

# ONE

*Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.*

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

**THERE WAS A** corpse in my neighbor's front yard. Sprawled before a hedge of juniper bushes, its twisted arms and legs flung out bonelessly, as if it had plummeted there from a passing helicopter, there was an enormous granite boulder where its head should have been. The gardening glove on its right hand was pulling away from the cuff of a flannel shirt, and a chunk of ghostly white foam rubber innards peeked through the opening.

It was one week until Halloween, and everyone on my block seemed to be already getting into the spirit. Across the street, the Harrisons had a series of tombstones lining the walk to their front door, each one engraved with a different “funny” epitaph. **HERE LIES THE MILKMAN—HE PASSED HIS EXPIRATION DATE.** That kind of thing. It was a gauntlet of terrible jokes, and if you survived it, Mrs. Harrison—dressed in a peaked hat and a warty latex nose—would award you a miniature Charleston Chew.

The last time I had gone trick-or-treating, which was nearly five years ago, I had skipped the Harrisons' house.

Up and down the street, you could see ghosts and skeletons, jack-o'-lanterns and candle bags, bats and black cats. Rubber spiders dangled from eaves, zombie hands thrust up from garden beds, and shrubs were cocooned in fake cobwebs as thick as cotton batting, my neighbors competing to see whose house could be the lamest and the "scariest." Mine had them all beat, however. Among that rogues' gallery of party-store clearance-sale showcases, my house alone on that chilly October afternoon was truly frightening.

My house had a cop car parked in the driveway.

"Dude, how much did your parents pay to rent that thing?" My best friend, Micah Feldman, was standing next to me on the sidewalk in front of my boring, two-story Colonial, and he was apparently being serious.

"They didn't, dumbass," I said, kicking up my skateboard—and if I sounded tense, it was an accurate reflection of my mood. *What the hell were the cops doing at my house?*

"Well, what the hell are the cops doing at your house?"

"How do I know?" I looked around nervously. The street was quiet, save for the rattling of dried leaves as wind shook the army of trees that occupied our neighborhood. A couple of weeks ago, my block had looked like a greeting card, the autumnal display of oaks and maples like jewel-tone fireworks in the midday sunshine. Now their branches were half bare, flocked intermittently with dried-out brown curls that as yet refused to fall.

"You don't think . . ." Micah's face lost a little bit of color.

“You don’t think maybe they found out about that weed you bought?”

*That weed you bought.* Nice. “You paid for half of it, Micah.”

“Yeah, but you were the one who actually, you know, held the money.” My so-called best friend squirmed like the snake he was. “Maybe the guy fingered you.”

“We bought, like, half an ounce! The cops have better things to do than bust some kids for buying two bowls’ worth of pot”—*I hoped*—“especially in Ann Arbor.”

“If you say so.” Micah shrugged uneasily and then started backing away, down the sidewalk. “I gotta get home. Call me if you don’t get arrested, okay?”

“Fuck off,” I mumbled, but cold needles were pricking the back of my neck and drawing beads of sweat. *Were* the police here about the pot? If they’d arrested the guy who’d sold it to me, could he have given up the names of his customers in an exchange for leniency?

I shook my head to clear it. I was being an idiot. The guy had been the roommate of the brother of a friend of a friend; he didn’t even know my real name. Still, if the cops were searching our house for . . . well, anything, they could easily find the little breath-mint box at the back of my desk drawer, open it up, identify the leafy contents as Not Altoids, and nail me for possession. My mouth felt dry and tacky as I tucked my skateboard under my elbow and started for the door. If the police hadn’t found the pot yet, I wouldn’t give them a chance; first thing I would do as soon as I got inside was find that box and flush the weed.

I didn’t get to execute my plan. No sooner had I set foot in

the foyer than I heard my mother call out from the living room, “Flynn? Is that you?”

She sounded . . . strained. Not angry, but anxious. *Was that better?* My palms were starting to feel a little clammy. “Uh, yeah.”

“Come into the living room, okay?”

I glanced at the stairs leading to the second floor, where my bedroom was, and swallowed around an ungainly lump in my throat. The living room was dead ahead, and before I could pretend not to have heard her, my mother stepped into view. Standing in front of the sliding doors that let out into the backyard, she smiled at me, but it was a spooky, rigid smile that did nothing to calm my nerves.

“I’m just gonna go up to my room and put my stuff down—” I tried, but she cut me off.

“Don’t worry about that right now, sweetie. You can leave your stuff there.”

*Sweetie.* Uh-oh. My mom hadn’t called me “sweetie” since . . . Actually, I couldn’t remember the last time she’d called me that. Numbly, I dropped my bag and my skateboard, shrugged out of my coat, and shuffled into the living room. With the set of glass doors and a massive picture window, it was a space that received a ton of light, but my vision tunneled until I could see only two things: a police officer seated in my dad’s recliner, and a second officer standing by the fireplace. The one in the recliner was a man with thinning, ginger hair and a bulbous nose; the one by the fireplace was younger, twenties maybe, a black woman with eyes that looked straight through me to the marijuana hidden in my bedroom. They both wore heavy utility belts with holstered guns.

I swallowed again, and tried not to look like I was trying not to piss myself.

“Why don’t you have a seat, son?” The male officer spoke, but it didn’t sound like a suggestion so much as a command. My mom, not taking her eyes off me for a second, circled the couch and sat down first, patting the cushion beside her like I was a terrier or something. Obediently, I followed the implied order, and once I was situated the man said, “I’m Detective Wilkerson, and this is Detective Moses. We just have a few questions we need to ask you.” He gave me a smile that fell somewhere between avuncular and “don’t fuck with me,” and my stomach gurgled. “I know it sounds silly, but since this is an official visit, I just need to confirm that you are Flynn Doherty—is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied automatically, my voice sounding like it was coming from another room. *Sir?* I never called *anyone* “sir.”

“Your mother tells us you’re a sophomore at Riverside.”

“Uh . . . yes?”

Wilkerson grinned. “My boy’s going to be a freshman there next year. He’s a wrestler, but I’m hoping I can convince him to try out for football. You guys have a pretty good team this year, don’t you?”

“Sure,” I said, trying to sound accommodating. I knew fuck-all about football, and even less about what our team was like. I’m a small guy, shorter and skinnier than most guys my age, and fifteen-year-olds who clock in at less than 120 don’t exactly make for star athletes in contact sports. I figured out in the third grade that I was never going to bring home any such trophies, and every gym class since has been an exercise in sheer misery. Guys

take sports incredibly seriously, and after getting slide-tackled six or seven times in a twenty-minute period of a middle school soccer game, I realized it was best if I focused my energies elsewhere.

A silence filled with apprehension stretched out, while Wilkerson and Moses stared at me. If they were expecting me to confess to something, I disappointed them. The older detective cleared his throat. “Son, your girlfriend is January McConville, isn’t that right?”

Whatever I’d been expecting him to say, it wasn’t that. My mom took my hand then, squeezing it hard enough to pulverize the boulder on the neighbor’s lawn, and it was my first indication that whatever was going on was a lot more serious than a half-ounce of pot. Licking my lips, I asked, “Why? What’s happened?”

“Just answer the question, please.”

My mom was still staring at me, radiating worry, and I decided not to overcomplicate things. “Yeah. Uh, yes, sir. Why?”

“Son, when’s the last time you saw her?”

I looked at him uncomprehendingly. “Last Friday. Why?”

Wilkerson and Moses exchanged a look. “Last Friday. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I know how to use a calendar,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “Why are you asking me about January? What’s happened?”

Acting like I’d said nothing at all, Wilkerson forged ahead with that avuncular/hard-assed expression on his face. “You didn’t happen to see her on Tuesday night, did you?”

“He just told you that he hasn’t seen her since Friday,” my

mother interjected sharply. It was a tone that usually struck fear into the hearts of men—she once used it on my sadistic home-room teacher in the sixth grade, and I got three tardies excused retroactively—but Wilkerson didn't even flinch.

"I'd like him to answer the questions, ma'am." Avuncular had given way fully to hard-assed. "Are you sure you didn't see her on Tuesday night?"

"Of course I'm sure," I insisted. My heart was starting to thud, and I felt something cold uncoiling in my gut. "I was here Tuesday night, writing a crappy history paper. The last time I saw January was Friday. Like I said."

Wilkerson's mouth shifted. "How did she seem?"

"Huh?"

"Was she upset? Angry?" Wilkerson made a revolving motion with one hand. "What did the two of you talk about?"

I flashed back to Friday night, January's breath fogging the air between us, her hands pawing at my jeans, her eyes a shimmering slick of tears, and I shifted on the couch. My mom was watching me like I was something under glass at the zoo, and I could feel my chest constricting. "I don't know. We talked about normal stuff."

I was sure they could see the sweat leaking at my temples. This was my worst nightmare. Why were they asking me about Friday night *in front of my mom*?

"Could you elaborate?"

It was like being called to the chalkboard to give a presentation you had forgotten you were supposed to prepare. I started talking, saying things that popped into my head, desperately avoiding the truth. I didn't *want* to mislead the cops—not if something bad had happened—but they wouldn't tell me what

was going on, and I wasn't going to back willingly into this particular corner if I could help it. "We did some stargazing. January's really into that kind of thing, and it was a pretty clear night, so we went out and . . . you know, looked at stars for a while. And we talked about what we're going to do when we finally graduate, and we talked about her big, fancy new house and her big, fancy new school, and . . . and that's about it."

It sounded pitiful even to my own ears, and I could see the cops didn't believe me. Looking at me dubiously, Wilkerson asked, "Did she seem depressed at all, or preoccupied? Was she acting unusual in any way?"

Again, I flashed on January's torn expression, stark in the moonlight with bitter tears making silver lines down her cheeks, and I felt ashamed. "Not really."

Wilkerson frowned, and Detective Moses narrowed her eyes a little like she was trying to picture me in handcuffs. Then she spoke for the first time. "She's your girlfriend, but you haven't seen her in almost a week?" It was Thursday now, so technically she was right. "Not over the weekend? Not on Tuesday night?"

"Why do you keep asking me about Tuesday?" My pitch was climbing into the upper register and, like watching a cat run up a tree, I couldn't seem to stop it. "Why do you keep asking me about January? What's happened?"

Maddeningly, the detectives shared another glance, and then Wilkerson finally said, "January McConville is missing, son. She never came home from school on Tuesday night, and no one's seen or heard from her since." He watched me for a moment, as if he expected me to respond, but I merely stared



back in quiet astonishment until he added, “So I think you can see why we’d like to know exactly what the two of you talked about the last time you saw her.”

I looked from my mom’s worried expression to the business-like ones of the cops, and I swallowed hard. *Oh, shit.*

# TWO

**TWO WEEKS TO** go before Halloween and the moon was full, a bone-white disc that glowed so brightly it rendered streetlamps redundant, so bright I actually cast a shadow over the waves of blond hair that trailed down January's back as she trudged quietly through the tall grass in front of me. A few small, wispy clouds hovered at the edge of the night sky, and the fields that stretched out around us were cast in a sharp, bluish relief. It was a startlingly cold night, and our breath streamed visibly into the air, white phantoms that vanished as soon as you looked at them.

I hadn't heard from her in days—not a call, not a text, nothing—and then, out of nowhere, she wrote and asked me to come over. The second I arrived, she'd told her mom and stepdad we were going stargazing, and we'd be back later. "Don't wait up," she'd said sarcastically, knowing they probably weren't even listening.

Ever since her mom married Jonathan Walker, a rich-as-hell state senator with national aspirations, January had become increasingly, incongruously pessimistic about her life. She went from a tiny, rented condo to the biggest house I'd ever seen in real life—a house so big it could double as a hotel—and she hated it. It was an "estate"

*in the sprawling and largely rural Superior Charter Township area northeast of Ann Arbor, sitting on more acreage than my entire neighborhood, and she bitched about how far away it was. Her bedroom was enormous—her bed was enormous—and she'd already been promised a convertible when she turned sixteen.*

*Still, she complained. "Mom and I used to be close, you know? We used to actually talk. Now it's the 'Tammy and Jonathan Walker Show' all the time, and I'm the teenage daughter who gets reduced from 'starring' to 'recurring' because my character's no longer useful. Mom always takes his side, and she barely even sounds like herself at all!"*

*She was right, though. I could see it happening before my eyes. When I'd met January freshman year, her mom had only just started dating Walker, and January was convinced it wouldn't last. Tammy was a struggling office manager and single mother, and Walker was one of the richest men in the state; they had nothing in common. But then I watched as January's mom went from mousy brown to platinum blond, from Sears to Saks, and from "Tammy" to "Mrs. Walker." Mr. Walker had stamped a new identity on her, like a kid playing with a doll, and his girlfriend/fiancée/wife had been an eager and cooperative subject. January, however, resisted the interference every step of the way, becoming harder and pricklier until neither her mom nor her stepdad particularly wanted to handle her anymore.*

*She still hadn't spoken yet, and we were reaching the little stream that marked the back end of the Walker property. Beyond it, a garri-son of black trees rose up toward the puffy shreds of cirrus clouds that drifted like torn gauze above our heads. Past the trees and to the left was a sloping meadow where January liked to watch the stars,*

*far enough from any houses that you could easily pretend you were the only person left in the world, but instead of heading for it, she veered right.*

*We hopped the stream, shoved through a cluster of pines, and emerged in the moonlight only a few yards from what had once been a functioning barn. Now it was an abandoned, moldering shipwreck of a building, its boards hoary and warped with age, its roof sagging perilously in more than one spot, with an encampment of weeds spreading out around its foundation. Without a word, January headed for the wide doors, the lock on them long since rusted through.*

*“Uh . . . I thought we were going to look at the stars,” I said uncertainly.*

*“We will,” she answered, her breath vaporizing before my eyes. “I just want to go in here first.”*

*“Why?” I halted in my tracks, eyeing the structure nervously, scared not of the building’s safety rating but of what this unannounced stop might represent.*

*“Because it’s cold,” January told me simply, dragging one of the doors open with an ominous croak from its ancient hinges, “and I want to.”*

*“Why?” I repeated, but she ignored me. Without waiting to see if I would follow, she walked through the dark maw of the doorway and was swallowed by the shadows within. Typical January. She knew I would follow; I didn’t have a choice. Where else would I go?*

*Heaving an irritated sigh, I trotted obediently after her.*

*The inside of the barn was no cheerier than the outside, especially at night. Creepy stalls filled with petrified straw bordered a central passage, dust thickly coating every visible surface, and the sharp, rusted remains of farm equipment deemed too decrepit to salvage or sell hung from the walls like some kind of primitive armory. I’d been*

*in there before, of course; immediately after discovering it, January had turned it into her own Fortress of Solitude, a place where she could get away from the Tammy and Jonathan Walker Show. As if she couldn't just go to the other end of that railway station they called a house and be equally as isolated.*

*Toward the far end of the barn was a ladder leading to the hayloft, and in the dim light I saw January already halfway to the top, the rungs giving little squeaks of protest under her feet. Frustrated, I called out, "Are you gonna tell me why we have to stop off in this haunted shithole first, or what?"*

*She didn't answer. She disappeared from sight, and then I heard her feet scraping through dirt and straw above my head, boards thumping and creaking until she came to a stop near the front of the barn. After a moment, I ascended the ladder and found her huddled in a little nest of hay near an open window that looked out toward the meadow and the woods, beside a stack of crates pushed up against the wall. The bright moonlight made a platinum halo of her pale hair.*

*"Sit with me for a little while, okay?" Her voice was scarcely above a whisper. "I'm cold."*

*I was still annoyed, but she sounded . . . fragile somehow. It was so unlike her, so out of character for the girl who had never had a sentimental word to say about anyone or anything, that I forgot to be wary of her motivation. I crossed the hayloft, skirting the weak spot in the floor, and settled next to her. She was shivering, so I opened my coat and let her move into my lap, then closed the coat around us both. We were silent for a moment, looking out the window at a sky rendered into a pointillist masterpiece by limitless stars, the moon shining like a beacon through the diaphanous lace of barely-there clouds.*

*"This is nice," January said at last. She looked up at me, the light*

*picking out an icy reflection in the blue of one eye. "I've missed you, Flynn. I feel like . . . like we don't even see each other anymore."*

*"We kind of don't," I answered bluntly. It sounded rude, so I added, "I mean, we go to different schools now, you've got drama club every afternoon, you work every weekend—"*

*"It's not just that. I feel like—" She stopped abruptly, then changed gears. "I miss you," she repeated. "I want for us to be happy again, like before."*

*"We're not happy?" I asked carefully. "Or you're not happy?"*

*"You know I'm not happy. Not anymore." Familiar bitterness was in her voice, a rush of bile so strong I could almost taste it. "I fucking hate it here. I hate Jonathan, I hate Dumas, I hate fucking robo-mom. . . . I hate that you and Micah and Tiana and everybody else are all having your old lives and doing fun things, while I'm out here in Narnia with my brand-new wax museum family and nobody fucking cares."*

*"I care," I assured her automatically.*

*She was silent for just a moment. "Tell me about California, okay?"*

*This was a little game we played. We'd played it since before we started dating, but neither of us got tired of it. She rested her head on my shoulder and I looked out the window at the moon. "When we graduate, we're both going to California. I'll go to UCLA for English, but only until I figure out what I really want to do; your parents will make you apply to Stanford and you'll probably get in, but you'll choose Cal Tech instead just to prove a point. You'll major in astrology—"*

*"Astronomy," she corrected, and I could hear the smile in her voice.*

*"Same thing," I teased. "We'll go to parties every weekend,*

*alternating whose friends we hang out with, but pretty soon you'll join a sorority—"*

*"Fuck you!" She laughed, and I realized it was the first time I'd heard her laugh in weeks.*

*"—and I'll make friends with all these film school hipsters, and they'll get me to start drinking organic, fair-trade coffee and bitching about the Establishment. Your sororstitute friends won't like me, and my hipster friends won't like you, and nobody will understand how we ever got together in the first place—"*

*"—but we'll go to the beach every Saturday afternoon, the Sunset Strip every Friday night, and a different, trendy café-slash-bar-slash-restaurant every Sunday, and all of our faux-cool friends will wish they were those two awesome kids from Michigan," she finished with a giggle, but her voice was quiet. "I really want that to happen."*

*"Me too."*

*She turned again, tilting her face up to mine, and then she kissed me. Her lips tasted like vanilla gloss and spiced rum, and I was surprised that I hadn't smelled the alcohol earlier. The kiss went from tender to serious in nothing flat, her tongue sliding between my teeth, her mouth pressing against mine with unmistakable urgency. Her right hand slipped underneath my sweater, moving over my stomach and up to my chest, and I jerked backward.*

*"What?" she asked, that one illuminated eye darting back and forth as she read my face. "What's wrong?"*

*"It's just—I mean, your hand is freezing cold!" I laughed awkwardly.*

*"It'll warm up," she promised, and she moved into me again, kissing harder, her left hand joining her right under my sweater. Her fingers clutched at my abs, the cold searing my skin, and then dropped*

down to the waist of my jeans. She'd managed to get the button undone before I realized what she was doing and pushed her back.

"Wait," I said, a little panicked.

"The time is right," she insisted breathlessly, her hands twisting out of my grip like eels, and she reached for my crotch again. "It's finally the right time, and I want . . . I want you to be the first. I want you."

She was kneading me, tugging at my jeans, and I should have been enjoying it—I really wanted to be enjoying it—but the panic had escalated to a screaming tornado siren in my brain, and I pushed her back again. "Stop! Stop it!"

"Why?" Her voice was bleak, almost challenging. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not ready yet," I exclaimed, grappling my pants back into place and fastening the button like it was the seal on a bomb shelter. "We talked about this! I—. It's too early, and it—it needs to be . . . special."

It was the stupidest thing I could've said, and that fact did not escape my girlfriend. She drew away from me, her face disappearing into the inky blackness of the hayloft. Caustic as acid, she snarled, "And I'm not special enough for you, Flynn?"

"That isn't what I meant, and you know it," I snapped, nerves making me irrational.

"We've been dating for four months. You're supposed to want to do this."

"And you're supposed to be glad that I respect your body and stuff!"

"Is that what this is?" Her voice was completely hollow. "Is that what this is really about?"

My first instinct was to demand, What are you talking about?



*But I knew exactly what she was talking about, and I didn't want the words to come out of her mouth. I'd have given anything to keep the words from coming out of her mouth. Sweat like ice water streaked down my spine as I retorted, "Sorry I'm not enough of a man-whore for you. Maybe I'm just old-fashioned."*

*"But I'm a regular, modern whore, I guess."*

*"I didn't say that!" I let her make me angry, because anger was safer. An objective listener would identify me as crazy, but I let wrath crowd out my guilt, my shame, and my rationale; I let it take over. "Don't put words in my mouth just because I'm not ready to have sex yet!"*

*January was quiet for a moment. "Are you afraid I'll be disappointed?"*

*"Huh?"*

*"In the size of your . . . you know?"*

*"There is nothing disappointing about my . . . size!" I exclaimed, offended and horrified by the delicate tone of the question, as if she truly believed I might have a tiny cock. Thing is, it felt like bullying, too, like she was trying to embarrass me as punishment for not wanting to get carnal in a haunted barn, or to goad me into whipping it out to prove my manhood.*

*"It's just that . . . Kaz said guys worry about stuff like that, and that maybe you—"*

*My anger swelled like a thunderhead as I interrupted her. "Why the fuck are you talking to fucking Kaz about my dick? Why are you talking to him at all about us? I don't talk about you behind your back!"*

*She leaned forward then, her face appearing again in the moonlight, and I was startled to see tears glimmering in her eyes and shining on her cheeks. Her expression was anguished, and in the blue-white*

illumination, she looked like a marble saint. “Can we not fight? Please? This isn’t how I wanted tonight to go.”

“Well, too bad. Guess you fucked up.” I didn’t sound balanced even to my own ears. I was being an asshole, but I wanted this to be over so badly that I didn’t care.

If anything, January’s marble face hardened further, anguish turning to resentment like milk curdling before my eyes. “You know what? I’m sick of pretending we don’t both know the reason you freak whenever I touch you.”

“Maybe it’s because you always say stuff like that.”

Her baleful glare was resolute. “I’m done letting you make me feel like it’s me, like it’s my fault. It’s never been about me. It’s always been about you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I hugged my coat a little tighter. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If you won’t be honest with me, you should at least be honest with yourself.”

“Thanks for the advice, Dr. Phil, I’ll think about it.”

She stared at me for another moment or so, and then hissed, “Fuck this! I’m tired of holding your hand and waiting for you to make friends with yourself, Flynn! I’m here, too—you’re not the only one.” She drew back again, into the darkness, and I heard her scrambling to her feet. “I’m done. I shouldn’t have called you. It was a mistake.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, catching, and I realized that she was crying again. “It was all a big mistake.”

I shifted uncomfortably, suddenly freezing on the bed of hay in that pool of moonlight. “January—”

“I won’t be your safeguard or your excuse or your problem anymore,” she spat suddenly, venomously. “Either admit the truth, or find a new place to hide, because I’m done!”

*Her feet pounded across the shadowy hayloft, then descended the ladder, and then crossed the barn underneath me. I heard the door creak open, and caught a glimpse of her glowing blond hair as she jogged from the barn back into the trees, heading toward the meadow.*

*It was the last time I saw her. Those were the last words she spoke to me.*