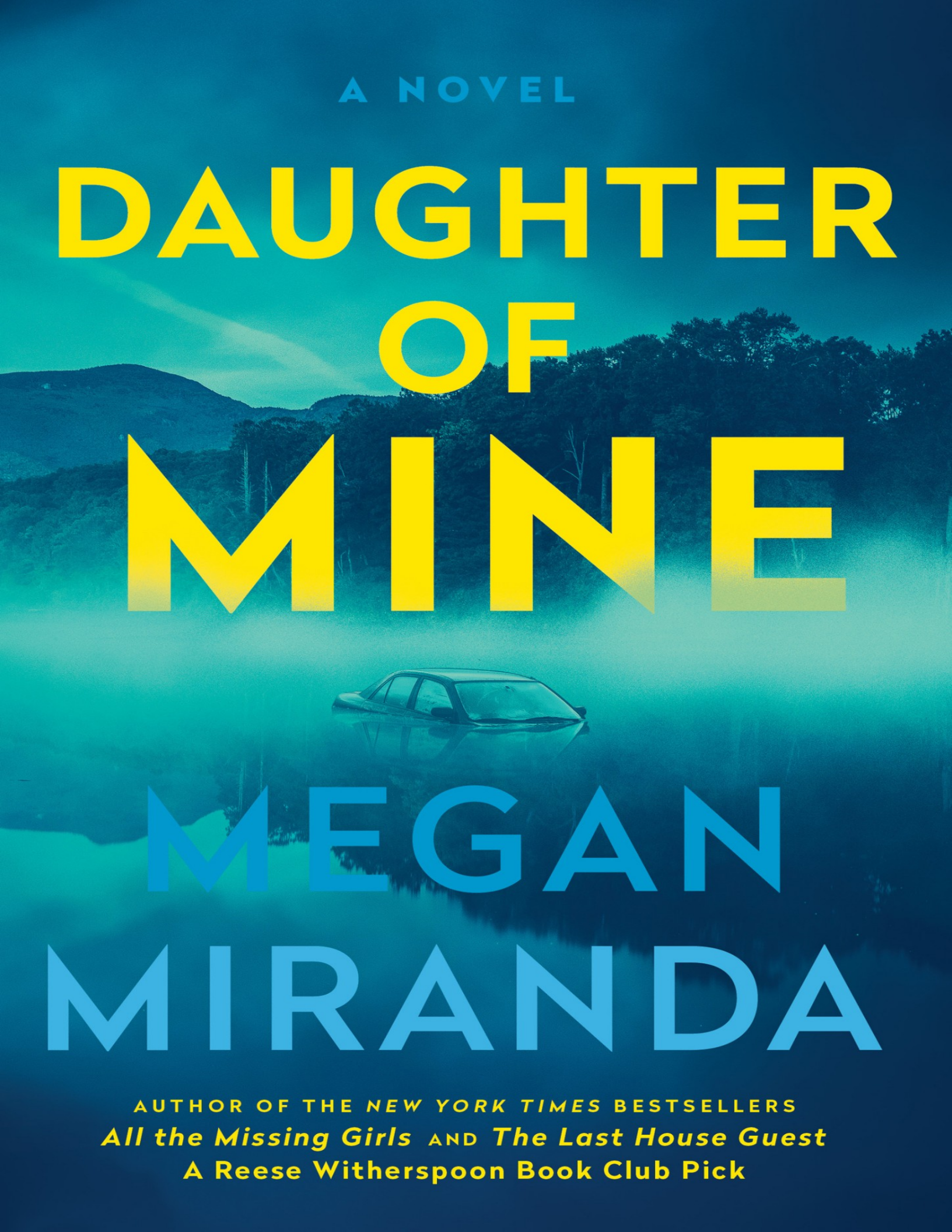


A NOVEL

DAUGHTER OF MINE

A teal-tinted photograph of a car on a lake with mountains in the background. The car is a dark-colored sedan, possibly a Volvo, and is positioned in the middle ground of the lake. The background shows a range of mountains under a clear sky. The overall mood is serene and mysterious.

MEGAN
MIRANDA

AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLERS
All the Missing Girls AND *The Last House Guest*
A Reese Witherspoon Book Club Pick

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DAUGHTER OF MINE

A Novel

MEGAN MIRANDA

MARYSUE
RUCCI
BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For my family



PROLOGUE

The drought started in the West. We watched on the news as the waters dropped in the reservoirs and lakes, and their secrets and ghosts slowly emerged. The Great Salt Lake was suddenly in danger of disappearing, threatening to release the toxic dust hidden at the bottom. Skeletons surfaced from the edges of a shrinking Lake Mead—in barrels, in boats, bare bones scattered on a dried-out shoreline. Missing persons, finally found. Unknown crimes, suddenly uncovered.

We watched from the safety of our enclave on the East Coast, where freshwater rivers cut down the mountain, sustaining our lake, our community. We watched from our living room couches, with lush forests of trees right outside the windows, the promise of the green North Carolina landscape. We thought ourselves protected, immune.

It came here on a delay, like everything else—the latest fashions, high-speed internet.

And then slowly, the rotted wood beneath the docks became visible, soft and black. Boats were raised up into dock houses, or anchored farther out, where they drifted back and forth like ghost ships in the night.

We were told not to water the grass, not to launch a boat onto the lake from Gemma's Creek, not to worry. Even as more things slowly started appearing: branches and trunks, reaching out from the surface; sunken beer bottles wedged into the newly ex-posed mud.

In the West, there were the bodies. But here, we were less flashy, less prone to drama and sensation. We preferred our crimes quiet, our cases closed—that was my father's motto. He was the last of a dying breed, I thought. A detective who got no shot of adrenaline from either the chase or the justice. So very different from the craving of my youth: *Give me a wrong, so that I may punish.*

So when the drought finally arrived, I supposed it was fitting that the first thing to attract attention was not a body or a barrel or a bone. It was something

quieter—something we didn't understand at first.
Quieter, but no less dangerous.

PART 1

FATHER



CHAPTER 1

62 Days without Rain

Wednesday, May 15

5:30 p.m.

Precipitation: Zero

They raised the car from the lake on the same day as my father's memorial, two unrelated but equally newsworthy events: Something lost. Something found.

My father had been gone for over three weeks, and in the days since, I'd found myself measuring time differently. A recalibration. A new reality.

I listened to the weather reports each morning on the radio in Charlotte—*sixty-two days without rain*—and thought, instead, *Twenty-three days without him*.

It seemed like half the town had come out for the celebration of life—crowding the deck of his favorite restaurant, raising a glass (or two, or three) to the portrait of Detective Perry Holt—while the other half was gathered around an inlet on the opposite side of Mirror Lake, watching as the salvage company hooked a crane to the car that had been spotted below the surface a few days earlier.

All I could think was: *Of course this is happening now.*

I'd always suspected that my father alone had held things together by sheer force of will—not only in our family but in the entire town. And without his careful gaze, his steady oversight, everything had shifted off-kilter.

Even for this, he had left us his guidance. A cremation instead of a burial. A party instead of a funeral. Food covered by the department. Drinks on him.

But the discovery of the car was big news in a small town, and no one had seemed sure what to do, with the outside world watching. It had made headlines all the way in Charlotte, even: the water level of Mirror Lake had dropped to the

lowest it had been in decades, and a fisherman had practically run up on top of the sunken vehicle.

There was no evidence of a crash—no bent metal or crushed vegetation at the curve of road above the inlet—so the rumor spreading through the crowd was that the old rusted sedan must've been there for years, before the addition of the new guardrail. Apparently, a dive crew had been out to inspect the car the day it was found, but saw nothing inside.

And yet, it had the air of something I couldn't quite put my finger on: a sign of things emerging, changing.

A warning, that things were beginning here too.

There was something in the air, keeping everyone on edge: a buzzing of insects in the muddy puddles beneath the deck; the setting sun glaring sharply off the surface of the water, so we had to squint just to look at one another; leaves, dry and brittle and churned up in the wind, falling to earth at the wrong time of year.

This wasn't how things were supposed to go.

There were supposed to be stories on the mic set up beside the bar, for anyone who felt moved to speak. We were supposed to find solace in the liquor, and the laughter—a release, an acceptance. Perry Holt was gone too soon, and it wasn't fair, but my god, what a life he had lived.

So many people here attributed their lives to him. Whether he'd pulled them out of danger, or pushed them toward the help he knew they needed—today, we were supposed to remember it all. But now news of the car was splitting everyone's attention and sense of responsibility and propriety.

For every comment of *He was such a good man, a good leader, a good role model* booming from the sound system, there was a quieter whisper carried in the crowd around me.

It's coming up.

No license plate. No VIN.

Stolen and dumped, probably.

While the youngest Murphy girl—now a few years out of high school—told the story of how my father found her drifting in the middle of the lake as a kid,

her tube cut loose from the dock, I heard the group to my side taking bets on what they'd find inside the trunk.

A body. Stolen goods. A gun.

I turned to stare, hoping to shame them into silence, but they were looking toward the entrance instead, where a group of uniformed officers had gathered in the doorway.

It didn't help that a lot of the people here were presently or formerly connected to law enforcement, either by profession or family ties. Or that men and women in uniform kept rotating in, alternating between paying their respects and relaying updates to my brothers.

Both of whom had suddenly disappeared again.

I didn't blame them.

I was pretty sure I'd find them on the long sliver of deck at the side of the building—the only reprieve from the crowd.

I saw Caden first, pacing back and forth, all frenetic energy. He paused periodically to hold his phone out over the water, trying to catch a signal. Any other day, he'd be out there himself. He'd been the very first on scene; the call about the car came in while he was working his normal shift on lake patrol.

Gage, meanwhile, remained perfectly still, arms resting on the wooden railing as he stared out at the water. From a distance, he looked so much like our father it stopped my heart: sharp nose, prominent jaw, dark cropped hair. Heavy slanted eyebrows that gave everything he said an air of gravity.

I slid up beside him, mirroring his posture. How many years had I mimicked him, idolized him, revered him as the hero of my youth? He let me follow him around far longer than most older brothers might, and I relished his praise: *Hazel can climb that tree*; and *Hazel will jump from that bridge*; and *Hazel can beat you in a race*.

All I'd had to do was show up, and prove him right. Now I tried to mirror not only his position but his emotions. *Find the balance. Rise to the moment*. Like our father, Gage was always the responsible one—and now he found himself in a new role not only in the department but in our family. Maybe that was the curse of being the oldest.

“Are we hiding out?” I asked, as Caden's footsteps retreated down the deck.

Gage tilted his head to the side, squinting. “We’re hiding out.”

Then I could feel Caden’s footsteps getting closer again—a metronome, keeping time.

He stopped pacing behind us. “Mel’s trying to send pictures. They’re not coming through.” I could see the pent-up energy in his stance, though his expression remained calm, controlled. The things he could hide under his cherub-shaped face, even at twenty-seven, with the dimpled cheek, and his brown hair swooped to the side, like he was still on the cusp of adulthood.

“What’s going on out there?” I asked.

If anyone would be able to distinguish the facts from the rumors, it was my brothers—both of them had proudly followed our father onto the force. Though Gage would probably be the only one to tell me. Caden and I got along best when I remembered to bite my tongue, and he remembered to ignore me. Today, we were both mostly doing our part.

Gage was tall and lean-muscled, where Caden was more broad-shouldered and stocky. The only discernible features they shared were the color of their deep blue eyes and the low tenor of their voices. *The Holt voice*, my dad had called it, though his had turned more gravelly as he aged.

“Probably some insurance scam,” Gage said, dark eyebrows knitted together. “The guardrail was installed fifteen years ago. The car must’ve been there for a while.”

I knew that stretch of road, right before the narrow, single-lane bridge. “It’s easy to lose control there,” I said. I remembered the warning myself, from when I was learning to drive. My father’s echo: *Careful. Slow it down, Hazel.*

It had always been a dangerous bend, especially in the night.

The township of Mirror Lake didn’t believe in streetlights or painted center lines or regular pothole maintenance, it seemed. It *did* believe in respecting the natural geography that had existed before, which was why the roads forked sharply, banked unevenly, rose steeply. The side roads were generally only wide enough for one vehicle at a time. Growing up here, we had learned to be both cautious and aggressive, to maneuver through tight spaces, to step on the gas before someone else did first.

So driving was a dangerous activity, especially for someone from out of town.

I imagined someone speeding around the bend, unfamiliar with the dark mountain curves, the dark mountain roads, tires losing traction—how quickly something could sink below the surface, unnoticed.

“There was no one inside the car, Hazel,” Gage answered. “They checked.”

“Could’ve escaped,” I said. I closed my eyes and saw it: someone clawing their way out of the vehicle as it sank. Their head finally emerging above water—that first, primal gasp.

“Yeah, well, no one called it in, if so. And the plates were removed. Seems more likely it was dumped there on purpose. It’s a convenient spot.” Gage was logical, pragmatic, levelheaded. All things that made him a good detective now. It was always so easy to believe him.

It made sense: here was a place no one would go looking.

Caden glanced up briefly from his phone. “I can’t believe it’s been there that long. I used to jump from that spot in high school.”

Gage rubbed the side of his chin. “Me too,” he said.

I shuddered. We had all jumped off the rocks at the edge of that curve, when the summer sun got too hot, and we were desperate for something to happen, despite the warnings from the adults. I could still feel the cold shock of that pocket of water, always in the shade no matter the time of day, the feetfirst plunge, and how the bottom seemed so endlessly far away.

How close had we come? How many of us had brushed up against a strip of metal and thought *boulder* or *branch*. How many of us had imagined something else instead?

“Jesus,” Caden said, holding his cell closer to his face. He stopped breathing for a moment, his only tell. And then his eyes narrowed. “Someone really needs to help with the crowd control over there.”

I tried to peer over his shoulder at the screen, but he was already on his way. He quickly rounded the corner back toward the guests.

Apparently by *someone*, he meant himself. I couldn’t believe he was leaving like this.

“Seriously?” I began. “Dad would—”

“Dad would be out there himself,” Gage cut in, squinting at the water, the surrounding mountains reflecting off the hazy surface. “And you know it.”

I did. Over the years, I'd watched our father leave the dinner table for a break-in; a birthday party for an overdose; a soccer game for a high-speed chase. He made no excuses or apologies. We all understood that his responsibilities stretched beyond the boundaries of our family.

"You should head home too, Hazel," Gage said, turning back to face me. "This is only going to get worse. Everyone knows you've got a long trip back."

Two hours, really. But Charlotte might as well have been a different world from Mirror Lake. I was a different person out there, without the anchor of history.

"You sure?" I asked. "I feel like I should stay to help clean up..."

But Gage shook his head, releasing me. "Drive safe," he said, like my father would do. "And, Hazel?" He looked at me with wide-open eyes, a wide-open expression. "Don't be a stranger, okay? He wouldn't want that."

I forced a small smile, even as a wave of panic gripped me from nowhere. I felt, then, the finality of this moment; I wasn't ready.

"You should be so lucky," I said before turning away, eyes burning.

Even as I joked, I wondered what would next bring me back. Thanksgiving? My niece's birthday in the summer, maybe, if Caden invited me? I felt untethered, ungrounded. All the emotions I'd fought to contain today suddenly fighting for the surface.

I kept my head down, weaving through the crowd, a study in evasion. Eyes forward, stride confident, hoping no one stopped me. It didn't help matters that I was the only one in black amid a sea of khakis and floral. Or that I looked like I was dressed for a business meeting—tailored A-line dress, blazer, stacked heels—while the rest of the guests had arrived in what I could only call Lake Casual.

I grabbed the bag I'd stowed behind the counter and slipped into the restroom. I wanted to change before the drive home—I had plans to swing by our latest renovation project on the way, which was still an active construction site. I needed to focus on something else, to let my work consume me again.

The bathroom was down a dimly lit, wood-paneled hall, and my vision was still adjusting to the change as I pushed through the door and nearly collided with the person on the way out.

“Oh.” A hand on my shoulder, to brace herself. A whiff of coconut. A curtain of hair.

Even in the dark, I would know: Jamie.

She slowly removed her hand from the front of my shoulder, then ran it through the ends of her long, honey-colored hair, an old nervous habit. “Hazel,” she said, locking eyes with mine. Her voice was like something sharp and piercing, straight to the heart. Maybe it was because my guard was already down, or my nerves too exposed, or because I was already hovering so close to the edge. Her attention shifted to the bag in my hands. “Are you leaving?”

“Yeah. Just changing first.” I gestured to my outfit. “No one told me the dress code.” Jamie wore a spring floral dress and beige sandals.

A twitch of her lip—an almost smile. A portal to another time, before her gaze slid away again. She stepped to the side, closer to the exit.

And then, because I didn’t know where to go from here: “Is Skyler around?” My six-year-old niece was always a welcome distraction.

“She’s outside with some of the department kids.” She cleared her throat. “Are you coming back this weekend?”

“For what?” I asked.

She frowned, peering at the door. “Caden said they’re cleaning out the house. I thought you knew.”

This was what happened when you were the only one who left home. I had to hear about things secondhand, default to my brothers’ preferences, concede to their decisions.

I shook my head, grief giving way to anger—a familiar and welcome slide. “When?” I asked, louder than necessary.

“Sunday.”

I did my best not to look surprised. Maybe Gage forgot to tell me in the chaos of the day.

Sometimes Jamie mentioned things in a way that sounded offhand but seemed almost intentional instead. As if she was still trying to bridge the gap between me and Caden.

Or maybe I was being too generous, blinded by nostalgia and the years of friendship that had once sustained us.

Back when we were in high school, Jamie used to say I had an A-plus asshole radar—warning her of the boys who would let us down; the teacher who would not give second chances; the classmates who would take particular pleasure in our missteps. But I felt my instincts went to something deeper than that, like I could see what was underneath—less action, more intention.

Unfortunately, it never rubbed off on Jamie, considering she married my brother Caden.

“Thanks,” I called as she opened the door. “I’ll be there.”

After changing, I thought about going out to find Gage, tell him I’d be back Sunday—but there was currently a straight shot to the exit, the sun was setting, and this celebration was quickly becoming something else.

I had started to get that subtle, creeping feeling—like the walls were closing in, and I needed to escape. A reminder of why I’d left in the first place.

Stay too long, and you became exactly what Mirror Lake decided you would be.

Out front, the department kids were playing a game of hide-and-seek in the trees. One of their mothers leaned against the wooden railing, keeping tabs on them, like mine had once done. I caught a flash of Skyler’s blond hair rushing past, and saw, instead, a group of us racing through these woods, a generation before.

I kept moving.

How quickly the past could grasp on to you here, and pull.

The dirt parking lot was overflowing, and several vehicles were combing the area, looking for free space. I raised a hand to the nearest car as I walked to my SUV, gestured I was heading out. I had gotten the last viable spot at the edge of the lot, half my car fully in the woods, tucked under the branches of a large oak.

The driver’s side window lowered as the bright blue car slowly pulled up behind mine.

“Hi,” he said. A familiar voice, a familiar face.

I froze, shoulders tensing.

Last I saw Nico Pritchard, he was driving away in a different car, and doing his best not to make eye contact.

I paused, one hand on my car door. “Hi,” I repeated.

“Sorry I’m late, I got held up,” he said. And then, when I didn’t respond: “Been a while, Hazel.”

Two years and two months, but who was counting?

“Yeah, guess it has,” I said, like I hadn’t just done the math. “Lucky timing on the parking spot, though.”

He drummed his long fingers on the steering wheel, as if debating his next words. “Seems like I keep just missing you,” he said.

I nodded. We’d been just missing each other for over two years, at holidays and family visits and birthday parties; I just wasn’t sure which of us was the more active player.

It was a feat, considering he was Gage’s oldest friend, and he still owned the house on the same inlet as my dad, bordering our property.

The pattern of evasion was broken only with the message he’d sent me the night my father had died: *Hazel, I’m so sorry.*

He’d been away on vacation when it happened. Even then we’d missed each other.

There was a time that Nico was anywhere Gage went, and was nearly as much a part of my childhood. Our fathers had been partners on the force—a different type of family, I supposed.

“Well,” I said, “good to finally run into you.”

It was, and it wasn’t.

For years growing up, I had been singularly focused on Nico Pritchard. Attuned to the careful way he did everything, from baiting a fishing line to saying my name. The way he pronounced each syllable carefully, not letting the second half get swallowed up, like everyone else. The innocent look of his wide brown eyes, like he was always trying to take everything in, quietly and carefully, to file away for later. The shape of his down-turned mouth, so that his sudden smile was both a surprise and a game changer.

My infatuation was obvious in a way that bordered on embarrassing. As we grew older, the fact that it had been reciprocated by him was not nearly as evident.

“Sorry it has to be under these circumstances,” he said. Even his words were carefully chosen. He’d managed to apologize twice in as many minutes.

“Me too,” I said. I opened my car door, before it was too late.

“Hazel, hold on,” he said.

I held on, hand tightening on the top of the door.

To my horror, Nico stepped out of his idling car: long, tailored pants; white button-down, tucked in; a silver watch that I knew had once belonged to his father; a flush along the top of his high cheekbones.

It didn’t matter how much time had passed, or how badly we’d left things the last time—whenever I saw him, I pictured him at fifteen on our swim platform; at seventeen, leaning against my bedroom door; at twenty-one, home from college, eyes slowly scanning the room, before landing on me.

“I wanted to call,” he continued, taking a step closer. “I’ve been meaning to. I just didn’t know—”

“Nico,” I said, cutting him off. “I’m sorry, but I really do need to go.”

I needed to leave before he did something terrible—like resting a hand on my shoulder; placing a thumb under my chin.

I slid into the driver’s seat, did my best at smiling. “If you can’t find Gage, he’s hiding out around the corner of the deck.”

I started the car and didn’t look back. I had learned long ago that this was the only way to truly leave.

Since Mirror Highway was a loop, there were technically two ways out of town. Going to the right would be faster, but turning left would take me by the scene of the salvaged car.

Sorry, Dad. It was human instinct. I wanted to see it too.

There was a slowdown before the curve, a line of cars steadily crawling forward, inch by inch. Most of the traffic seemed to be due to the line of

emergency vehicles along the side of the road, and the fact that only one lane could move at a time. I could just make out a man in the distance, directing traffic past the site.

When I finally approached, I realized that it was Caden in the road, guiding us on. He was still in his khaki pants and light-blue polo. There was mud on the side of his pant leg, like he'd been pressed up against the car, checking inside. Curiosity, before crowd control.

I paused for a beat, like all the rest before me, taking in the scene beside the lake.

The guardrail had been removed and now lay curved and crooked against the trees.

The old vehicle rested at a slight angle on the side of the road, tires flattened, rubber disintegrating. I felt myself holding my breath, like I did whenever driving past a graveyard.

The car was coated in a layer of mud, like something alive, sliding off the surface, dripping onto the asphalt. I couldn't tell the color underneath anymore, but the body was boxy and long, like something a grandparent would drive. The windows were either down or broken, and the inside was piled high with mud and grime. The trunk had been pried open, and it remained that way, like the mouth of an animal.

Goose bumps rose across my arms, the back of my neck. The car seemed like it had become something else under the surface. Something more visceral. A part of the landscape, swallowed up by it, pulsating with the place it had just been.

Caden's face didn't change as he waved me past.

But when I glanced in the rearview mirror, he had turned in my direction, watching me drive away.

My phone chimed once I had exited the town, on the weaving road toward the main highway that would bring me back to Charlotte. I thought it was probably Keira or Luke—my business partners and closest friends—checking in, updating me on the day's progress. Making sure I was doing okay.

I peered down at the phone, and saw a message from my uncle: *Did you leave?*

I ignored it, but then my phone rang, the name ROY HOLT on the display. Since I'd left Mirror Lake, he'd rarely reached out. But in the years before, he'd sometimes step in for my father when work called him away.

I answered on speaker. "Hello?" I said. A question, more than a greeting.

At first his voice was choppy, as if he was still in a dead zone himself. "Hazel?" he said, like he'd just repeated himself. "Are you still here?"

"No, I'm on the road already. I have a project I have to check in on."

If he was calling with a lecture, I wasn't interested. Though he'd often seemed proud that I'd set off on my own—building a business, charting my own course—he'd always had a closer relationship with my brothers. *Caden left already too*, was what I wanted to say.

"I was hoping to catch you before you left." A beat of silence, as he searched for what to say next. "I'm the executor of the estate, Hazel," he said, voice low, as if he was trying to find someplace quiet to have this conversation.

It made sense, since he was the only lawyer in the family. He'd begun his career as a prosecutor—he and my dad used to tell stories of the old days, when the cases would pass directly from one Holt to the next. He'd since settled into family law, so of course my father would entrust this part to him. I braced myself for whatever he was about to say.

"Look," he began, voice even lower. "There's something in the will you should know about."