

IN LEAH'S WAKE

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Prologue

March

Justine strikes a pose before the full-length mirror hanging on her closet door. Chin up, hands by her sides. She draws a breath. “My dear. . .” she begins, and stops mid-sentence. Wrinkles her nose. She’s got it all wrong. She’s too—Too *stiff*. Too grownup. Too *something*.

She rakes her fingers over her short dark hair, sweeping the bangs out of her eyes, tugs at the hem of her pink baby-doll pajamas. She’s scheduled to deliver the candidates’ address at her Confirmation Mass this afternoon. When she learned, six months ago, that she had been selected speaker, Justine was ecstatic. Now, the very idea of standing in front of the whole congregation, telling hundreds, maybe thousands, of people how she’s learned from her own family what it means to be part of God’s larger family makes her sick to her stomach.

She has no choice. She made a commitment.

She folds her hands primly, setting them at chest height on her imaginary podium, glances at her cheat sheet, rolls her lower face into a smile, and begins again. “My fellow Confirmation candidates,” she says this time. Justine crumples the paper, tosses it onto her bed. *My fellow Confirmation candidates*. What a *dork*. She sounds about twenty, instead of thirteen.

She screws up her face. “I can’t do this,” she says, wagging a finger at the girl watching her from the mirror. She would feel like a hypocrite.

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Justine plods to the bathroom, pees, pads back to her bedroom. The forecasters are predicting snow, starting later today. A dismal gray stratus clouds the sky outside her skylight. Her room is dark, the air raw. Her sister's blue and gold Cortland High sweatshirt lies in a heap at the foot of her bed. Justine pulls the sweatshirt over her head, retrieves the balled-up paper. With the back of her hand, she flattens it out, and returns to the mirror to practice.

As always, on first glance, the girl in the mirror takes Justine by surprise. She's grown two inches since Christmas, isn't chubby anymore, her belly flat, the clavicle bones visible now at the base of her throat. She pushes her bangs out of her pale, darkly fringed eyes. With her fingertips, she touches her cheeks. Her features have matured, her nose long and straight, like her mother's, her cheekbones defined. She curls and uncurls her toes. She wears a size six shoe, a size and a half smaller than Leah. Her toes are long and slim, the nails painted blue.

Justine crushes the sheet of paper, tosses it in the trash, strolls to her window, raises the honeycomb shade. Spring feels a long way away, the yard empty, the trees bare. A rush of cold air streams in, under the sash. The air smells of snow. Justine presses her hand against the cool glass, the way she and her sister used to do on the windshield of their father's car, when they were small. *Stop*, their father would scold. *You're making a mess*. She smiles, remembering how Leah loved egging him on. She pulls her hand away from the glass, watches her prints disappear.

Justine wishes, sometimes, that she could disappear, too. *Poof*, just like the handprint.

Poof, just like her sister.

One

Just Do It

September

Zoe and Will Tyler sat at the dining room table, playing poker. The table, a nineteenth-century, hand-carved mahogany, faced the bay window overlooking their sprawling front yard. Husband and wife sat facing one another, a bowl of Tostitos and a half-empty bottle of port positioned between them. Their favorite Van Morrison disc—*Tupelo Honey*—spun on the player in the family room, the music drifting out of speakers built into the dining room walls.

Dog, their old yellow Lab, lay on a ratty pink baby blanket, under the window.

Zoe plucked the Queen of Hearts from the outside of her hand, and tucked it center. She was holding a straight. If she laid it down, she would win the hand, third in a row, and her husband would quit. If she didn't, she would be cheating herself.

The moon was full tonight, its light casting a ghostly shadow across the yard. The full moon made Zoe anxious. For one of her internships in grad school, she'd worked on the psych ward at City Hospital, in Boston. On nights when the moon was full, the floor erupted, the

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patients noisy, agitated. Zoe's superiors had pooh-poohed the lunar effect, chalked it up to irrationality, superstition. But Zoe had witnessed the flaring tempers, seen the commotion with her own two eyes, and found the effect impossible to deny—and nearly all the nurses concurred.

“Full moon,” she remarked. “No wonder I had trouble sleeping last night.”

Will set his empty glass on the table. With his fingers, he drummed an impatient tattoo. “You planning to take your turn any time soon? Be nice if we ended this game before midnight.”

“For Pete's sake, Will.” Her husband had the attention span of a titmouse. He reminded her of Mick, a six year-old ADD patient she counseled—sweet kid, when he wasn't ransacking her office, tossing the sand out of the turtle-shaped box, tweaking her African violets.

“What's so funny?” he asked, sulking.

She shook her head—nothing, *Mick*—and forced a straight face.

“You're laughing at me.”

“Don't be silly. Why would I be laughing at you?”

He peered at his reflection in the window. Smirking, he finger-combed his baby-fine hair, pale, graying at the temples, carving a mini-pyramid at his crown.

“Nice do. Could use a little more gel,” she said, feeling mean-spirited the instant the words slipped out of her mouth. The poor guy was exhausted. He'd spent the week in California, on business, had flown into Logan this morning, on the red-eye. Though he had yet to fill her in on the details, it was obvious to her that his trip had not gone well. “Sorry,” she said. “Just kidding.” She fanned out her cards, hesitated for an instant, and laid down the straight.

“Congratulations.” Scowling, he pushed away from the table. “You win again.”

“Way to go, grumpy. Quit.”

“I'm getting water,” he said, tamping his hair. “Want some?”

Dog lifted her head, her gaze following Will to the door, yawned, and settled back down.

Her husband stomped across the kitchen, his footfall moving in the direction of the family room. The music stopped abruptly, and the opening chords of a Robbie Robertson tune

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belted out of the speakers. Zoe loved Robbie Robertson, "Showdown at Big Sky" one of her favorite songs. That didn't mean that the entire state of Massachusetts wanted to hear it.

"Will," she said, gesturing from the kitchen. "Turn it down. You'll wake Justine."

She waited a few seconds, caught his eye, gestured again. The third time was the charm.

Exasperated, she returned to the dining room, bundled the cards, put them away in the sideboard, and gathered the dishes. The toilet flushed in the half-bath off the back hall. Seconds later, she heard her husband rattling around the kitchen, slamming the cabinet doors. Last spring, Will had won a major contract for his company, North American Construction. Since then, he'd been back and forth nonstop to the West Coast, spending two weeks a month in San Francisco, servicing the client. Zoe hadn't minded his traveling, at first. Over the past two years, with the glut of office and manufacturing space in the northeast, construction starts had dropped, and his sales had taken a serious hit, his commissions steadily dwindling. To compensate, initially they'd relied on their savings. In January, they'd refinanced the house. When the California job arose, Will had jumped on the opportunity. He had no choice, especially with Leah headed to college next year. But the situation, lately, was brutal. Will hated traveling, hated flying, hated living out of a suitcase. And he resented missing Leah's soccer games. Last November, as a sophomore, their daughter had been named Player of the Year on the *Boston Globe* All-Scholastic team. A week later, in his year-end summary, the sports reporter from the *Cortland Gazette* had called Leah the "best soccer player in the state." The head coaches from the top colleges in the area—Harvard, Dartmouth, Boston College, BU—had sent congratulatory letters, expressing their interest. Will wanted to be home to guide her, meet the prospective coaches, help her sort through her options. Zoe didn't blame her husband a bit. But it didn't seem to occur to Will that his traveling disrupted her life, too. Last year, she'd developed a motivational seminar, called "Success Skills for Women on the Move." Now that the girls were practically grown, the workshops were her babies. The extra workload at home, added to the demands of her fulltime

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job at the counseling center, left her with no time for marketing or promotion, and the workshops had stagnated. Zoe understood her husband's frustration. It irked her when he minimized hers.

Will appeared in the doorway, a few minutes later, empty-handed. Will was tall, a hair shy of six-one. He'd played football in college, and, at forty-five, still had the broad shoulders and narrow waist of an athlete. Amazing, really: after eighteen years of marriage, she still found him achingly sexy. Crow's feet creased the corners of his intelligent blue eyes and fine lines etched his cheekbones, giving his boyish features a look of intensity and purpose, qualities Zoe had recognized from the start but that only now, as he was aging, showed on his face.

After work, he'd changed into a pair of stonewashed jeans and a gray sweatshirt, worn soft, the words "Harvard Soccer Camp" screened in maroon lettering across the chest. Absently, he pushed up his sleeves, and peered around the room as though looking for something. "Zoe—" Normally, he called her Honey or Zo.

"I put the cards away." She thumbed the sideboard. "You quit, remember?"

"Do you have any idea what time it is?"

She glanced at the cuckoo clock on the far wall. "Ten past eleven. So?"

"Where's Leah?"

At the football game, with Cissy. "They've been going every week. Did you forget?"

"She ought to be home by now."

"She's only ten minutes late." Their daughter was a junior in high school. They'd agreed, before school started this year, to extend her weekend curfew to eleven. "She'll be here soon."

Will stalked to the window, grumbling. Dog rose, and pressed her nose to the glass.

Their driveway, half the length of a soccer field, sloped down from the cul-de-sac, arced around the lawn, and straightened, ending in a turnaround at the foot of their three-car garage. In summer, the oak and birch trees bordering the property obscured their view. Now that most of the leaves had fallen, the headlights were visible as vehicles entered the circle.

"She has a game in the morning." Will stretched his neck. His upper back had been

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bothering him lately, residual pain from an old football injury he'd suffered in college.

Zoe came up behind him, pushing Dog's blanket aside with her foot, and squeezed his shoulders. "You're tight."

He dropped his chin. "From sleeping on the plane. Got to get one of those donut pillows."

"You know Leah. She has no sense of time. I'll bet they stopped for something to eat."

"I can't see why Hillary won't set a curfew. Every other coach has one."

"Relax, Will. It's not that late. You're blowing this out of proportion. Don't you think?"

A flash of headlights caught their attention. An SUV entered the cul-de-sac, rounded the circle, its lights sweeping over the drive and across their lawn, and headed down the street.

Bending, Will ruffled Dog's ears. "Reardon's coming tomorrow, specifically to watch her. She plays like crap when she's tired."

The Harvard coach. She should have known. "So she doesn't go to Harvard," she said, a tired remark, fully aware of the comeback her words would elicit, "she'll go someplace else."

"There *is* no place else."

No place that would give her the opportunities, the connections... *blah, blah, blah*. They'd been over this a million times. If their daughter had the slightest aspiration of going to Harvard, Zoe would do everything in her power to support her. As far as she could tell, the name Harvard had never graced Leah's wish-list. It was a moot point, anyway. For the last two terms, Leah's grades had been dropping. If she did apply for admission, she would probably be denied.

"Reardon has pull," he offered, a weak rebuttal in Zoe's opinion. "He's been talking to Hillary about her. She can't afford to blow this opportunity."

Opportunity? *What* opportunity? "Face it, Will. She doesn't want to go to Harvard."

"If she plays her cards right, she can probably get a boat."

Zoe opened her mouth, ready to blast him. He'd received a full football scholarship from Penn State, and dropped out of college. Was that what he wanted? A college drop-out in a couple years? Noticing the purple rings under his eyes, she held back. "You're exhausted." His plane had

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barely touched ground at Logan Airport when he was ordered to NAC's corporate office in Waltham, for a marketing meeting. He hadn't had time to stop home to change his clothes, never mind take a short nap. "Why don't you go to bed? I'll wait up."

The look he returned implied that she'd lost it. "You think I could sleep?"

"For all we know, they had a flat."

"She would have called."

"So call her." *Duh.*

"I did. I got voice mail."

Shoot. "You know Leah. Her battery probably died." She was grasping at straws. Leah was sixteen years old. That phone was her lifeline. Still, it could be true. It was possible. Right?

Leah had totally lost track of time. She and Todd had been hanging out at the water tower for hours, perched on the hood of Todd's Jeep, drinking Vodka and OJ, admiring the beautiful night. This place was perfect, the most perfect place in the universe, maybe. Big sky, lots of trees. From here, they could see the whole town, just about—the river, the railroad tracks. An orchard. In the valley, lights began to blink out. Leaning back on her elbows, she gazed up at the heavens. "Look," she said, mesmerized by the inky black sky, the billions and billions of stars. "The Big Dipper." As she stared into space, time fell away, the past merging seamlessly with the future, this moment, up here, with Todd, the only reality there ever was or ever could be.

Todd took her hand, drawing her close, so close she could smell the spicy deodorant under his armpits. Just being with Todd Corbett made her feel dizzy all over. Todd was, by far, the most beautiful boy she had ever laid eyes on. His hair was long on top, short on the sides. He had full lips, and the most fabulous blue eyes, like, like crystals or something. A Romanesque nose, the exact nose she'd once told Cissy she'd die for, only now that she'd seen it on Todd, she realized that that particular nose was meant for a boy. Best of all, he had this incredible aura, all purple and blue, like James Dean or Curt Cobain.

She curled her legs under her, laid her head on Todd's chest.

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They met at a party, the Friday before school started. Todd had been on tour for the past two years, working as a roadie for a heavy metal band called "Cobra." Leah knew he was back—that was all anybody was talking about—had recognized him instantly, from all the descriptions.

She couldn't believe her luck. Todd Corbett! And alone! She'd heard he was hot. He was even better looking in person. Looking back, she couldn't believe she'd been so brazen. She left Cissy in the lurch, sashayed right over to him, took a seat beside him, on the living room floor.

The movie he was watching was stupid. People clopping across a field like zombies, their arms outstretched. They reminded her of herself and Justine when they were little, playing blind. Even the makeup looked phony.

"What are you watching?" she asked.

"*Night of the Living Dead*. Flick's a classic. Hey, haven't I seen you someplace before?"

Maybe, though she couldn't imagine where. Todd couldn't possibly have remembered her from high school. She was only a freshman when he dropped out.

"Leah Tyler, right? You're that soccer chick."

The wind swished through the trees. Leah shivered and Todd shrugged out of his worn leather bomber, draped his jacket over her shoulders. He reached into the pocket of his jeans, retrieved a small plastic bag half-full of weed, began rolling a joint. He licked the edge of the paper, lit the joint, inhaling deeply, and handed it to her, the smell rich and exotic and sweet.

Leah had never smoked marijuana until she met Todd. She used to be scared, which was dumb: weed was totally harmless. (The first few times she smoked, she had to admit, she'd been disappointed.) She pulled, her chest searing, struggled to hold the ice-hot smoke in her lungs.

Suddenly, she was coughing, waving her arms.

"You OK, babe?" Todd rescued the joint. With the other hand, he patted her back.

Once she was breathing easily again, he laughed, a sweet laugh that left her feeling dignified, rather than cheesy or stupid. He pinched the joint between his index finger and thumb, took a hit to demonstrate, and brought it to her lips, holding it for her. "That's it, babe. Good."

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They smoked the joint to its stub, and he showed her how to fashion a roach clip from twigs. Afterward, he offered to drive her home. "Don't want you getting in trouble or nothing."

"That's OK," Leah said dreamily. "I don't have to go yet."

Todd hopped off the hood of the Jeep, pulled a flannel blanket from the back of the truck, and spread the blanket on the grass, under a giant oak tree. Leah watched him smooth it out, his hands dancing, the whole world intensely colored, brilliantly alive. She heard the lonely trill of a cricket, calling from deep in the valley, smelled the damp autumn earth, felt the cool blue breeze on her face. Todd was gliding toward her now, floating on air. He scooped her into his arms, lifting her from the hood of his Jeep, and laid her on the blanket. And kissed her.

At eleven thirty, Zoe dialed Leah's cell phone again. When Leah didn't pick up, she tried Cissy, both times reaching voice mail. "I don't believe those two," Zoe said, infuriated. "I'll bet they changed their ringers. The little devils probably know it's us."

"That's your daughter for you," Will huffed.

"She's *my* daughter now?"

By eleven forty-five, Zoe was chewing her cuticles. And Will was pacing.

"This is it," Will announced. "I'm calling the cops."

"You can't be serious. What do you plan to tell them?"

He opened his cell phone. "I can't sit here, doing nothing." He glared at the screen.

"You can't call the cops. She's forty-five minutes late. They'll think we're crazy."

He clicked his cell shut, dug his keys out of his pocket. "Fine. I'll find her myself."

Find her? Where on earth did he plan to look?

"I'll start at the high school."

"The game was over hours ago."

"I'll drive by the Hanson's." He headed for the garage, Dog at his heels.

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“And do what?” Cissy’s mom, a nurse, worked the early shift at St. John’s. Judi was probably in bed by now. He would frighten her if he knocked on the door. “Will? Answer me.”

He swiveled to face her. “Look for the car,” he snapped, and ushered Dog out the door.

Zoe stood in the mudroom, at a loss, staring blankly at the door her husband had closed. The house, she realized when she came to, was an icebox. She rooted through the hall closet, found a fleece jacket of Will’s, and pulled it on, kicked off her shoes, the ceramic tile cool under her bare feet, went to the bathroom, crossed the hall to the laundry, tossed a load of clean clothes into the dryer, and wandered back to the kitchen. She poured a glass of water, gathered the dishes they’d left on the dining room table, and emptied the uneaten chips into the compactor. She loaded the dishwasher. After she finished washing the counter, she flung the rag into the sink, and grabbed the cordless phone, so she would have a phone handy if Will or Leah tried to call.

A family portrait, commissioned last year, hung over the stone fireplace in the family room. For the photograph, the four of them had dressed in blue; their blue period, they’d joked when the photographer showed them the proofs. In the photo, Zoe is sitting on a stool, leaning toward the camera, Will standing behind her, flanked by the girls. Looking at the portrait, you’d never guess how hard it had been for the photographer to capture the shot, the kids squabbling, Will impatient, Zoe frustrated, both parents clenching their teeth. Restless, Zoe stepped down into the family room, sank into the oversized chair next to the fireplace, and curled her legs under her, clutching the phone.

Waiting, she tried to think positive thoughts. *Leah’s responsible. She can handle herself.* If the girls had been in a car accident, the police would have contacted them by now. As usual, her effort to avoid negative thoughts conjured them up. Something wasn’t right. Leah had been late a few times before, never like this. A half hour was one thing. Zoe often lost track of time herself. She would be at her office, transcribing her notes, look up, notice the clock, and realize she was supposed to have picked up one of the girls—at school, at the mall, at a friend’s—fifteen, twenty minutes before. She would rush around her office in a tizzy, collecting her folders and

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purse, cursing herself for being a neglectful mother, and drive like a madwoman to her destination. But an hour? She checked her watch. And fifteen minutes? This wasn't like Leah.

She wondered if she had missed something. A signal. A hint. This morning, Leah, out of bed by seven, had moseyed into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes. Spotting the sauce pan on the front burner, she'd whined about having to eat oatmeal again. But she always whined when Zoe made oatmeal, which on certain days she found "revolting," on others "disgusting" or "gross." Zoe set the bowl in front of her. "Quit bellyaching," she said. "Oatmeal is good for you."

They were running late. So the girls wouldn't have to rush to catch the bus, Zoe offered to drive them to school. Justine rode shotgun, while Leah dozed in the backseat. At two, Leah called Zoe at work to remind her that she and Cissy planned to go to the game. She was headed directly home after practice, Leah had said; she would fix dinner. At six thirty, when Zoe opened the back door, she smelled Leah's spicy, cumin-laced chili. On the island counter, Zoe found place settings for her, for Will, for Justine, three glasses filled with ice water and lemon. Justine was upstairs in her room, doing her geometry homework. Leah had already left for the game.

Zoe closed her eyes, breathing deeply, attempting to center herself, and, counting backward from ten. . . eight, seven, six. . . summoned an image of her daughter. Leah's face materialized, and her body slowly came into focus. Directing her energy outward, Zoe enclosed her daughter in a protective circle of light. *Be safe, baby*, she whispered. *Be safe.*

Will drove along country roads canopied by the boughs of towering oak trees, the winding streets bordered by stone walls erected in the late 1700's, by the farmers who'd settled the town. In those days, the stone walls served as boundary markers, the average farm occupying fifty acres of land, most of it orchards. It was a hard life, Will thought, working eighteen hours a day, building walls, cultivating the land. He reached for Dog, on the passenger seat, ruffled her ears. "What do you say, Girl?" Dog cocked her head. "Was life harder then? Or harder today?"

The Hansons lived a mile outside the center, on a corner lot in a modest sub-division,

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built in the late-eighties, a neighborhood of center-entry colonials, garrisons, expanded Capes, set on cramped one-acre lots. Will slowed as they approached the Hanson's newly remodeled Salt Box, he and Dog rubber-necking together. Onion lamps flanked the entrance and the garage doors; matching pole lights lined the drive. The house was dark, the driveway empty. Will turned left, onto the adjacent street, hoping to find a light on in the back of the house, in which case he would knock on the door. Nothing, not even a porch lamp. Frustrated, he rounded the block, passed by the front of the property again, in case he had somehow managed to miss Cissy's car the first time, and headed for the high school, on the off-chance that the girls were still there.

The parking lot was dark when Will pulled in, the lights extinguished hours ago. He pulled down the sloping driveway behind the school, passing the rubberized track, where the soccer players practiced their sprints. He swung by the service entrance, then by the gym, doubled back, and circled the deserted lot, scanning the playing fields. At the ticket booth by football stadium, he parked, and just sat, thinking, Dog curled beside him on the passenger seat.

They'd had no idea, he and Zoe, how easy they'd had it when the girls were young. In their eyes, every little thing seemed like a crisis. They would glance at the window, catch three-year-old Leah zooming down the drive on her Big-Wheel, her legs outstretched, little hands reaching for the sky. In a panic, they would tear out of the house, always an instant too late, too far from their daughter to do anything except cross their fingers and watch. "Leah—" Will would holler, his stomach churning, "hold on." And Zoe would cover her eyes, both parents envisioning the worst, the Big-Wheel rocketing off course, crashing into a tree. Later, the rope swing he'd hung by their deck replaced the Big-Wheel as the most obvious threat. They'd worried about random accidents, obsessed over tragedies they watched on *News Center 5* or read about in the *Globe*: that the girls would fall into the hidden shaft of a well or drown in a neighbor's backyard pool, that a stranger would kidnap one of their daughters when she was outside playing or taking a walk. It was tough being a parent, the welfare of their children utterly dependent on them, yet as long as they were vigilant, as long as they did their job, kept a trained eye on their daughters, their

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children would be safe. Now that she was older, they had no way of keeping tabs on their daughter. Once the car she was riding in rolled out of the drive, her fate was out of their hands. She could be anywhere, doing anything, with anyone. They had no way to protect her.

“What do you say, girl?” he said finally. “Doesn't look like she's here, does it?”

In a last ditch effort, he took another run by the Hanson's place.

Zoe had fallen asleep clutching the portable phone, her head resting on the wing of her chair. He brushed a curl out of her face, touched her shoulder gently, so he wouldn't startle her.

His wife blinked up at him. “Did you find her?”

He shook his head, dejected.

Dog nuzzled Zoe's leg. Yawning, she scratched the dog's head. “What time is it?”

“Close to one.”

“My God.” She pulled herself to an upright position. “What do you think is going on?”

Hard to say at this point, he told her. “She didn't call, did she?”

Zoe shook her head in alarm. “You don't think anything's happened, do you?”

“We'd have heard by now.”

“I'm worried, Will. This isn't like her.”

Will rubbed his neck, squeezing the trapezius muscles, hoping to release some of the tension. “I don't know where else to look. Figured it'd be stupid to keep driving in circles.”

His wife attempted to stifle a yawn.

“You look beat,” he said. “Why don't you go to bed? I'll wait up.”

“You're as tired as I am.”

“Go. I can sleep in. You've got to get up in the morning.”

“Maybe I should,” she said, shifting position. “Have to be up at six. Had to—” She paused, her glazed eyes fixed on the palladium window at the far end of the room. “Sorry.” She blinked. “I had to shift my schedule around. Workshop Sunday. Wake me when she comes in? You won't forget?”

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"I won't forget."

Will helped his wife out of her chair, walked her to the front staircase, kissed her, and told her to sleep well. From the foot of the staircase, he watched her climb the stairs and wander down the hall to their bedroom. When she closed the door, he went to the kitchen, filled a glass with spring water, brought the glass to the living room, sat on his leather recliner by the window, adjusted the back, and put up his feet. Dog lay on the floor, next to his chair. In ten minutes, she was snoring. He plucked an old issue of *Sports Illustrated* out of the pleated leather pocket on the side of his chair, flipped through. Unable to focus, he tossed it on the floor.

On the windowsill, in front of an eight-by-ten studio portrait of the girls, taken when Justine was a toddler, sat a framed snapshot of Leah. He picked up the photo. They'd been in Cortland for about a year when he snapped the shot. Leah was not quite seven, the youngest child on the under-ten team. Her uniform was two sizes too big, her baggie blue T-shirt skimming the hem of her shorts. The team was in the midst of a game, Leah racing to the net, blond ponytail flying, the ball jouncing in front of her, her tiny face focused, intense.

His daughter was an exceptional player, fast, agile, fiercely competitive, the best player from Massachusetts *ever*, some coaches said. Since she was a child, Will had been grooming her, encouraging her, fostering her talent. Youth soccer, traveling teams. Scholarship to Harvard—that was their plan. They'd practiced, strategized, prepared. Through the rain, the snow, he'd been right there with her. All in service to the crimson uniform she would one day wear. That was her dream, wasn't it? She hoped to play pro. But Harvard first. Time and again, they'd discussed the importance of a good education, the one thing in life that can never be taken away.

Will pushed her, he knew. He wanted the best for his kids. He would do whatever it took to help them succeed, prevent them from repeating the mistakes he'd made. In the spring of his junior year, he'd left Penn State, surrendering a full scholarship, trading his education for a long shot at a music career. In one hour, the time it took to inform his dean he was quitting, walk to the registrar's office and sign a couple of forms, he'd managed to screw up his life. Look at him:

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forty-five-years-old, stuck in a dead-end job, kissing the asses of people who ought to be working for him. He refused to sit back, watch Leah throw her life away. Kids needed guidance, a motivational coach to push them, keep them focused, drive them when they didn't feel like practicing, pump them up when they lost confidence, spur them on when they wanted to quit.

Will closed his eyes. *God help him.* Tell him he hadn't pushed her away.

Two

Just Do It II

Will sat in his recliner, listening to a Tom Petty recording he'd bought in '89, the day the record came out, the volume low. The clock ticked past one, one thirty, two. Dog lay by his chair, snoring. He considered pouring a bourbon, to help him relax, and immediately thought better about it. Needed to stay alert. Leah had been late for her curfew once or twice before. Never like this. He got up, sat. Got up, paced, went to the kitchen, poured another glass of water. He imagined her lost. Imagined a car wreck, his daughter's body lying on the road, under a tarp.

The seconds ticked. Unable to bear the wait for one more second, he headed upstairs to her room, hoping to find something, a phone number, a name, some clue as to where she was.

Her room was a pigsty, dirty clothes lying on the floor, wherever she'd taken them off, her cleats, shin guards, random shoes scattered over her bed. Her bureau drawers were open, several off track. He stuffed her panties and bras back in the top drawer, pushed it shut, thumbed through the notebook on her nightstand. He lifted her bed-skirt, patting the floor under the bed. A Nike poster was taped to the wall over the bed, the top right corner curling into itself. Just Do It, the poster commanded. *Just Do It*. Will shook his head, and looked away. He cleared his

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daughter's bed, brushing the cereal crumbs from her sheets, and neatened her blanket.

He was set to call the cops, report her missing, when he heard a vehicle rumble down the drive. He raced downstairs, heart hammering, figuring at this hour the news could only be bad.

At the foot of the staircase, he stopped to collect himself, and reluctantly opened the door.

A black Jeep Wrangler, its top down, was parked in the drive, next to the light post. And there she was, sneaking toward the garage, the arm of a boy he had never seen before draped over her shoulder. *Thank God*, he thought. Then, *Goddamn, all this time I've been waiting*.

"Leah," he called, choking a shout. "Get in here."

Leah froze, her eyes narrowed, glaring at Will. She tugged on the boy's wrist and the kid, a head taller, bent toward her. His daughter whispered into the kid's ear, the punk taking hold of her hand. He appeared to be six, six-one, Will's height, more or less. Weighed a buck-fifty, tops. Took every ounce of determination he was able to muster not to bolt out of the house, pound the piss out of the kid. Will watched with mounting impatience as they slunk through the shadows under the eaves, past the garage, and up the stairs to the brick walkway that led to the house.

"Get in here," he ordered, as his daughter climbed the three granite stairs, to the stoop.

Leah looked up at him, loopy grin plastered in place. "Dad," she said brightly, her bloodshot eyes darting from Will to the kid. "This is Todd."

Todd. Give him a break. Blond hair, pretty boy lashes. Dressed in ghetto shorts, a black T-shirt. A diamond stud in his right ear. Kid had to be twenty, twenty-one. Too old for Leah.

Will fixed the punk in his sights. Cocky bastard stared him right back.

Leah fidgeted, shouldering away from the boy, and gazed up at her father again, wheedling. "Well, Daddy? Aren't you gonna say hello?"

This time, when she opened her mouth, he caught a whiff of alcohol on her breath. *Christ.* She'd been drinking. "Get in here, Leah." He pushed the screen door open, the hinges creaking. He grabbed his daughter's arm. "Beat it," he said, chinning the Jeep. "Get lost."

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For an instant, the three of them stood there, dumbfounded, Will clutching Leah's wrist, congratulating himself for holding his temper. (His old man would have walloped the kid.)

All at once, his daughter exploded, writhing.

"Let go of me," she hissed, and jerked her arm free.

Get her inside. That's it—just get her inside. Opening the screen wider, he lunged, and seized his daughter's arm. *Asshole*, she shrieked, batting him away. *Don't touch me*. In a flash, she was five or six, tiny feet planted, fists clenched, sassing him about something, because she wanted to go outside, she didn't want to pick up her toys. He was losing her. His daughter was spinning out of control. In one swift motion, his mind numb, he yanked her inside. Pivoting, he swung left, pulling her clear of the door, so she couldn't get out, couldn't escape. "*Stay there*," he barked. Turning his attention back to the kid, he let his daughter go. In his peripheral vision, he saw her slam into the wall and—*God, no*—slump to the floor.

The kid glowered at Will, his lanky body strung as tight as a bow.

Seething, Will grabbed for the kid, but the boy, too quick, bolted down the steps, and darted across the lawn. Will looked right, left, for a stick, a bat, something to throw. In a rage, he raced toward the Jeep, its engine turning. Screamed at the kid. . . *something, something, something*. . . the words ripping through the hurricane in his head.

Will?

"Will, please."

Turning, he peered blankly at Zoe, and turned back to the truck, its engine roaring, the Jeep squealing out of the drive.

"Come in here. Please." She stood on the stoop, holding the screen. A breeze blew across the lawn, catching the hem of her nightgown, the filmy fabric swirling over her bare feet.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded, when he went in.

With his palms, he rubbed his eyes. "Don't know. I lost it."

He heard movement, glanced up at the landing at the head of the stairs. Their younger

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daughter, tiny, dark-haired Justine, stood behind the balustrade, dressed in her pink baby-doll pajamas, peering down at them, Dog at her side. She met his gaze, her expression inscrutable, and retreated to her bedroom, trailed by the dog.

Leah was nowhere in sight.

"She's in bed," Zoe said. "I sent her up."

"What did she say?"

Zoe hedged. "Nothing."

"She said something."

"Let's talk about it in the morning, all right? When everyone's calm."

"I want to know what she said."

His wife shrugged. "That you're crazy. Okay? She said you're psycho. Look, I'm going up. We can talk about this tomorrow. All right? Are you coming?"

He'd be up in a while, he told her. He was too worked up to sleep.

For a good hour, he sat in his recliner, his eyes closed, replaying the events of the night, *John Barleycorn Must Die*, an old Traffic recording from his younger days, in the background. Images flashed through his mind, Will in a rage, seizing his daughter, watching her fall. Over and over the vision played, like a horror movie on an endless reel, the nightmare waking him with a jolt, starting all over again each time he fell back to sleep. He longed to wake her, sit on the edge of her bed, the way he used to when she was a child, tell her a story. *Once upon a time, in a land far, far away.*

He never intended to hurt her.

It was nearly dawn when he turned off the lights. At the entry to Leah's room, he paused, tiptoed inside, stood over her bed. Leah was a fitful sleeper. Her blankets lay in a tangle at her feet. He pulled the sheets and blankets over her, tucking her in, and kissed her forehead. As he was leaving the room, he caught sight of the poster, lit by a slim shaft of early morning light. Just

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Do It. How many times over the years had he repeated that slogan? To himself? To Leah? No guts, no glory. Put up or shut up. Do what needs to be done. Do it. Just do it. Just do it.

Just do it.

Three

A Girl Who Knows What She Wants

Leah woke the next morning, her head as big as a beach ball. She'd stay here all day, if she could, in her warm bed, cocooned in the blankets and sheets, but she had to pee. She dragged herself up, shivering as she threw off the covers, swung her feet over the side of the bed. Her head hurt, her stomach, her legs, even her arms. She'd never been this sick in her life. She probably had cancer. *Oh God*, she was going to barf. She dropped her head between her knees, staying put until her stomach had settled enough to move, and plodded to the bathroom.

She could hear her father in the kitchen, fixing breakfast. The odor of maple bacon drifted upstairs, making her gag. In a minute, he would be up here, ordering her downstairs to eat. Her team had a game this morning, at ten, which meant she had to be on the field—she checked her alarm clock—in an hour. She flopped back onto her bed, pulled the covers over her head. No way was she playing soccer today. Not after last night, after her father tweaked out.

She turned on her side, burying her face in her pillow, closing her eyes. Around midnight last night, Todd retrieved a blanket from the truck, spread it over a pillow of pine needles and leaves. She pictured him up on his elbows, staring down at her, the planes of his face accentuated

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by the shadows. The wind swished through the trees. He pulled her close, pushing her hair away from her face, winding the stray hairs around his finger. His hand slid from her shoulder to her hips. And he kissed her. She made a kissing noise on the pillow. The extra pillow had slipped to her feet. Eyes closed, she wriggled lower, tucking the pillow between her knees.

Todd, she whispered. *Todd.*

Her shades snapped up all of a sudden, startling her. In the harsh morning light, Todd's face vanished. Digging lower, she squeezed her eyes tighter, willing him back. She heard her name again, *yes*, pushed the covers down. *Todd.* And rolled onto her back.

When she looked up, her father was standing over her bed.

"Time to get up, Leah. The Harvard coach is coming today."

Her father plunked on her bed. The *nerve* of that man. She curled into a ball, drawing the covers over her head, and wriggled sideways, toward the wall, so his butt wouldn't touch her. Her father's slimy hand slithered under the covers. Now he was wiggling her big toe, the way he used to when she was little. She yanked her foot back.

"Come on, kiddo," he coaxed. "You have to get up." He'd made blueberry pancakes. As if his stupid pancakes made up for last night.

"Go away," she spat, her words garbled by the mountain of blankets and sheets.

"Leah, your team is—"

Who cares if you're tired? she heard. *The competition is practicing, even when you're not.* . . . "depending on you, Leah" . . . *dedication is what counts.* . . . "talk to you, honey". . . *suck it up.* . . . *get up, get up.* . . . *do it.* . . . *time to get up.* . . . *time for soccer.* . . . *time . . . practice.* . . . *do it.* . . . *just do it.* . . . *Just do it.*

Leah clapped her hands over her ears. "Go away," she cried. "Get out. Get away from me." Why did her father do this to her all the time? Why couldn't he let her be?

"I'd like to talk to you, Leah. Please."

"No," she cried. "I'm not going. You can't make me."

In Leah's Wake

The toilet flushed in the bathroom between her room and Justine's, the faucet sputtered, and water splashed into the sink. Leah's sister was washing her hands. Now she was brushing her teeth. Perfect little angel, never in trouble. Perfect little *dork*. Leah hated her sister. She hated them all—her mother, her father, Justine. Her parents didn't care one iota about her. They cared about controlling her, was all. They expected perfection, wanted perfect robots for kids. Well, guess what? She wasn't a robot. They would have to be satisfied with just one.

"Fine." Her father sighed. "Stay home, if that's what you want."

She pulled the covers down slightly, exposing only her eyes.

He leaned forward, dropping his hands between his knees. "I'm sorry, baby." Her father shook his head. "I blew it," he said, and sat there, staring at the floor, waiting for a response.

Good. Leah dug down under the covers. She had him right where she wanted him. She would forgive her father, eventually. First, she planned to make him suffer. She pulled the covers over her head, her elbows angling upward, creating an air tunnel so she could breathe.

Her father's weight shifted, and she felt the spring of the mattress.

Wait. Leah shot out of bed. He couldn't leave. They hadn't talked. They hadn't worked things out. At the landing, she leaned over the rail. "Dad," she called. "Daddy?"