

THE ONLY SURVIVORS

A NOVEL

MEGAN MIRANDA



AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLERS
All the Missing Girls, *The Last to Vanish*, AND
The Last House Guest, A REESE WITHERSPOON BOOK CLUB PICK

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THE ONLY SURVIVORS

A Novel

MEGAN
MIRANDA

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New York London Toronto
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For Luis

PROLOGUE

There were things I had done to avoid this reunion.

I'd made a list. Made a plan. Justified it by reminding myself that these were not really my friends, and ten years was long enough.

This yearly trip wasn't helping anyone. This *promise*. We had been too young when we'd agreed to come together for the anniversary, as a way to keep one another safe. It had been a misguided impulse, an overreaction. A panicked grasp for control, when we all surely knew better by then.

I'd begun the process of disentangling myself six months earlier, in the hope of becoming invisible, unreachable. Three simple steps, seen through to the end:

I'd changed my number when I switched carriers, transferring most of my contacts, while deleting those I'd hoped to leave behind. A clean slate.

And when the group email from Amaya arrived in January, I marked it as junk, deleted it immediately. Unopened, unread, so I could claim ignorance. Though the details bolded in the subject line were already seared in my mind: *May 7th—Be there!*

Instead, I'd planned to stay at Russ's for the weekend, the final step of evasion. I needed to move forward. I was twenty-eight, with a steady job and a semi-serious boyfriend who cooked breakfast on Sundays and owned reasonably decent sheets.

But on Sunday morning, my phone chimed as I was finishing up my omelet and Russ was at the counter, back turned, refilling his coffee. There was a flash of light on the display of my cell, faceup on the table. A North Carolina number not in my contacts, a message in all caps: *DID YOU HEAR?*

My fork hovered over the plate.

“Who’s that?” Russ asked as he sat back down across from me, hands circling the mug. He must’ve seen it in my expression, the blood draining, my shoulders tightening.

It had to be Amaya. She was the one who reached out with the details each year. She cared for us deeply, as a collective. She cared about everything deeply.

“Just spam,” I said, dropping the fork to the plate, pressing my hands to my knees under the table, to keep them still. I fought the urge to turn the phone facedown.

It didn’t have to be a lie. It could’ve been a wrong number, instead of Amaya tracking me down, making sure I knew that today was the arrival date. As if she knew I was sitting at my boyfriend’s kitchen table hundreds of miles away at this very moment, with no intention of hitting the road.

But just in case, when I thought Russ wasn’t watching, I would delete the message. Block the number. As if it had never happened.

We took the plates to the counter, and I waited for him to turn his back, for the water to run, before picking up my cell.

But by then a second message had come through. A link to an article. No, not an article—an obituary.

Ian Tayler, twenty-eight

I sank into the nearest chair. Read the notice of his unexpected death, words swimming.

Beloved son, brother, uncle, and friend. Donations to be made to the Ridgefield Recovery Center, in lieu of flowers.

They had used an older picture—when his face was boyishly full, blond hair just long enough to catch a breeze, tan skin and brown eyes and a smile I wasn’t sure I’d seen in over a decade. So different from the last time we’d been together, one year ago, at our meeting place in the Outer Banks.

His face had been gaunter then, his hair cropped short. He seemed beset by a fidget he couldn’t shake. *Until next year*, he’d said, one arm hooked awkwardly around my neck in half a hug.

We didn't like to stand too close anymore, because all I could picture as we lingered in those moments was the same thing I was seeing now: a flash of his brown eyes, large and wide, mouth open in a frozen scream as he faced the river —

I pressed my fist to my teeth, let out one single gasp, hoped it was muffled under the sound of running water.

Then, a second shock: the obituary was three months old, and I hadn't known.

Out of contact. Unreachable.

Shouldn't I have felt it somehow? That bond, connecting us all across time and distance? *Ian, I'm sorry—*

I left the room. Left Russ at the sink. Made a new plan: stop by home for the right clothes; email work with a family emergency; start driving.

It had been a mistake to believe I could just disappear. That I could forget any of this—the memories, the pact. That I could leave it—and them—behind for good.

On my way, I responded, my hands still trembling.

I shouldn't have tried to fight it. There was a gravity to this ritual week, to the past, to them. The only survivors. There were nine of us, at the start.

Their names were a drumbeat in my head, our lives perpetually bound. Amaya, Clara, Grace. Oliver, Joshua, Ian. Hollis and Brody. Me. A miracle, it seemed, that there were any of us at all.

In truth, they represented the facet of my life I wanted most to forget. An exorcism of my past that I couldn't quite complete. But, like Amaya, I did care, and deeply so. Because we had all made that promise: Then and always, we would see each other through this week. Keep our borders close, keep our secrets closer. One moment, pulling the rest of us back together, year after year.

Only now we were seven.

SUNDAY

CHAPTER 1

Our house, like most things, came down to luck.

Luck that the property had managed to withstand two hurricanes in the last decade, perched on a set of pilings at the edge of the dunes, protected only by aluminum storm shutters and cedar shake siding that had faded over the years to a weatherworn gray.

Luck that there was space for all of us within its five bedrooms, with balconies that connected via wraparound porches and precarious wooden steps over three stories.

Luck that the beachfront rental belonged to Oliver's family, and, that first year, after Clara's funeral, when we were panicked and desperate and made that pact, Oliver had said: *I know a place.*

The house was tucked away from the activity of town, at the far edge of a dead-end road. It was close enough to see the neighbors down the stretch of sand—especially in the dark, with the windows lit up, beacons in the night—but still private enough to feel removed. A peace of mind in both regards.

It was the perfect haven for us, the lucky ones: survivors of the crash, and then of the raging river, the unrelenting storm.

Oliver called it The Shallows, a name that felt like a promise. A place of safety, and retreat, isolated from the rest of the world, and surrounded on all sides by the endless deep. We came here the first time out of convenience, but we kept coming back because returning here year after year removed the necessity of decisions, the burden of plans. And because it was hundreds of miles from the site of the accident, protected from the undertow of the past.

• • •

I drove five hours to the coast, and then over a series of bridges to the southern barrier islands, passing the time in a state of steady dread, trying to distract myself with a variety of podcasts I couldn't focus on, before finally giving over to the silence.

The turnoff appeared before I was ready for it, a cluster of uncoordinated mailboxes before a faded street sign, bent from the wind and sun-scorched white at the center.

The house was at the end of the unpaved road, the parking area out front a semicircle of rocks and weeds, with a fine coating of sand that I'd felt under the wheels for the last ten miles. On the drive in, the land progressively narrowed between the ocean and the sound, and the dunes crept closer to the road, sand swirling across the pavement in gusty spirals. From a distance, the sand formed a sort of haze, suspended like fog in the atmosphere, encroaching from the sea. Without regular maintenance, I imagined, all of this would be swept away; every sign of humanity wiped clean, in a steady assault of nature.

The geography was constantly shifting out here. In the marshlands, water seeped onto the grassy edges of the road. After a storm, islands could have become peninsulas, or vice versa. And the dunes were always moving, growing—like everything in sight was waiting to be consumed.

But somehow this house remained.

There were four cars in a row out front, the last being Amaya's rust-colored sedan, with a collection of decals lining the rear windshield. It was already late afternoon—I assumed I was the last to arrive. Not everyone lived within driving distance anymore.

I pulled into the spot beside a familiar dark Honda, jarred by the car seat visible in the back, by how much could change in a year.

When I stepped outside, the air tasted like salt, like something from my nightmares. Sometimes, alone, in the dark of night, I'd wake from a dream still tasting the river, storm water, a gritty soil in the back of my throat. But other times I'd wake to the scent of saltwater air instead, like I wasn't sure which was the nightmare—then or now.

I breathed slowly, staring up at the house. The raised porch, multiple gables, windows reflecting the sun and sky. The structure was dated but objectively

beautiful, I knew, in the way it rose unobtrusively from the landscape, like driftwood from the beach, positioned with care to welcome the forces of nature, instead of fighting against them.

A set of wide wooden steps led up to the front door, where we'd taken that single photo our first year—the eight of us crammed together, sitting shoulder to shoulder, knees pressing into the body in front of us, like proof: *We're still here.*

I straightened my spine, steeling myself. On a list of things that could set my nerves on edge, this would be near the top. Not quite as high as driving on curving dark roads, or being lost. But arriving late to this house, with this group: high.

They weren't bad people. They were just bad people for me.

A shadow passed the living room window, and I imagined them all together, sitting around that taupe sectional couch, waiting for me.

And then, before I could stop the image: I saw them running, funneling out the front door, a massive wave rising up behind the house, sky darkening, shadow expanding. The chaos of panic, and wondering who I would save first—

It was a habit I couldn't shake, the question always on my mind. In a room full of people, a bus full of strangers: *Who do you save?* A thought experiment playing out in real time. A horror interlude in the monotony of my daily life.

I grabbed my luggage, slammed the trunk of my car.

The first day was always the hardest.

• • •

The front door squeaked as I pushed it open, hinges rusted from the saltwater air and time. One step inside, and my memory sharpened: whitewashed, wood-paneled walls and an open floor plan, so I could see straight through the house, entrance to exit—first the living room, then the long table of the dining room and the kitchen beyond, the areas partitioned by furniture alone, and finally the back windows and the sliding door to the deck. But when I closed the front door behind me—loud enough to draw attention, to make sure they knew I was here—Brody was the only one I saw.

“There she is,” he said, standing from the fridge, as if there were someone else in the room with us. He twisted the top off his beer while he walked halfway across the space, dimple forming as he smiled. He had the same shaggy haircut as always, a brown mop he was constantly pushing back from his face. He’d been the athlete of our group, one half of class-couple Brody and Hollis, and he still carried the confidence of someone used to being widely known in school.

“Here,” I said, like I was a student calling out her attendance, and he laughed. From his greeting, it sounded like they’d been waiting. Unlike Brody, I was more accustomed to being overlooked, so I had gotten into the habit of going out of my way to make my presence known.

I set my luggage beside the couch and took him in. Every year, our first greetings were both familiar and jarring. He dressed the same—casually, in gym shorts and a T-shirt and slip-on sandals. But there was a car seat in the back of his car; he was a *dad*. An entire identity that had changed in a moment.

“The drive okay?” Brody appeared at ease no matter where he was or whom he was with. He picked up a conversation with me as if no time had passed since we’d seen each other last.

“Yes, but sorry I’m late.”

He took a long drink, shook his head, brushed a rogue wave of hair from his eyes. “You’re not even the last one.” Then he nodded toward the back of the kitchen. “We’re outside, after you get settled.”

“I’ll be out in a few,” I said, grateful for the time to orient myself first.

Reasons to save Brody: he was a new father; people would miss him.

He smiled, standing at the back door, taking me in. I was wearing the first jeans and T-shirt I had managed to pull from my drawer, and pieces of dark blond hair had fallen from my haphazard ponytail during the drive. I felt self-conscious, exposed. “You look good, Cass,” he said, as if he could read my insecurity. He left the sliding door ajar as he exited, in an offering, or an oversight.

In the silence that followed, I could hear the waves, the cry of a seagull. Out back, there was a wooden walkway through the dunes, patchy seagrass mixed in with the sand, and then—water, sea breeze, infinity.

Grace always said there was something healing about the ocean, but then, she was someone who believed in the mind's ability to right itself, and in nature's ability to do the same. She worked as a trauma therapist now, which I thought was reason enough to save her, even if she saw the rest of us as works in progress. Grace must've managed to convince herself that the enemy was not *water* but the lack of lights on a winding mountain road. A deer, caught in the blinding glare of headlights; a series of bad decisions in an approaching storm.

But I found nothing healing about this place.

Maybe it was the bridges I had to take to get here, cutting me off from the rest of my life, cutting us all off together. The single road in, and the way the light shimmered off the pavement, like water. The sea visible on both sides, and this sensation that something was closing in.

Maybe it would feel this way no matter where we were, as long as we were together. Maybe everything we touched together turned to ash.

• • •

My room—the room I had stayed in since that very first year—was one of three on the second floor. The door was open at the end of the hall, welcoming me. Inside, there were two queen beds with matching aqua-colored comforters, dark wooden furniture, and an antique, out-of-place mirror. Amaya's luggage was at the foot of the bed that had always been hers, nearer the entrance.

I almost didn't see her. It was the breeze I noticed first: the glass doors to the balcony cracked open, and the silhouette through the gauzy curtains—a person facing the dunes, the ocean.

“Hey,” I said quietly, swinging the doors fully open. But I made her jump all the same. Her curly brown hair was up in her signature high ponytail, and it appeared shorter than the year before. There were hollows under her hazel eyes when she turned to face me, as if she'd traveled through the night, or been haunted by the drive in, same as me.

“Oh,” she said, like she was surprised to see me here at all. She seemed even smaller than I remembered, drowning in loose joggers and an oversize sweatshirt, hands tucked inside the sleeves. The weather in the Outer Banks in early May

was unpredictable. It could be sixty degrees with a crisp ocean breeze, or it could be closer to eighty with a strong sun and thick with humidity.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” I said, dropping my luggage beside the bed closer to the window, in the room we always shared. Creatures of habit, all of us. The comfort of routines lingered from our school years, assigned positions and predicted places. The rooms were almost dormitory-style, with identical layouts: two beds and similar furniture in each. Only the color scheme varied, so we called the rooms by their colors: Grace and Hollis in the yellow room; Brody and Joshua in the navy room. The main bedroom on the first floor always belonged to Oliver.

Amaya leaned back against the wooden rail, fidgeting with the set of silver rings she always wore. Her nails were painted a chipping, stormy blue. “You made it,” she said, as if to let me know she’d been waiting. We didn’t hug. We never did, not until the end, when it was a relief. A release. “I was starting to worry.”

She always seemed to have a sixth sense, like she knew I’d been sitting at Russ’s kitchen table that morning with every intention of staying put, knew enough to text me—knew what it would take to get me to come.

I wondered what she’d been thinking while I’d made excuses to Russ, *So sorry, message from my boss. Last-minute business trip*—and waved off his offer to take me to an airport, the lies slipping so easily off my tongue.

“I didn’t know,” I said, and at her continued stare, I added, “About Ian.” The loss was too fresh, impossible to process. I felt myself wanting to look for him, desperate, as always, to account for him—to check his room, or listen for his footsteps overhead; to hear his laughter from somewhere out back.

She scrunched up her nose as she looked to the side. “I had to hear the details from Josh.”

Amaya, like me, like most of the survivors, had moved away from town in the years after the accident. Though her choice of location now was unsettling.

Joshua was the only one who still lived and worked in the town where we’d all grown up, who would’ve heard about Ian directly through the local rumor mill.

“I thought he was doing better,” I said, my eyes burning, the act of discussion suddenly making it real. But the truth was, I had no reason to know how Ian had been doing at all.

Amaya blinked at me slowly. “Is everyone else here?” she asked, pivoting the conversation, sparing me the awkwardness.

“Brody said they’re out back,” I said, and she nodded. “Come on,” I added. “Don’t make me go out there alone.”

“I’ll be right down. I just need a minute,” she said, turning back to the balcony.

She looked so small standing there, framed by the dunes, the ocean stretching out into the distance, the wind blowing her hair. A shudder rolled through me—I couldn’t help picturing Clara on a different precipice, needing something, too.

But then Amaya looked over her shoulder, the faintest smile. “It’s good to see you, Cassidy.”

“You too,” I said.

Long ago, she had once led us all to safety. I tried to find the shadow of that person in the one now standing before me.

Reasons to save Amaya: I wasn’t sure she could make it on her own.

• • •

Stepping out the back door of The Shallows was always a trick of perspective. The dunes blocked the view of the beach from the lower level, but you could still catch a glimpse of the horizon beyond. It was easy to imagine you were alone out here, just sand and sea and sky. But the steps to the side led down to an enclosed patio with a hot tub, a patch of loose stones surrounding Adirondack chairs, and a fire pit in the center: a hub of hidden activity.

I saw them from above, sitting in a semicircle, the cadence of their voices carrying upward, but impossible to decipher.

As I descended the steps, only Joshua seemed to notice. I felt his eyes tracking me from the other side of the fire pit.

“Cassidy Bent,” Joshua said, in the way he always did. No *Nice to see you* or *How was the drive* or *Grab a seat*. Just my name; just like that, an echo across time.

He never seemed glad to see me, for reasons I couldn’t quite understand. Not from our interactions before the accident (nonexistent) or after (minimal). Eventually, I had stopped trying to figure it out. He was all sharp edges, sharp gaze, sharp comments. A pale scar across the ridge of his cheekbone. Khaki shorts and a striped polo, hair slicked back with gel. There were three crushed cans of beer under his chair, and he grinned when he saw me looking.

Reasons to save Joshua: nothing came to mind.

Brody gestured for me to join them, just as the woman beside him twisted in her chair, long dark hair falling over her shoulder as she did.

“Hey, Cassidy,” Grace said, smile stretching wider, a complete contrast to Joshua’s greeting. She had the rare ability of putting others at ease, myself included. She wore a maxi dress under a jean jacket, had a softness to her features and a way of moving that felt deliberate, fitting of her name. Everything about Grace felt designed to draw you closer, draw you in. “Did you see Amaya in there?” she asked, brushing her hair behind her shoulders.

“She’s on her way,” I said, slipping into the seat on the other side of Grace. I felt Joshua’s gaze on me, and became hyperaware of every move: how to cross a leg, where to put my arms. My jeans weren’t right for the beach, and my hair was at that awkward in-between length—I busied myself by undoing the hair tie now, running my hands through the shoulder-length pieces.

In the quiet that followed, I thought I caught an exchange of glances between the three of them. It made me think I’d interrupted something. But whatever they were discussing, they didn’t pick up with it again.

Brody tipped his head back, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called, “Amaya, come on down!”

Grace gave him a tight-lipped look. Then: “Let her be.” Grace spoke with an air of wisdom, or authority, how I imagined all therapists must, as if she had some extra insight that the rest of us didn’t.

Then she leaned closer to me, two freshly manicured hands on my arm. “Oh, I love your necklace,” she said. Grace operated in a series of compliments and

optimism, and could disarm you so easily, so readily. A skill she probably used in her job, with patients. Now she reached a hand to my neck, goose bumps rising along my arms as she slipped the chain into her palm, leaning closer, sliding the interlocking circles between her fingers, so they sounded like music.

“Thanks,” I said, waiting for her to drop the chain. For all the things Grace believed in, personal space didn’t seem to be one of them. Russ had gotten the necklace for my birthday last month, said he thought of me as soon as he saw it. At the center of the interlocking circles was the letter *C*, but it was something you noticed only if you were looking for it, in a way that felt like a secret, or a surprise.

Now it served as a connection to my real life. I slid the charm along the chain, suddenly transported back to my apartment when Russ handed me that box, his face at first guarded and unsure, before I felt his expression mirroring the joy in my own. *I love it*, I’d said as he helped clasp it around my neck—and I did. It was a reminder of the person I had become away from this group of people. The person I would return to again, in six more days.

Seconds later, footsteps echoed from the deck above, louder and more deliberate than Amaya’s. And then a crisp voice called over the rail, “I see you all made yourselves at home.”

“Well, well, the King is finally here,” Joshua said, with half a smile.

Oliver King, who always seemed ready to command a room, strode down the steps, looking like he’d just come from a meeting or a business lunch, in slacks and trendy sneakers and a blazer that must’ve been perfectly tailored to his lean frame. He was Korean American and had lived down the street from me all through high school, a proximity that made us feel closer than we actually were.

“Glad someone managed to find the way inside this time,” Oliver joked.

In past years, we had hovered outside or on the beach, until Oliver arrived with the key code for the unit, which apparently either changed each year or none of us had bothered to ask him before, or remember.

Reasons to save Oliver: this house, for starters.

“The door was open when I got here,” Brody said with a shrug.

Josh handed Oliver a fresh can of beer across the fire pit, and it looked out of place in his hands. But he cracked it open, frowned before taking a sip, then

wiped his hand across his mouth, in a way I couldn't imagine him doing around others.

Last I heard, Oliver was living in New York, managing some prestigious hedge fund. Maybe he was used to people waiting for him now. But he still, always, made time for this. All of us did.

It's why I believed that, for all our differences, for however disconnected our lives were ten years later, we all cared more for each other than we'd admit, face-to-face.

We hadn't missed a year, not even in 2020, when most of the restaurants were shut down and we were advised to stay put. Not even last year, when Brody's girlfriend was nine months pregnant and she'd begged him not to come. She'd gone into labor the very last day, and when he left—a rare moment of elation, kissing each of us on the cheek—I'd felt something shift, thinking maybe this was the end. That new beginnings and the promise of the future were releasing us. But now Brody was back, car seat in tow, like nothing at all had changed. The only person missing was—

“Someone's on the beach,” Amaya called from the top of the steps. She had her hands on the wooden rail, though she wouldn't be able to see clearly from there.

“It's a beach,” Josh said, not even looking her way. “People do tend to use it.”

“Hollis is out there,” Grace answered, ignoring Josh, waving Amaya down. “She spent about three seconds inside, unpacking. Just long enough to change for a workout.”

“Is that all of us, then?” Oliver asked, taking us in slowly, one by one. I wondered if he did a mental tally, as I did—of who to save. I wondered where I'd fit into his list.

Amaya perched on the arm of the last open seat, looking around the circle. Each of us taking stock of the rest.

“All present and accounted for,” Brody said, crossing his feet on the ledge of the fire pit.

I flinched in my chair. No one mentioned Ian, and it felt like a gut punch. How quickly we could each be forgotten: here one moment and then *poof*, gone, brutal and efficient. But then, wasn't this just like us. I couldn't remember the

last time someone mentioned Clara either—not even Grace, and they had been best friends. We did not mention the dead, as if it were yet another layer of the pact of which I was unaware. Another tool of our survival.

Grace checked a message on her phone, while Josh bounced a single knee, the silence stretching.

Finally, Oliver cleared his throat. “Did anyone happen to pick up food?”

Josh let out a bark of laughter. “No, Mr. King, we did not prepare the house for your arrival.” He rolled his eyes. “Speaking of, though. I took the upstairs room.”

Grace’s head whipped in his direction at the same time as Amaya’s.

“The fuck you did,” Amaya said, with more force than I’d heard her muster in years.

Josh and Amaya stared at each other wordlessly, and I remembered that they were bound in other ways, not just from these yearly trips—but through Amaya’s family, and Josh’s position in their law firm.

“To be honest,” Grace cut in, attempting to temper whatever came next, “I was hoping we could use the upstairs space for work. I still have patients to see this week, virtual appointments set up—”

“The upstairs space?” I heard myself repeating, cutting her off. For the first time, everyone looked at me. “You mean *Ian’s room*. Let’s call it what it is.”

His name reverberated through the group with a jolt. There was a prolonged stretch of silence before Josh raised one shoulder in a conceding shrug.

“Fine,” Josh said. “I took *Ian’s room*, seeing as he wasn’t going to be needing it anymore.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” Amaya said. I wasn’t sure if she was referring to the fact that he’d taken the room, or that he was being so crass about it now. “You can’t just take whatever you want.”

“What should we do instead, Amaya?” Josh said. “Should we draw for it?”

Brody let out a low groan of frustration.

The first day was always like this. Like no one actually wanted to be here, and we bumped up against one another in sharp edges and passive aggressions. *Survivors’ guilt*, Grace would say. But for every face here, there was another missing, a reality we had to come to terms with each time. Eventually we’d settle

into it, into one another, and Grace would convince us that *See, we needed to do this. We needed one another.*

“Stop,” Grace said, hands held out to pacify us. “Let’s talk this out. And, Josh, *please.*”

“What?” Josh said, turning on Grace now too. “We’re a dying breed. If we can’t joke about that, who can?”

“Josh, come on,” Oliver said, finally interjecting.

“Oh, that’s right,” Josh said, the corner of his mouth raised. “Your place, your rules, I forgot.”

How quickly everything could turn. How quickly *we* could turn things.

Grace had her eyes closed, like she was meditating, or repeating some mantra to herself. “Are you going to say *anything*, Brody?” As if even her facade had finally cracked, and she was desperate to know that everyone was on her side.

Oliver caught my eye over the group, and I wondered, again, if he was weighing his options, as I was.

Quick, who do you save? *Amaya. Grace. Brody. Oliver.*

I stood from the chair. Turned away. Pushed through the back gate, heading toward the dunes.

It’s a trick question, of course. The answer was always: yourself.