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Firefly Lane

Written by Kristin Hannah

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firefly lane

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PAN BOOKS



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This book is dedicated to "us." The girls.
Friends who see one another through the hard times, big and small,
year in and year out. You know who you are.
Thanks;

To the people who make up so many of my memories:
my father, Laurence; my brother, Kent; my sister, Laura;
my husband, Benjamin; and my son, Tucker.
Wherever we all go in the world,
you are in my heart;

And to my mom, who inspires so many of my novels;
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The best mirror is an old friend.

—George Herbert

firefly lane

CHAPTER ONE

They used to be called the Firefly Lane girls. That was a long time ago—more than three decades—but just now, as she lay in bed listening to a winter storm raging outside, it seemed like yesterday.

In the past week (unquestionably the worst seven days of her life), she'd lost the ability to distance herself from the memories. Too often lately in her dreams it was 1974; she was a teenager again, coming of age in the shadow of a lost war, riding her bike beside her best friend in a darkness so complete it was like being invisible. The place was relevant only as a reference point, but she remembered it in vivid detail: a meandering ribbon of asphalt bordered on either side by gullies of murky water and hillsides of shaggy grass. Before they met, that road seemed to go nowhere at all; it was just a country lane named after an insect no one had ever seen in this rugged blue and green corner of the world.

Then they saw it through each other's eyes. When they stood together on the rise of the hill, instead of towering trees and muddy potholes and distant snowy mountains, they saw all the places they would someday go. At night, they sneaked out of their neighboring houses and met on that road. On the banks of the Pilchuck River they smoked

stolen cigarettes, cried to the lyrics of "Billy, Don't Be a Hero," and told each other everything, stitching their lives together until by summer's end no one knew where one girl ended and the other began. They became to everyone who knew them simply TullyandKate, and for more than thirty years that friendship was the bulkhead of their lives: strong, durable, solid. The music might have changed with the decades, but the promises made on Firefly Lane remained.

Best friends forever.

They'd believed it would last, that vow, that someday they'd be old women, sitting in their rocking chairs on a creaking deck, talking about the times of their lives, and laughing.

Now she knew better, of course. For more than a year she'd been telling herself it was okay, that she could go on without a best friend. Sometimes she even believed it.

Then she would hear the music. Their music. "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road." "Material Girl." "Bohemian Rhapsody." "Purple Rain." Yesterday, while she'd been shopping, a bad Muzak version of "You've Got a Friend" had made her cry, right there next to the radishes.

She eased the covers back and got out of bed, being careful not to waken the man sleeping beside her. For a moment she stood there, staring down at him in the shadowy darkness. Even in sleep, he wore a troubled expression.

She took the phone off its hook and left the bedroom, walking down the quiet hallway toward the deck. There, she stared out at the storm and gathered her courage. As she punched in the familiar numbers, she wondered what she would say to her once-best friend after all these silent months, how she would start. *I've had a bad week . . . my life is falling apart . . .* or simply: *I need you*.

Across the black and turbulent Sound, the phone rang.

Part One



THE SEVENTIES



Dancing Queen

young and sweet,
only seventeen

CHAPTER TWO

For most of the country, 1970 was a year of upheaval and change, but in the house on Magnolia Drive, everything was orderly and quiet. Inside, ten-year-old Tully Hart sat on a cold wooden floor, building a Lincoln Log cabin for her Liddle Kiddles, who were asleep on tiny pink Kleenexes. If she were in her bedroom, she would have had a Jackson Five forty-five in her Close 'N Play, but in the living room, there wasn't even a radio.

Her grandma didn't like music much, or television or board games. Mostly—like now—Grandma sat in her rocking chair by the fireplace, doing needlepoint. She made hundreds of samplers, most of which quoted the Bible. At Christmastime she donated them to the church, where they were sold at fund-raisers.

And Grandpa . . . well, he couldn't help being quiet. Ever since his stroke, he just stayed in bed. Sometimes he rang his bell, and that was the only time Tully ever saw her grandma hurry. At the first tinkling of the bell, she'd smile and say, "Oh, my," and run for the hallway as fast as her slippered feet would take her.

Tully reached for her yellow-haired Troll. Humming very quietly, she made him dance with Calamity Kiddle to "Daydream Believer." Halfway through the song, there was a knock at the door.

It was such an unexpected sound that Tully paused in her playing and looked up. Except for Sundays, when Mr. and Mrs. Beattle showed up to take them to church, no one ever came to visit.

Gran put her needlework in the pink plastic bag by her chair and got up, crossing the room in that slow, shuffling way that had become normal in the last few years. When she opened the door, there was a long silence, then she said, "Oh, my."

Gran's voice sounded weird. Peering sideways, Tully saw a tall woman with long messy hair and a smile that wouldn't stay in place. She was one of the prettiest women Tully had ever seen: milky skin, a sharp, pointed nose and high cheekbones that slashed above her tiny chin, liquid brown eyes that opened and closed slowly.

"Thass not much of a greeting for your long-lost daughter." The lady pushed past Grandma and walked straight to Tully, then bent down. "Is this my little Tallulah Rose?"

Daughter? That meant—

"Mommy?" she whispered in awe, afraid to believe it. She'd waited so long for this, dreamed of it: her mommy coming back.

"Did you miss me?"

"Oh, *yes*," Tully said, trying not to laugh. But she was so happy.

Gran closed the door. "Why don't you come into the kitchen for a cup of coffee?"

"I didn't come back for coffee. I came for my daughter."

"You're broke," Grandma said tiredly.

Her mother looked irritated. "So what if I am?"

"Tully needs—"

"I think I can figure out what my daughter needs." Her mother seemed to be trying to stand straight, but it wasn't working. She was kind of wobbly and her eyes looked funny. She twirled a strand of long, wavy hair around her finger.

Gran moved toward them. "Raising a child is a big responsibility, Dorothy. Maybe if you moved in here for a while and got to know Tully you'd be ready . . ." She paused, then frowned and said quietly, "You're drunk."

Mommy giggled and winked at Tully.

Tully winked back. Drunk wasn't so bad. Her grandpa used to drink lots before he got sick. Even Gran sometimes had a glass of wine.

"Iss my birthday, Mother, or have you forgotten?"

"Your birthday?" Tully shot to her feet. "Wait here," she said, then ran to her room. Her heart was racing as she dug through her vanity drawer, scattering her stuff everywhere, looking for the macaroni and bead necklace she'd made her mom at Bible school last year. Gran had frowned when she saw it, told her not to get her hopes up, but Tully hadn't been able to do that. Her hopes had been up for years. Shoving it in her pocket, she rushed back out, just in time to hear her mommy say,

"I'm not drunk, Mother, dear. I'm with my kid again for the first time in three years. Love is the ultimate high."

"Six years. She was four the last time you dropped her off here."

"That long ago?" Mommy said, looking confused.

"Move back home, Dorothy. I can help you."

"Like you did last time? No, thanks."

Last time? Mommy had come back before?

Gran sighed, then stiffened. "How long are you going to hold all that against me?"

"It's hardly the kind of thing that has an expiration date, is it? Come on, Tallulah." Her mom lurched toward the door.

Tully frowned. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. Her mommy hadn't hugged her or kissed her or asked how she was. And everyone knew you were supposed to pack a suitcase to leave. She pointed at her bedroom door. "My stuff—"

"You don't need that materialistic shit, Tallulah."

"Huh?" Tully didn't understand.

Gran pulled her into a hug that smelled sweetly familiar, of talcum powder and hair spray. These were the only arms that had ever hugged Tully, this was the only person who'd ever made her feel safe, and suddenly she was afraid. "Gran?" she said pulling back. "What's happening?"

"You're coming with me," Mommy said, reaching out to the doorframe to steady herself.

Her grandmother clutched her by the shoulders, gave her a little shake. "You know our phone number and address, right? You call us if you get scared or something goes wrong." She was crying; seeing her strong, quiet grandmother cry scared and confused Tully. What was going on? What had she done wrong already?

"I'm sorry, Gran, I—"

Mommy swooped over and grabbed her by the shoulder, shaking her hard. "Don't *ever* say you're sorry. It makes you look pathetic. Come on." She took Tully's hand and pulled her toward the door.

Tully stumbled along behind her mother, out of the house and down the steps and across the street to a rusted VW bus that had plastic flower decals all over it and a giant yellow peace symbol painted on the side.

The door opened; thick gray smoke rolled out. Through the haze she saw three people in the van. A black man with a huge afro and a red headband was in the driver's seat. In the back was a woman in a fringed vest and striped pants, with a brown kerchief over her blond hair; beside her sat a man in bell-bottoms and a ratty T-shirt. Brown shag carpeting covered the van floor; a few pipes lay scattered about, mixed up with empty beer bottles, food wrappers, and eight-track tapes.

"This is my kid, Tallulah," Mom said.

Tully didn't say anything, but she hated to be called Tallulah. She'd tell her mommy that later, when they were alone.

"Far out," someone said.

"She looks just like you, Dot. It blows my mind."

"Get in," the driver said gruffly. "We're gonna be late."

The man in the dirty T-shirt reached for Tully, grabbed her around the waist, and swung her into the van, where she positioned herself carefully on her knees.

Mom climbed inside and slammed the door shut. Strange music pulsed through the van. All she could make out were a few words: *somethin' happenin' here* . . . Smoke made everything look soft and vaguely out of focus.

Tully edged closer to the metal side to make room beside her, but Mom sat next to the lady in the kerchief. They immediately started talking about pigs and marches and a man named Kent. None of it made sense to Tully and the smoke was making her dizzy. When the man beside her lit up his pipe, she couldn't help the little sigh of disappointment that leaked from her mouth.

The man heard it and turned to her. Exhaling a cloud of gray smoke right into her face, he smiled. "Jus' go with the flow, li'l girl."

"Look at the way my mother has her dressed," Mommy said bitterly. "Like she's some little doll. How's she s'posed to be *real* if she can't get dirty?"

"Right on, Dot," the guy said, blowing smoke out of his mouth and leaning back.

Mommy looked at Tully for the first time; really *looked* at her. "You remember that, kiddo. Life isn't about cooking and cleaning and havin' babies. It's about bein' free. Doin' your own thing. You can be the fucking president of the United States if you want."

"We could use a new president, thass for sure," the driver said.

The woman in the headband patted Mom's thigh. "Thass tellin' it like it is. Pass me that bong, Tom." She giggled. "Hey, that's almost a rhyme."

Tully frowned, feeling a new kind of shame in the pit of her stomach. She thought she looked pretty in this dress. And she didn't want to be the president. She wanted to be a ballerina.

Mostly, though, she wanted her mommy to love her. She edged sideways until she was actually close enough to her mother to touch her. "Happy birthday," she said quietly, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out the necklace she'd worked so hard on, agonized over, really, still gluing glitter on long after the other kids had gone out to play. "I made this for you."

Mom snagged the necklace and closed her fingers around it. Tully waited and waited for her mom to say thank you and put the necklace on, but she didn't; she just sat there, swaying to the music, talking to her friends.

Tully finally closed her eyes. The smoke was making her sleepy. For most of her life she'd missed her mommy, and not like you missed a toy you couldn't find or a friend who stopped coming over to play because you wouldn't share. She *missed* her mommy. It was always inside her, an empty space that ached in the daytime and turned into a sharp pain at night. She'd promised herself that if her mommy ever came back, she'd be good. Perfect. Whatever she'd done or said that was so wrong, she'd fix or change. More than anything she wanted to make her mommy proud.

But now she didn't know what to do. In her dreams, they'd always gone off together alone, just the two of them, holding hands.

"Here we are," her dream mommy always said as they walked up the hill to their house. "Home sweet home." Then she'd kiss Tully's cheek and whisper, "I missed you so much. I was gone because—"

"Tallulah. Wake up."

Tully came awake with a jolt. Her head was pounding and her throat hurt. When she tried to say, *Where are we?* all that came out was a croak.

Everyone laughed at that and kept laughing as they bundled out of the van.

On this busy downtown Seattle street, there were people everywhere, chanting and yelling and holding up signs that read MAKE LOVE NOT WAR, and HELL NO, WE WON'T GO. Tully had never seen so many people in one place.

Mommy took hold of her hand, pulled her close.

The rest of the day was a blur of people chanting slogans and singing songs. Tully spent every moment terrified that she'd somehow let go of her mother's hand and be swept away by the crowd. She didn't feel any safer when the policemen showed up because they had guns on their belts and sticks in their hands and plastic shields that protected their faces.

But all the crowd did was march and all the police did was watch.

By the time it got dark, she was tired and hungry and her head ached, but they just kept walking, up one street and down another. The crowd was different now; they'd put away their signs and started drink-

ing. Sometimes she heard whole sentences or pieces of conversation, but none of it made sense.

"Did you see those pigs? They were *dyin'* to knock our teeth out, but we were peaceful, man. Couldn't touch us. Hey, Dot, you're bogarting the joint."

Everyone around them laughed, Mommy most of all. Tully couldn't figure out what was going on and she had a terrible headache. People swelled around them, dancing and laughing. From somewhere, music spilled into the street.

And then, suddenly, she was holding on to nothing.

"Mommy!" she screamed.

No one answered or turned to her, even though there were people everywhere. She pushed through the bodies, screaming for her mommy until her voice failed her. Finally, she went back to where she'd last seen her mommy and waited at the curb.

She'll be back.

Tears stung her eyes and leaked down her face as she sat there waiting, trying to be brave.

But her mommy never came back.

For years afterward, she tried to remember what had happened next, what she did, but all those people were like a cloud that obscured her memories. All she ever remembered was waking up on a dirty cement stoop along a street that was totally empty, seeing a policeman on horseback.

From his perch high above her, he frowned down at her and said, "Hey, little one, are you all alone?"

"I am," was all she could say without crying.

He took her back to the house on Queen Anne Hill, where her grandma held her tightly and kissed her cheek and told her it wasn't her fault.

But Tully knew better. Somehow today she'd done something wrong, been bad. Next time her mommy came back, she'd try harder. She'd promise to be the president and she'd never, ever say she was sorry again.

Tully got a chart of the presidents of the United States and memorized every name in order. For months afterward, she told anyone who asked that she would be the first woman president; she even quit taking ballet classes. On her eleventh birthday, while Grandma lit the candles on her cake and sang a thin, watery version of "Happy Birthday," Tully glanced repeatedly at the door, thinking, *This is it,* but no one ever knocked and the phone didn't ring. Later, with the opened boxes of her gifts around her, she tried to keep smiling. In front of her, on the coffee table, was an empty scrapbook. As a present, it sort of sucked, but her grandma always gave her stuff like this—projects to keep her busy and quiet.

"She didn't even call," Tully said, looking up.

Gran sighed tiredly. "Your mom has . . . problems, Tully. She's weak and confused. You've got to quit pretending things are different. What matters is that you're strong."

She'd heard this advice a bazillion times. "I know."

Gran sat down on the worn floral sofa beside Tully and pulled her onto her lap.

Tully loved it when Gran held her. She snuggled in close, rested her cheek on Gran's soft chest.

"I wish things were different with your mama, Tully, and that's the God's honest truth, but she's a lost soul. Has been for a long time."

"Is that why she doesn't love me?"

Gran looked down at her. The black horn-rimmed glasses magnified her pale gray eyes. "She loves you, in her way. That's why she keeps coming back."

"It doesn't feel like love."

"I know."

"I don't think she even likes me."

"It's me she doesn't like. Something happened a long time ago and I didn't . . . Well, it doesn't matter now." Gran tightened her hold on Tully. "Someday she'll be sorry she missed these years with you. I'm certain of that."

"I could show her my scrapbook."

Gran didn't look at her. "That would be nice." After a long silence, she said, "Happy birthday, Tully," and kissed her forehead. "Now I'd best go sit with your grandfather. He's feeling poorly today."

After her grandmother left the room, Tully sat there, staring down at the blank first page of her new scrapbook. It would be the perfect thing to give her mother one day, to show her what she'd missed. But how would Tully fill it? She had a few photographs of herself, taken mostly by her friends' moms at parties and on field trips, but not many. Her gran's eyes weren't good enough for those tiny viewfinders. And she had only the one picture of her mom.

She picked up a pen and very carefully wrote the date in the upper right-hand corner; then she frowned. What else? *Dear Mommy. Today was my eleventh birthday . . .*

After that day, she collected artifacts from her life. School pictures, sports pictures, movie ticket stubs. For years whenever she had a good day, she hurried home and wrote about it, pasting down whatever receipt or ticket proved where she had been or what she'd done. Somewhere along the way she started adding little embellishments to make herself look better. They weren't lies, really, just exaggerations. Anything that would make her mom someday say she was proud of her. She filled that scrapbook and then another and another. On every birthday, she received a brand-new book, until she moved into the teen years.

Something happened to her then. She wasn't sure what it was, maybe the breasts that grew faster than anyone else's, or maybe it was just that she got tired of putting her life down on pieces of paper no one ever asked to see. By fourteen, she was done. She put all her little-girl books in a big cardboard box and shoved them to the back of her closet, and she asked Gran not to buy her any more.

"Are you sure, honey?"

"Yeah," had been her answer. She didn't care about her mother anymore and tried never to think about her. In fact, at school, she told everyone that her mom had died in a boating accident.

The lie freed her. She quit buying her clothes in the little-girls

departments and spent her time in the juniors area. She bought tight, midriff-baring shirts that showed off her new boobs and low-rise bell-bottoms that made her butt look good. She had to hide these clothes from Gran, but it was easy to do; a puffy down vest and a quick wave could get her out of the house in whatever she wanted to wear.

She learned that if she dressed carefully and acted a certain way, the cool kids wanted to hang out with her. On Friday and Saturday nights, she told Gran she was staying at a friend's house and went roller-skating at Lake Hills, where no one ever asked about her family or looked at her as if she were "poor Tully." She learned to smoke cigarettes without coughing and to chew gum to camouflage the smell on her breath.

By eighth grade, she was one of the most popular girl in junior high, and it helped, having all those friends. When she was busy enough, she didn't think about the woman who didn't want her.

On rare days she still felt . . . not quite lonely . . . but something. Adrift, maybe. As if all the people she hung around with were placeholders.

Today was one of those days. She sat in her regular seat on the school bus, hearing the buzz of gossip go on around her. Everyone seemed to be talking about family things; she had nothing to add to the conversations. She knew nothing about fighting with your little brother or being grounded for talking back to your parents or going to the mall with your mom. Thankfully, when the bus pulled up to her stop, she hurried off, making a big show of saying goodbye to her friends, laughing loudly and waving. Pretending; she did a lot of that lately.

After the bus drove away, she repositioned her backpack over her shoulder and started the long walk home. She had just turned the corner when she saw it.

There, parked across the street, in front of Gran's house, was a beat-up red VW bus. The flower decals were still on the side.