

PROLOGUE

This is a ghost story.

I am the ghost.

TODAY

CHAPTER 1

I wake up falling. I am falling fast, away from myself, but when my body should slap against the ground, it isn't the ground at all, but black water that swallows me whole, and the last thing I see is my own face staring up at me before the water sucks me down.

I have the weirdest dreams when I'm sober.

I wake up listening. I hear the Tick come into my bedroom, and I know when I open my eyes, I am going to see him kneeling by my bed, wearing his Halloween vampire teeth and smelling like little-boy sleep, wet-lipped with stifled laughter, waiting for me to wake up and pour him a bowl of Cap'n Crunch for breakfast. He

will poke me and whisper, “Nan, are you dead again?”

I wake up freezing, and now I am getting tired of this and want to wake up for real. This dream isn’t even a dream; it’s a memory in the shape of a dream. I am at the deep end of a drained pool in Connecticut. It’s early spring, and I am freezing. I’ve slept on a long patio-chair cushion covered with flowers the color of orange sorbet. There’s a matching cushion on top of me; a stiff, unforgiving blanket. I blink my eyes against the too-bright sky. It smells like dead leaves and cold and something else. My feet lie in an ice-crusting black soup of rotting things. I roll over on my side and try to throw up, but there’s nothing in my stomach. From the look of the mess next to me, I lost it all last night.

I will never, ever drink again.

I think I might still be drunk.

Nan! Seemy yells, laughing, from over the side of the pool. She’s wearing a Santa hat that’s too big for her little pixie head. *What the hell! Patrick told you to sleep in his sister’s room!*

I push the cushion off and sit up. What feels like a tsunami-size wave of dizziness crashes over me, and I close my eyes before it can flip me upside down and drown me. When I open my eyes I am staring at my hands in my lap. They are red with cold, except for my knuckles, which are chapped and white.

Nan! Seemy yells again, not laughing this time.

Who’s Patrick? I finally ask, pulling my feet out of the water and shaking them off.

I am.

I look up, and the kid is vaguely familiar, with the sort of stupid face Seemy always falls for. *Ugh*, I groan aloud when I recognize him. *That kid?* I remember him from last night, this douchy kid from the suburbs that Seemy insisted we bring back to the carriage house. She threw a freaking tantrum when Toad and I, in a rare moment of agreement, told her the carriage house was supposed to be just for us. The three of us argued about it while Patrick waited across the street, trying not to look alarmed at the fact that his hook-up location was being decided by committee. It ended with Seemy getting her way because she said, *Fine, me and him will just go someplace else*, which was shocking because I don’t think Toad or I ever considered that her leaving was even an option. The fear of her just walking away felt silver and sharp, with a blade that was bigger than my body could take. So we all went to the carriage house. We climbed the iron gate and then rubbed the rust off on our pants as we stole across the muddy lawn in the dark. We turned sideways to squeeze between the barn-style wooden doors. I hoped Patrick would get stuck and then hated him for slipping through so easily. Work on the place had stopped before they even tore out the

stalls, and the three of us had set up a little living room in the one that stunk the least. That's where Toad and I went, to sit on milk crates and turn on the battery-operated lamp we'd stolen from Eastern Mountain Sports. We made Seemy leave us the bottle of vodka mixed with orange juice before she and Patrick climbed up the ladder to the hayloft. It was just Toad and I downstairs, and he turned on some music, which was good because Toad and I hate each other and I didn't want to have to talk to him. The floor upstairs creaked and he and I avoided looking at each other. Then, even though the music was on, we heard Seemy moan really loud and then laugh, and Toad stood up so fast he knocked over the milk crate. *I'm going*, he said. *Stay and listen if you want*. He turned off the music. *There, now you can hear even better*. I watched him slip between the doors into the night and wondered what I should do. I wished I wasn't so drunk. I wished I could just stand up and walk out and go home, but I knew I wouldn't because that would mean leaving Seemy with some douchy kid from the suburbs. A couple minutes later Seemy called down from the hayloft that it was too cold and Patrick's parents were away for the weekend, and that's how I ended up in the bottom of a drained pool in Connecticut.

And now Patrick is looking down at me, sick with panic. *My parents and sister are coming home early. You guys have to leave*, he says. I keep sitting, keep looking around

me, wondering where I put my stuff. *Seriously*, Patrick calls down, *you guys have to leave*.

I sigh. *Fine*.

Patrick and Seemy look into each other's eyes, blush, look down at their shoes. Then Seemy moves her head a little so she catches his gaze, lifts his chin with the tip of her pointer finger. They kiss. Seemy does that little moaning sound in her throat that drives the boys wild. I think maybe they can feel the vibrations on their tongues.

I climb out of the pool. The aluminum ladder is breaking away from the side, so with every step it pulls back, letting loose a spray of cement that rattles down to the bottom. *Let's go*, I say, looking away as they kiss again.

See ya, Patrick says to me.

I say, *I just have to get my stuff*.

His face changes. I see Seemy already has her bag. *You have to go over the fence*, he says, pointing to the white picket fence that lines the far side of the backyard. Between us and the fence there's a football field's worth of brown lawn, which I imagine magically turns into a lush green carpet with the *ch-ch-ch* sprinkler sound of springtime in the suburbs. There's a pool house, which, if I had a brain in my head, I would have slept in. Patrick nudges me, keeps pointing. *Just climb over the fence. That's all you have to do. Just climb the fricking fence, okay?*

I run my hand through my knotted hair, pull my long, multicolored mane over my shoulder, hold out the ends and study the stripes of pink and green. *I need to get my stuff inside*, I say again, waiting a moment before I level my gaze at him. I tower over him. He has to look up. His mouth twists a little. *What?* I tease. *You don't want your parents to meet me?* He shrugs. I clack my tongue ring against my lip ring a few times, grinning as he flinches.

There's a cold gust of wind, and I don't want to be standing here anymore in wet boots, with vomit breath and a crick in my neck. My anger feels liquid and hot, gushing into my lungs like water, billowing and blooming like black roses. I hate Seemy for dragging me out here with her last night and hate myself for coming. We both knew I wouldn't let her go alone.

Come on, Nan, Seemy says, *let's just go*.

I look at her. *Are you kidding? Seemy, how am I going to get on the train? My wallet's inside. My phone. I can't. I need my stuff.*

But she keeps pushing me. *He'll send it to you*, she says.

Yes, yes, he assures me, *I'll send it to the address on the license.*

I'm not from the suburbs, I snap. *I'm a New Yorker. I don't have a license.* I'm embarrassing Seemy, adding an unfortunate postscript to her hookup. Patrick goes really pale, and I see him looking over my shoulder, to the driveway, where a car is slowing.

He yells, *Go!* And Seemy gets pissed because he won't kiss her good-bye, and then she and I are climbing over the white picket fence. These suburban assholes can't built a fence for shit because as soon as I start climbing, the thing starts creaking and leaning, and by the time we're to the top it's almost flat on the ground. Before I run after Seemy, I jump on the fence a couple times to make sure it's good and busted and Seemy is calling back to me, *Jesus, chill out, Nan, I'll buy your stupid train ticket!* And then we're running down this random street flanked by the sort of houses you see in real estate commercials, and my boots are chafing my skin and I think I might get sick again.

At first, when Seemy sees that I'm turning around and jogging toward Patrick's driveway, she chases me, tries to grab my hair to stop me. *He'll get in trouble! Nan! Seriously!* But then she stops chasing me and hides behind one of the neighbors' trash cans and waits for me while I ring Patrick's doorbell and tell his mom, who has the stupid face he does, that I left my stuff inside.

I go back to get Seemy a couple minutes later. She's still crouching behind the trash can, and she looks up at me like she could kill me. *What the hell, Nan?* she says. *You probably got him in so much trouble!*

What do you care? I ask. *You're never going to see him again.*

She shrugs and stands up, crossing her arms. *Whatever.*

I start walking.

Where are you going? she calls after me.

I turn around, keep walking backward. *Train station.*

Where do you think?

That's, like, a mile away, she whines. *It's freezing!*

What were you planning on doing?

She shrugs again. *I could call Toad, see if he can borrow a car and come get us.*

I stop walking. *Seemy, that's just cruel.*

She tries to hide her smile. *What?*

The guy's obviously in lust with you, and you're going to make him find a car, drive to Connecticut, and pick you up from your one-night stand?

Seemy laughs. *Maybe? He'd do it.* She looks at me, and I know what she's thinking. She's thinking I'd do it too. She's thinking if she called me and asked me to find a way to Connecticut, I'd get my dad to drive out here in his truck and pick her up.

Just because he would do it doesn't make you any less of an asshole, I tell her.

Fine, she snaps. *We'll walk.*

And we do.

I buy a travel toothbrush set from a vending machine at the train station and use the whole mini tube of toothpaste trying to brush the vileness out of my mouth in the

bathroom. There's a cafe at the train station but it's closed because it's Sunday, so we're left shivering on the platform with vending machine Cokes and Doritos for breakfast. Seemy ignores me. I pretend not to care. I pretend that I'm ignoring her too, even though I'm really waiting for her to stop looking right through me as she looks down the track for the train. I hate it when Seemy's mad at me. It makes me wish I could fly away from myself, away from this body that is an open sore for her salted anger, this body that changes without her love. But I can't fly away. I stand next to her and grow larger and uglier and stupider every minute she ignores me. It is good she's not looking at me. I don't want her to see what I really am when I'm not disguised by her friendship. At moments like this it seems inconceivable that she is the same person who presented me with a little homemade book with a hand-sewn binding called *My Friend Nan* on my birthday, or who wiped away my tears and hugged me when I cried about not knowing who my real dad is, or who told me I wasn't really all that big.

I'm not even sure if she's going to sit next to me, but she does, and she puts on her headphones right away so I put on mine. I peel off my boots and wet socks and slip my gloves on my feet to keep them warm. I sit cross-legged, my feet finally warming under the heat of my thighs, and I don't care that my knee is practically in Seemy's lap. We don't talk the whole

way back to the city. We're just pulling into the dark underground tunnels that lead to Grand Central station when I feel her tapping on my knee. I look away from my reflection in the now-dark window and see her smiling at me, her fingers working out the rhythm of whatever song she's listening to. I pull off my headphones, thinking she wants to talk. She leaves her headphones on but says too loudly, *I'm sorry I dragged you to Connecticut, Nanja. I was thinking with my quivering loins, not my brain.* I say, *It's okay,* but now she's got her eyes closed, and she's doing this dance in her seat to the music. She takes her fingers away from my knee.

What I want to say to her is, *I love you,* but I know she'd just laugh and say, *I know, I love you too, Nanja.* In the beginning we'd crack each other up, dramatically confessing our love for each other. Yelling out from across the street, *You complete me, Samantha "Seemy" Turbin!* Or from the window of a taxi as it pulled away from my apartment, *Wait for me, Nanja! Wait for me forever.*

But then it wasn't funny anymore to yell it; it kind of made me sick to my stomach because I got scared I meant it in a way she didn't.

In this dream, in this memory, I miss Seemy the way I did when we first stopped hanging out, in that way that hurts the place where your heart and throat touch. My fingers twitch as I count the months since I've seen her. One,

two, three, four, five, six. Almost six months. It hurts too much. So I make myself fall back asleep.

I wake up watching. There is a coffee cup on its side under a subway seat. The cup is from Dunkin' Donuts, and most of the coffee has spilled out into a puddle the shape of a flattened frog. *Oh man, I think, all that coffee. And it looks nice and creamy, too. Probably lots of sugar. Someone's good morning, just dumped out. That sucks.*

I close my eyes; wait to leave the dream, to fall back into inky blackness, to come out the other side. I open my eyes. The coffee cup is still there. So's the spilled coffee. I close my eyes again. Open. Same thing.

Wait.

I am not asleep. I am not dreaming. I am awake.

Fear flickers electric and hot from the top of my head to the soft soles of my feet. I can almost smell myself burning.

I am not where I'm supposed to be.

My heart is rick-tick-ticking inside my chest, rattling a bone-thunk alarm against my ribs, *Danger, danger, danger.*

And then there is a feeling that tastes bitter on the back of my tongue and makes my blood freeze in my veins, a feeling that makes me want to scream because it fills me with such familiar doubt.

What have I done?