

ADELAIDE

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*For my parents, my sisters,
and the many women who held my broken pieces*

Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. As is true in many fictional works, aspects of this story were inspired by life experiences. However, all of the characters, all of the dialogue, and all of the events described in this book are wholly imaginary. No identification with actual, real-life events, organizations, or persons—living or dead—is intended, nor should any such identification be inferred. But the love, the grief, the pain, the joy, the feelings, the feelings, the feelings? Those are all genuine—existing, living, and breathing off-page. I hope those are the bits that feel most real to you, reader. They're certainly the most real to me.

So it wasn't a failure after all! It was going to be all right now — her party. It had begun. It had started. But it was still touch and go.

—Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*

I know that that sassy little minx called love will find me when I'm ready, but right now, it's time to write.

—Beck Dorey-Stein, *From the Corner of the Oval Office*

Prologue

The funny thing about hitting rock bottom is that you never quite know once you've reached it. That whooshing, falling feeling never ceases, and at every preceding level you've thought, *This has to be it, right?*

Sitting in a hospital room in Chelsea—drowsily answering questions about her emotional state, her family's mental health history, the exact number of pills she'd just swallowed—Adelaide still couldn't be certain this was it. Rock Bottom. She was waiting for the floor to give out from under her or the ceiling to cave in, for something else to push her further down. *This can't be it*, she thought. It never was. (Though, this was the closest she'd come.)

Celeste was in a chair to her left, a Tesco bag filled with snacks on her lap. She'd met Adelaide at the hospital an hour or so earlier and hugged her in a way Adelaide would never forget, so simultaneously careful and caring. It's a very odd thing to check yourself into the hospital for suicidal ideations—particularly when the receptionist can't quite make out your hushed words (*I. Am. Soo-ih-side-al. Can I just write it down?*)—and Adelaide was immeasurably grateful to have her there. In conversations with hospital staff, Celeste helped her fill in the blanks, out loud

and on paper, jotting down her number under “Emergency Contact” without a moment’s pause. She was in *Ms. Celeste Mode*, she explained, adopting her caretaking, primary-school-teaching demeanor, feeding Adelaide pretzels and petting her hair in the waiting room.

Did Rock Bottom even permit visitors?

Whatever the answer, Adelaide was relieved to have Celeste by her side, but just beyond this relief sat a swirl of more sinister emotions. She was sure she’d hit a new low, found a new darkness. Her heart was still graciously beating, and pretzel salt was stinging her tongue, and she didn’t want to be alive anymore. Physically, Adelaide was held together—her thighbone connected to her knee bone, and so on and so forth—but internally, mentally, she was a mess of jagged, disconnected pieces, and she didn’t believe she was capable of putting herself back together. She didn’t want to die, *per se*, she just wanted to stop existing. Stop being. And, frightening as it was, Death felt like the only avenue by which to get there. A handful of pills and a swig of water and she’d be free—her broken pieces swept up and transferred to another spiritual plane.

Adelaide hadn’t woken up that morning thinking she would choose it to be her last. The latte to which she’d treated herself had been mediocre at best, and she didn’t remember eating anything more than a smooshed granola bar from Pret—far from the Southern feast she’d always joked would be her last meal (mac and cheese and corn bread and fried green tomatoes and a rich chocolate cake, thank you very

much). No note was written, no will established, no preparations made.

The sun was surprisingly bright and chipper for a day in late September, clouds politely staying out of its way. Adelaide had the chance to sleep in and sing show tunes in the shower. She got a seat on the Tube and called her mom at twelve thirty, wishing her a happy birthday as she watched *The Today Show* from her home in Massachusetts. Sure, she was still reeling from the breakup, but there was nothing *bad* about the day. Nothing that made an earthly exit feel imperative. It was Moving Day! The start of something fresh! New! Exciting!

But slowly, then in one swift motion—the way anyone and anything unravels—she started to lose her grip.

She picked up the keys for her new one-bedroom flat and noticed the couches didn't match. Her landlord rolled her eyes when Adelaide asked who the electricity provider was (*I'm sorry, what is it that you do? I've never had to explain this to someone before*). Though she'd taken the day off, she still had a mountain of work waiting, and the movers were late, and *Are you sure I can't put art on the walls?* And fuck, she needed to lie down.

It's ludicrous in retrospect—*The couches didn't match and I didn't want to write a press strategy, so I decided to kill myself*—but Adelaide had nothing left in her tank. No emotional reserves to ground her, or push her forward, or remind her that she could mount this anxiety. She checked Twitter to distract herself and saw that *she'd* been honored at the London Book Awards—been recognized, rightfully, by the literary community to which Adelaide so desperately

wanted to belong—and she just couldn't do it anymore. She couldn't live.

Adelaide hadn't even realized she'd started crying; she just noticed the raw, stinging feeling on her cheeks several minutes later, looking down to find her T-shirt wet with tears. That's when she filled a glass with tap water, dug through her purse for the emergency stash of Xanax, and started swallowing pills like Smarties.

It's a good thing, really, that she reached this breaking point on her mom's birthday—a birthday that, exactly three years before, they'd celebrated by welcoming Adelaide's nephew into the world. It's lucky. She sat on an undressed mattress with a prescription bottle in one hand, a glass of water in the other—five pills down, twenty or so to go—and thought, *Maybe I should finish this tomorrow. Maybe I shouldn't mark my favorite people's birthdays with my suicide.* (What might have stopped her, had this spiral begun a day or two later?)

Adelaide called a hotline, met the movers, called Celeste. She texted her family, her best friend Eloise. She took several deep breaths and a cab to A&E at Chelsea and Westminster. And she sat in the waiting room, wondering if this, indeed, was Rock Bottom, or if she still had further to fall.

Name?

Adelaide Williams. With an "e."

Williams has an "e"?

No, Adelaide. At the end. A-d-e-l-a-i-d-e. They always left off the "e."

Age?

Twenty-six.

Nationality?

American, but I'm a permanent resident in the U.K. I have my residence permit, if you need it.

That's all right. Occupation?

Communications manager, I do PR for a tech company.

Relationship status?

Celeste and Adelaide exchanged looks. *Single*. She cleared her throat. *Very single*.

At this, the nurse paused, wordlessly willing her to elaborate. Adelaide did not.

She recently went through a breakup, Celeste said. *Really recently. A not-so-great breakup.*

The nurse nodded, scribbling something onto her notepad. She was a curvy woman with purple scrubs, thick glasses, and a Bajan accent. In Adelaide's mind, the nurse was thinking, *Ah, yes, another brokenhearted girl playing Juliet and wasting our time and resources*. She didn't blame the nurse for thinking these things; clearly, Adelaide had the same impression of herself.

She had a Venus symbol tattooed on her middle finger and a cardboard box labeled FEMINIST LITERATURE waiting to be unpacked in her new home. She was prone to intense crushes and loved Richard Curtis films, yes, but Adelaide had never thought herself the type to become swallowed whole by unrequited love. Boys were dumb! She didn't even like them! Women were better, smarter, stronger! Yet here she was in a hospital room, answering questions about her relationship status with a sardonic *Very single*, seemingly incapable of coping with the fact that one boy did not love her.

Was there a Suicide Section in heaven? Adelaide imagined the smoking room of a Tex-Mex restaurant in her hometown—literary greats mingling over ashtrays and red plastic baskets of tortilla chips. Would Virginia Woolf even talk to her if she showed up there?

History of mental health challenges?

Ish, yeah. I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression when I was in high school. Her mom had dragged her to a psychiatrist after her first breakup. Adelaide hadn't slept or eaten in about a month, and as her waistline shrunk, her mother grew concerned. There was a theme here, it seemed. I've also got some obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Those were kind of, um, triggered today. For lack of a better word.

Triggered?

Yeah, the new couches in my flat didn't match. The nurse didn't question this.

Are you taking any medication?

Just birth control, mostly to treat endometriosis. I also take Xanax on occasion, like today.

And how many Xanax did you take today?

I think six or seven milligrams. Not a lot more than that.

All at once?

All at once.

How are you feeling now?

Pretty drowsy, but calm.

Do you have any family history of mental illness?

Uh, yes. Adelaide chuckled inappropriately—when she was growing up, her family's home phone had a psychiatrist on speed dial. Virtually everyone in

my family has some form of mental illness, minus my dad. He's surrounded by crazy women. He was, rather.

Are you able to share specifics?

Sure. My sister, Izzy, has bipolar disorder. Holly, my other sister, has ADD. My mom is clinically depressed.

Any suicide attempts?

Several, yeah. Mostly my sister, the bipolar one. Mom on occasion as well.

And have you attempted suicide in the past?

Not really, no. My high school journal entries were pretty bleak, but I'd never tried this before.

She appreciated the clinical nature of the conversation. There were no long *Hmms* or stretches of painful eye contact, no shrink-like *And how did that make you feels*, punctuated by ellipses rather than question marks. These were clear questions with clear answers, and Adelaide was relieved they were finite. There was a rhythm to this Q&A that felt oddly comforting, like a volleying ball or a metronome.

And what made you try it today?

This answer would break the rhythm. The couches, the breakup, the work—they were all trigger points and catalysts. But the events and feelings that led Adelaide to this moment had taken far longer than one afternoon to accumulate and combust; they were more difficult to quantify and explain.

Her heart didn't break once. It had broken multiple times over the last year—over the last decade, really—and each

time she'd started to put the puzzle back together, to reconstruct her heart and soul with metaphorical superglue, they would shatter again. The pieces were getting smaller, less recognizable, more difficult to reconnect with each blow.

Um, she said. I'm not even sure how to explain it. It's kind of a long story. A lot of long stories.

The nurse put down her notepad. *Would it help to talk through it?*

SPRING

London, England

2018

One

T*he skin on my heels is coming off in chunks, and I probably shouldn't have sex tonight, right?*

These are the types of things Adelaide shouts across her flat, prompting the kinds of conversations with which Madison, her roommate, quickly had to become comfortable. They'd been loose acquaintances at Boston University—members of the same sorority—but never really spent time together outside of chapter meetings and other mandatory events. Different majors and friend groups and all that. One afternoon, a few years after graduation, Facebook informed Adelaide that Madison would also be heading to the U.K. for grad school, and, *Well*, she'd thought, *I could really use a pal over there*. She dropped her a note and, somehow, convinced Madison to forgo student accommodations and search for a home with her in north London.

Five days before landing at Heathrow, they'd signed a virtual lease for a gorgeous Victorian flat in Highgate—all beveled glass and chipped paint and worn-down, antique furniture—which they quickly decorated with framed posters from flea markets and an abundance of fairy lights. The cupboards were stocked with chocolate biscuits and ground coffee, the windowpanes lined with empty wine

bottles stuffed with candlesticks. Polaroids of the two girls in sparkly dresses, winged eyeliner, and cheap faux fur coats covered the various dings and stains on their refrigerator—an appliance that made an unusual whistling sound and might, they feared, give out any day now.

On their first night in the neighborhood, the new roommates had gotten drunk at a local pub populated by dusty leather chairs and old men, eating veggie burgers and giggling from a corner table. The conversation flipped from politically charged ideological discussions to *Remember that girl who got carted out of a frat party on a gurney senior year? That was me!* and *Which Spice Girl was your favorite growing up?* They bonded quickly and easily and thank goodness.

During the first week of classes, Madison attended a yoga session for new students, and—in a twist of fate for which Adelaide would forever be grateful—laid her mat down next to a girl with a faint New England accent and a Boston College T-shirt. The girl's name was Celeste, Madison texted. She was a few years their senior, but had just moved to London for graduate school as well (same uni as Madison, slightly different program), and *Would you want to grab a drink with us later?* Adelaide did, indeed.

Just as she'd convinced Madison to move in with her, and just as she'd convinced Madison and Celeste to spend countless evenings at the pub (*To study!* she'd say, grinning), Adelaide had also tricked her roommate into doing a very intense foot mask earlier in the week—something she'd found on a Korean cosmetics site that smelled, alarmingly, of bleach. Now, their feet were essentially molting. At

a glance, it looked like Adelaide's legs were attached to two very wide, very pale snakes in ecdysis.

My heels are the same, it's terrifying, Madison said, glancing at the bottoms of her feet and handing Adelaide a mug of red wine (the glasses were dirty, per usual). *You know you don't have to have sex with every guy you go out with, though, right?*

Adelaide laughed. After nearly half a decade of celibacy, she had thrown herself into the worlds of dating apps and one-night stands with force and fervor when she was twenty-two—charming strangers in text conversations and sweaty dance halls on a weekly basis. First in New York, now in London.

Tonight's date would be no different from the rest, she thought. She'd meet this boy and melt at the sound of his accent (Adelaide had been living in London for seven months now, but the novelty had yet to wear off). He'd mock American politics and ask if life in New York was anything like an episode of *Friends*. She'd laugh at his jokes; he'd excuse her clumsiness when she knocked a drink over. At some point, they'd stumble back to one of their homes, have sloppy, mediocre sex, and their fling would be over before the sun was up. It had become a pattern.

The week before, Adelaide had three one-night stands over a six-day stretch. A month or so before that, she made out with two guys in the same evening at a grimy bar in Shoreditch. It had little to do with low self-esteem and everything to do with control. There were few things more intoxicating to Adelaide than locking eyes with a stranger, running her tongue along his bottom lip, and abruptly leaving the bar, or his flat, or wherever when she decided

she was ready to go. Adelaide had found agency in her twenties that she'd lacked in her teens (that had been stolen in her teens, really), and she enjoyed using it.

I don't have to sleep with everyone, you say? She took a swig of wine and winked at Madison's reflection in the mirror, then turned her attention to swiping black eyeliner above her lashes. *News to me!*

Madison sat on the bathtub as Adelaide started to iron her hair into long, dark blond, pin-straight sections, chuckling as she watched her struggle to tame her grown-out fringe. They talked about term papers, sailing trips in France this coming summer, and *Oh my gosh, did you see that Marissa and Josh got engaged in Miami? I still remember holding her hair back at Sigma Tau the night that they met.* Eventually, Adelaide poured the rest of her wine into a plastic bottle, ran her tongue across her teeth—*Good?* she grinned at Madison; *Good,* Madison nodded—and tucked her flaky little feet into a pair of floral flats, praying this boy didn't notice their appearance.

The boy's name was Rory Hughes, and Adelaide hadn't yet decided whether or not he was her type. They'd met on a dating app and his photos were mostly out-of-focus group shots (as many men inexplicably featured on their profiles), so she couldn't quite discern what he looked like. Not really. But he'd left little "hearts" on her profile, and he liked the Spice Girls, and the bits of banter they'd exchanged over text had put a smile on Adelaide's face. If nothing else, she was hopeful she'd get a drink and some pleasant conversation out of the evening. And besides, it was best not to sleep with him, anyway—she had papers to finish and exams for which she should be studying. The

date would be quick, she told Madison, throwing on a leather jacket.

I'll be home before ten, she said.

(She would not, in fact, be home before ten.)

If one were to cleave Adelaide's adult life in two—like a melon, split clean down the middle—those halves would likely be *Before Rory Hughes* and *After*, a different version of her sitting on either side.

On the Tube en route to their first date, drinking dregs of wine and playing Ginuwine's "Pony" on a loop, she had no idea that this was it. That these were her final moments in this particular body, in this identity. Maybe she would have done something differently if she'd known; maybe not. (Probably not.)

He'd suggested they meet outside the Old Vic, a quick walk from Waterloo station. Adelaide had been to the theater once before, about three years earlier for a performance of *Clarence Darrow*.

(Later, she'd learn that Rory had been there for the same performance—he'd sat in the dress circle, Adelaide had won lottery tickets for the stalls. She'd often daydream about their paths crossing in the lobby that night, the backs of their hands brushing against one another in the crowd. She liked to imagine their lives tied by fate into an inextricable knot.)

She had rolled her earbuds into a neat bundle and tossed them into her bag, wondering what to do with her hands, when she heard a voice say, *Hiya, Adelaide?*

Her body went numb.



Two and a half years before she packed up her Brooklyn apartment and moved into that Highgate flat, Adelaide spent the most carefree semester of her life studying abroad in London. She'd always had a soft spot for the city, having lived on the outskirts for a few years growing up, but she'd never known that a metropolis could become a booming, integral character in your life. Not before then. *It's crazy, she'd tell friends over Skype. My baseline emotion is just contentment here. Who knew that was even possible?* Her responsibilities were minimal and Hyde Park was at her doorstep. It was perfect.

At one point that semester, Adelaide threw on a navy dress covered in tiny white anchors and joined her friends at an open-air pub along the River Thames, eyes peeled for the Oxford versus Cambridge boat race. They drank bottomless pitchers of Pimm's and lemonade and basked in that elusive little thing called the sun. Late that afternoon, tipsy and tanned, she saw him.

He was wearing a scarf and a blue button-down and Adelaide loved him instantly—all brown curls and razor-sharp jawline. Like a young Colin Firth. *Stop drooling over that stranger*, her friend said. *You look like a drunken trout.* She closed her mouth and stood up, steeling herself as she strolled over to approach him at the bar—two empty Pimm's pitchers in her hand and no shoes on her feet (they'd been giving her blisters all day).

Hi, she said, tapping his arm. *I'm so sorry, I just. I had to tell you. You look like a Disney prince.*

Oh, um, hi, he said. *That's so nice. Thank you.*

He gave Adelaide's shoulder a friendly pat, then turned back to his group. But she had never forgotten his face.

She told this story over and over again in the years that followed. When Adelaide would joke about her blundering lack of sex appeal and friends shook their heads in polite disbelief, this was the anecdote she would offer up. *See?* she'd say. *I'm the type of person who approaches strangers and tells them they look like Disney princes without shoes on!* It was humiliating and hilarious and very much Something Adelaide Williams Would Do.

She never expected the prince to reappear in her life, patting her shoulder once more and introducing himself as Rory outside of the Old Vic theater.

Adelaide's jaw dropped for a split second. How had she not connected the dots sooner? she wondered. How had she not recognized him from his photos? *Oh my gosh, hi, I'm Adelaide*, she said. *It's so good to meet you! Can I hug you? I'm going to hug you.*

Luckily, magically, Adelaide's aggressively friendly disposition was seen as American charm in London, not a bunny-boiling red flag. The beauty of a foreign accent, really. Rory chuckled and returned the hug, then puffed his chest out a little.

Shall we? he asked.

This was a habit of his. When nervous, he'd puff his chest out like a bird—an effort to seem bold or brave or confident—and say things like, *Shall we?* Adelaide was just so glad to be near him, next to him, with him (with him!) that she'd melt and oblige each time. He could have

asked this question at a cliff's edge—gesturing to a rocky canyon below—and Adelaide would have gleefully replied, *We shall!*

But they weren't at a cliff's edge. Not yet. On this particular evening, he led them to a rickety Italian bar on Lower Marsh Street—one that smelled like roasting espresso and had creaky, wooden tables covered in ring stains. Before their date, Rory had texted to see if Adelaide preferred bustling pubs or cozy spots with fairy lights. She'd opted for the latter and, taking in the setting, was glad of her choice.

What can I get you to drink? he asked.

Oh, anything! I like all alcohol, she said, an unsuccessful attempt to seem nonplussed and low-maintenance.

Rory gave her a funny look but returned a few minutes later with two orange goblets of Aperol spritz, striped paper straws bobbing on the sides. *Cheers,* he said.

She decided not to tell him that they'd met before, to keep that delicious little secret to herself for now, fairly certain he didn't recall.

Rory spent his gap year on a farm in the South of France, he explained. Studied at Cambridge. Worked in law for a little while. He took a year off to do pro bono legal work in Alabama, then spent a few weeks at film school in L.A.—*Just for kicks*—which inspired him to switch fields entirely. These days, he was working for a budding production company, and it was wild how much happier he was making films and shit money, wearing jeans and T-shirts to work instead of stiff gray suits.

She learned all of this as he peppered her with questions about her own life—about the States, her many moves, those months she spent au-pairing in Paris. He asked about

her favorite shows on Netflix and the American snacks she missed most, gently teasing when she said she sometimes dreamt about eating Kraft Macaroni & Cheese and gooey summer s'mores and woke up with drool on her chin.

That's not cute, she said. Let's strike that from the record?

It's hilarious and adorable, he said. You are hilarious and adorable.

They finished their first spritzes. Then their seconds. Then moved on to a shared bottle of the house red. Adelaide had never felt this instantly comfortable with a stranger, let alone one so cartoonishly handsome.

Fuck my feet, she texted her roommate from the bathroom. I'm going to have sex with this guy.

Of course you are, Madison replied. Celeste and I had been taking bets.

Around eleven thirty that night—four and a half hours after they'd met—the bar staff politely informed the pair that they were closing, and *Would you mind if we cleared the table?* They quickly finished their glasses of wine and Rory grabbed the door, leading Adelaide out of the bar and into the open air. She shivered.

Are you cold? he asked.

Just a little, she said. I'll be fine.

I would offer you my coat if I had one.

Instead, he wrapped his arms around Adelaide, rubbing her shoulders with the sleeves of his jumper. She was covered in goose bumps and wished she could take her own jacket off, just to feel his hands on her skin. He smelled of pine trees and fresh laundry; being near him felt like Christmas morning.

It's a shame, really, he said, arms still enveloping hers.

This street used to be all independent bookstores and locally owned coffee shops. Now it's Costas and Boots. Gentrification, innit? Adelaide nodded. *I've only lived around here for two years or so and it's already changed so much. It's sad to watch. This used to be a tea shop run by this lovely older woman. None of the crockery matched and everything was homemade.* She nodded again. *Why am I talking so much about gentrification?*

I watched the same thing happen in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, she said. *It's hard to walk down the street and not think about it all the time. About what it used to be. Oof, capitalism.*

They chuckled and reached the end of the street. Well, he said. *I suppose you're going this way.*

Adelaide turned to the station, then turned back to Rory. He pulled her closer by her elbow, tucked his hand beneath her chin, brought her lips to his, and slipped his tongue inside her mouth. And then, she remembers, she was on fire. It was well past eleven at night and the sun must have set hours earlier, but in her memory, standing on that street corner, the sky was bright. Birds chirping, clouds parted, sun shining. It's painfully clichéd, but darkness didn't exist here, not in this little universe Adelaide entered when she first kissed Rory Hughes.

You know, she said, pulling her lips a centimeter from his, *I don't have to go this way.*

He hesitated. *How about this weekend?* he asked. *Are you free on Friday?*

It was Wednesday. She paused, looked up, trying to think through her plans. She and Madison were grabbing dinner with Celeste, but after that, maybe?

Oh no, Friday's too soon, he said. I'm too keen, aren't I?
I think I'm free later on Friday, she said. Let's plan something. Text me?

Of course I will, he said. This has been lovely.

It has been. She paused. But did you, um, just turn me down?

He squeezed her hand and crossed the street, winking over his shoulder and leaving Adelaide to wonder if the entire night had been a fever dream. The sky was still bright. She stood there for a second, then reflexively dialed her best friend's number.

Eloise, she said, I think I just met my soul mate.