LINA AND JUNE

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For Torri and Stephanie Macarages

Or, more broadly, for the best kinds of friends
and the wonder women who raised them

And a friend's praise is always sweeter than a dozen newspaper puffs.

—LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, *LITTLE WOMEN*

It is a glory and a privilege to love what Death doesn't touch.

—DONNA TARTT, *THE GOLDFINCH*

Prologue

Lina Arquette rapped twice on the door, holding her breath.

It had a brass knocker, which was shaped like a fish with a very large mouth, the name of which she could not remember—a clear sign she'd been away from Florida too long.

Though it never really felt like long enough, if she was honest.

She knew the door would open any moment, that she'd soon be faced with a woman she hadn't seen in—*gosh*, half a year, was it? Maybe more? Lina was trying to do the mental math, to calculate the exact number of months that had passed since she'd last spoken to June Carmichael, then stopped herself. The number itself mattered less than what it meant: Too much time, too much silence—all of it her fault. Or June's. Or maybe, probably, a bit of both.

The door opened a second later, interrupting her spiraling thoughts. Standing on the other side was Eleanor, June's mother. *Lina,* she said—her voice was all warmth, no enmity, which Lina found to be both surprising and unsurprising in equal measure. *I thought that might be you. Come in, come in! How are you? How was your trip?*

Lina answered these questions politely, if not entirely honestly, and followed Eleanor through the entryway, into the living room of June's childhood home. Their family photos hung framed on its pale

blue walls, and two red-and-white-striped sofas sat perpendicular to each other in the center of the room beneath a couple of skylights, their patterns altered by decades of spills and snuggles and sunshine.

Please, Eleanor said, gesturing toward one of the sofas. *Take a seat, make yourself comfortable. I'll grab us something to drink and then let June know you're here—what would you like? We've got sweet tea, Diet Coke, orange juice . . .*

Sweet tea would be great, Lina said. It was one of the only things she ever really missed about Jacksonville: the ubiquity of sweetened iced tea. *Thank you so much, Eleanor.*

Coming right up, Eleanor said, stepping into the kitchen and leaving Lina on her own.

She checked her phone—no new messages—and looked around the room, scanning the old pictures: June's high school yearbook photos, shots from her parents' wedding, Polaroids from their St. Croix vacation in the late nineties. Lina knew so many of the stories behind these images: That June had used too much Sun In the day before her senior portraits, accidentally turning her already blond hair orange, and had begged her mother to book an emergency appointment at the salon that night. That Eleanor had taken a pregnancy test on the morning of her wedding, finding out she was pregnant with June just before heading to the chapel, where she feared she might burst into flames. That the entire Carmichael family had gotten such bad sunburns during their trip to the US Virgin Islands, they'd literally bathed in milk and honey, consequently attracting swarms of fire ants to their hotel room. She knew the girl in those pictures almost as well as she knew herself. Or, at least, she had.

It was funny, she thought, how a place could feel so familiar and foreign at the same time.

A vase of sunflowers sat on the windowsill, their golden heads beginning to bow beneath their weight. They were still beautiful, but not nearly as bright as they'd once been—petals curling at the edges, stems growing limp in the Florida heat. Lina couldn't stop staring at them,

her chest tightening as she did. She told herself it was nothing—just flowers, just time. But she knew better.

Eleanor returned a moment later and handed Lina a glass of sweet tea, on which beads of condensation were already forming—a result of the Florida humidity. *Here you go, honey,* she said. *June's just freshening up after a nap. She should be down any minute.*

Perfect, Lina said. *Thank you again.*

She took a sip and let the sugar hit the back of her tongue, trying to remind herself that sweetness still existed. That it wasn't all bitter.

New York City, 2012

12 Years Before

One

The night Lina Arquette met her soulmate, she was dressed as a bumblebee and covered in her own vomit.

It was Halloweekend in New York, and Lina—a freshman at NYU—had been invited to five parties and counting that Friday, ever the social creature. Despite her refusal to rush a sorority, she'd managed to befriend a handful of brothers from Delta Lambda Sig, most of whom were upperclassmen in her French class. And here—at their unofficial, off-campus frat house—is where she'd decided to start her night.

Remember to pace yourself, her mother had told her over speakerphone that afternoon. Lina—who had been touching up her eyeliner in her dorm room mirror at the time—had, unsurprisingly, not been paying full attention. By eight o'clock, she was already on her sixth or seventh vodka cranberry, still waiting for her roommate to arrive, and the room was starting to spin.

June Carmichael, on the other hand, could not have been more sober.

Now in her sophomore year, she was arguably too good at heeding her parents' words and warnings. She refused to touch alcohol unless it was removing the polish from her fingernails, largely because of her

very sweet (and mildly overbearing) nurse practitioner mother. June was the type of person who said she wanted to join a sorority for the volunteering opportunities and meant it; she was already the Community Service Chair for Alpha Chi Gamma, one of the many on-campus sisterhoods Lina had resisted joining.

In addition to organizing clothing drives and planning charitable danceathons, June's duties included playing chaperone to new members at no fewer than two mixers a semester, and this Friday's was her first of the fall. She had on a white T-shirt and a pink tulle skirt, with an eye mask and plastic crown atop her head of straight, blond hair—*I was going for Sleeping Beauty,* she'd explained to one too many frat guys that night. The most common response was some variation of *I'd sleep with you, my beauty,* at which she'd awkwardly chuckled and rolled her eyes each time, not knowing what to say.

She was brushing off another guy with a cheesy pickup line when a girl collapsed in the corner, smacking her head against the concrete wall and landing face down on the floor, which was also concrete. Her legs—clad in black-and-yellow-striped tights—stuck straight out, like the Wicked Witch of the East, and her mesh wings were pointing up at odd, lopsided angles.

A Swedish House Mafia song continued to blare through the speakers, its bass rhythmic and heavy, but everything else seemed to stop, including the partygoers. A few people gasped; no one really knew what to do.

June had done some first aid training as a teenager—a requirement of the sailing camp where she'd worked as a counselor—but she was mostly taught how to treat bad rope burn or perform CPR to the beat of "Stayin' Alive." Not how to scoop a drunk young woman off the floor of a fraternity basement or check her for signs of a concussion. No less, June tried to summon an air of authority, shoving a few slack-jawed bystanders out of the way and kneeling by Lina's side.

Hi there, she said, pushing Lina's mess of curly, dark hair out of her face. *Are you okay? Can you hear me?* Lina made a moaning sound and gently nodded her head. *All right, good.*

That's good. My name's June, I'm going to get you to the hospital, okay? Lina nodded again.

June grabbed the arm of a burly-looking frat guy, one who hadn't hit on her yet that night. *You,* she said. *I need you to carry her up the stairs and out of the house. I'm going to call an ambulance.*

Frat Guy ran a hand through his hair—silently wondering how much trouble they could get into for hosting a party rife with underage drinking—but he ultimately agreed. *Yeah, okay,* he said, following June's lead and lifting a flopsy, bloody-nosed Lina off the ground. June bobbed up the stairs behind them, dialing 911. Her palms were starting to sweat, and she could feel her heartbeat in her throat, but she tried to remain cool and calm, in control of the situation.

911. What is your emergency? a voice asked on the other end of the line.

Hi, June said. *I'm with a young woman who may be a bit intoxicated. She collapsed and hit her head. Can you send an ambulance to*—she looked at the house number behind her—*229 East 12th Street, please? As soon as possible?*

The emergency operator dispatched an ambulance and asked June a number of questions she couldn't quite answer while it was on its way: What was the young woman's name? How much had she had to drink? Did she have any underlying medical conditions? Had she taken any drugs?

I don't know, June repeated, feeling increasingly panicked and helpless. *I don't know, I'm sorry.* She tried to ask Lina some of the questions—*What's your name? When is your birthday? Were you with any friends at the party tonight?*—but her replies were slurred at best and indiscriminate grunts at worst. Her friends at the frat had seemingly abandoned her; both Lina and June were on their own.

Lina, she managed to squeak out eventually. *Muh-nem-is-Lina.* Moments later, the ambulance arrived; Lina threw up on herself as soon as it was in motion.

Sorry, she gurgled.

It's okay, June said, petting Lina's hair and trying to breathe through her mouth. *It's okay, baby girl. You're going to be just fine.*

Lina woke up several hours later, aggressively blinking into the fluorescent light. She could tell she was in a hospital room, but the *how*s and *why*s were unclear. Her memory was a hazy collection of vignettes from that night: the basement spinning around her, the ambulance jolting forward, and a girl—a girl she hadn't remembered meeting before, she didn't think—gently comforting her, insisting it would all be okay.

Lina was trying to sit up and take in her surroundings, squinting, when she saw that same girl curled up in a chair next to her—a thin, navy blanket draped over her legs. She was sleeping, her eyelashes fluttering, but she was there. She hadn't left Lina's side. *I don't even know your name,* Lina thought guiltily. *How are you still here when I don't even know your name?*

She went to check her phone—to let her roommate, her friends at the frat know she was okay; alive, at least—but the battery was dead.

A nurse entered the room then—she must have noticed Lina was awake—and asked to run some tests, to get a few more details. After checking her eyes, the tilt of her head, the nurse told Lina she appeared to have suffered a minor concussion, but with plenty of rest, no screens, and a bit of Tylenol, she'd be just fine.

She was kind and professional, no lectures or tut-tutting about underage binge drinking, for which Lina was immeasurably grateful. Their conversation had woken June, who sat up in the hospital chair and rubbed her eyes. She scrolled through her phone until the nurse left a few moments later, not wanting to interrupt or intrude.

Hi, she said to Lina once the nurse exited. Her voice was hoarse and sleepy, her blue eyes bloodshot; it was just after four in the morning. *How are you feeling?*

All right, Lina said. She wanted to ask a million questions, to parse through June's memories and piece together the puzzle of that evening

in a way that made her seem less like an irresponsible teenager and more like a grown-up who'd simply had one too many drinks on a night out. *Yeah, I'm all right,* she said again, unsure how to broach the rest just yet. *I'm so sorry, I don't think I caught your name?*

June, June said. *My name's June Carmichael. And you're . . . Lina?*

I'm Lina, Lina said, nodding weakly. *Well, Jacqueline, technically. But Lina to most.*

They agreed it was nice to meet each other—which was only partially true, given the circumstances—and sat in silence for a beat, too tired and dazed to fill the gaps in conversation. It was then that Lina remembered she was still dressed as a bumblebee, the front of her striped dress moist with her own sick. She looked down, then looked at June.

Can I ask a favor? she said.

Of course, June said.

Could you, um, see if they have any other clothes I could change into, maybe? I'm kind of, uh—

Of course, June said again, saving Lina from having to say, "I'm kind of covered in my own vomit over here." *I'll be right back.*

June returned a few minutes later with a baggy white T-shirt, a light blue pair of hospital pajama bottoms, and some thick black socks, all of which she handed to Lina. *There's a bathroom just down that hall,* she said, pointing to the left. *If you want to change in there.*

Thank you, Lina said. For the clothes, the directions; for staying by her side, despite being a complete and utter stranger. *Be back in a sec.*

Lina was discharged about an hour later, sometime around five AM. *Get some food in your system,* the nurse told her. *Then try to get some sleep. Oh, and June, was it?* the nurse asked; June nodded. *You'll want to stay with her for at least twenty-four hours, just to ensure everything is okay and she doesn't show signs of a more serious head trauma.*

Okay, June said, her voice higher than its usual pitch. She didn't know how to explain to the nurse that she hadn't even known Lina's

name before this incident, that she wasn't sure how to go about watching her for a whole day.

But also, ultimately, it didn't really matter, did it? Of course June was going to take care of this woman.

Do you want to come back to my dorm? June asked in the lobby. She didn't look up from her phone, where she was searching for nearby cars to hail, as she said this. *I have my own studio in Palladium, so you can sleep on my sofa. And I can make you some pasta or scrambled eggs or something.*

A small part of Lina wanted to politely decline—to say she was fine to get home on her own, thank you, that her head injury couldn't possibly be that severe. But a larger part of her knew this wasn't true. She wasn't sure of the severity of this concussion, and besides, she wanted to be taken care of and looked after. Who wouldn't?

Okay, she said. *That'd be nice, yeah. Thank you so much.*

Don't mention it, June said, covering a yawn. *Our driver should be here in five.*

In another life, and under different circumstances, it's possible—likely, even—that Lina and June's paths never cross. That they remain students at NYU, one year apart, with different majors and friend groups and extracurriculars—their academic and social calendars never thrusting them into the same shared space.

But, in this life, it begins like this: with June making Lina scrambled eggs and toast in the earliest hours of the morning. Giving her Tylenol, a phone charger, a place that feels comfortable and warm and safe. It begins with Lina falling asleep on June's "sofa" (a glorified IKEA futon)—wrapped in a quilt June's mom made for her before she went to college—thinking she'd just stumbled upon the big sister she'd always wanted, the one she'd never had. It begins with June feeling not resentment, but affection—a strong desire to protect this delicate stranger who'd, almost literally, fallen into her lap and life.

It all begins here.