

1991

On three separate occasions during the first twelve weeks, Kate made the hour-long drive to the abortion clinic in the city. The first two times, she threw up as soon as she stepped out of her car. The third time, she managed to walk into the building and write her maiden name, Katherine Wood, on the receptionist's sign-in page. She took a seat in the bleak waiting room and felt a small, concentrated twinge in her abdomen just below her belly button. The baby. It was moving inside her, stretching and growing and multiplying its cells at an astonishing rate. By that point, her baby's circulatory system would be developing and its kidneys beginning to function. She regretted reading all of those prenatal books. She couldn't do it. Kate couldn't destroy this baby. Her worst fears surfaced. *What if someone finds out? What if I go to hell?*

She decided the guilt of the abortion would be almost as bad as the guilt of being a no-count whore, which is what her father would have called her. Though he'd been dead for almost three years, Kate could still hear his voice in her head, scratchy from smoking too many menthols. She couldn't get out of the clinic fast enough.

She slammed her car door with the force of her decision and exhaled loudly. She sat for a few minutes, eyes closed, just breathing. "We're going to be alright," Kate reassured herself and the growing life inside her. Saying it aloud might make it true, she thought.

For twenty-four weeks, Kate managed to keep her secret. She gained very little weight and wore clothes that wouldn't have people wondering. Her husband had been overseas for over a year, for God's sake. She shuddered, imagining the look of disbelief on his face, the smirks from the other wives on the base, most of whom lived for gossip and scandal.

Now, in her last trimester, Kate rubbed her hands over her swollen and shifting belly. She resigned from her job at the library two months before, telling them that she needed to get away for a little while, that Jim's absence was taking its toll on her. It wasn't a lie. Without looking back, Kate drove to the same beach house where she and Jim spent their lackluster honeymoon. Stepping out onto the boardwalk that lead to a grey and churning ocean, Kate remembered every detail with such clarity.

Jim had fallen in love with her two years earlier, watching her pour his coffee at the diner where she worked as a waitress. Two sugars, a little cream. She still remembered that. When she met Jim's mother three weeks later, she referred to Kate as that 'poor white trash' that Jim felt sorry for. Kate heard the woman's exact words with her ear pressed against the cheap, hollow bathroom door, her voice thick with resentment for this girl who was stealing her only son away from her.

Jim thought she was beautiful, and he was right by anyone's standard. Hers was a natural beauty; no makeup, other than the loose powder she dusted over her face to offset the grease from the diner. Her hair was a shiny chestnut brown, and fell gracefully below her shoulders when she bounced from table to table, taking and delivering orders as if she were conducting her own private symphony.

When she first saw Jim, Kate felt something click. He was handsome; there was no doubt about that. He had intense blue eyes and the crisp Army uniform lent him an air of authority. It wasn't love exactly; rather, Jim reminded her of something she had once known to be true, but forgotten over time. She stared at him, trying to figure him out. Jim just smiled back and asked for more coffee.

Jim begged Kate to marry him later that week. He had no ring, only promises. She believed them all. He was saving her from a life of scrubbing greasy tables just to survive in the dead-end town. She was so grateful for the chance to escape that she said yes before he finished asking the question. Jim would love her, protect her. And most importantly, he would give her a shot at having something that she'd never known, something that resembled happiness. Perhaps this was her chance.

He was witty and charming most of the time, but Jim had a switch that turned him cold, quiet and brooding. Kate could find no rationale for what exactly triggered Jim's darker side, but she was able to detect the subtle shift in the atmosphere just before the bottom fell out. The quiet, still air would be momentarily charged with explosive energy. When he finally ignited, his rage was wide and his sadness was deep, though she never knew into which abyss he'd sink. For years, doctors said it was manic depression, but Jim refused to take his prescribed medication for fear of seeming weak.

They spent their honeymoon at Jim's family's small, rustic cottage on a tiny beach at the North Carolina coast. It rained every day, providing a perfectly ironic setting for the new couple. Jim was in the middle of one of his spells and their attempts to consummate the marriage dead-ended with Jim's desire turning to frustration, then anger, then overwhelming sadness. She couldn't comfort him at all, though she'd tried, reassuring him that it didn't matter; he'd be all better when he returned from Saudi Arabia, and they'd pick up right where they left off.

"I hope so," Jim whispered into her ear on the sidewalk outside of their house. When she heard the muffled thud of the taxi door and watched it wind down the narrow street, Kate realized that she was utterly alone. That night, an emptiness settled over her like a damp and heavy wool blanket.

To distract Kate from her loneliness, she got a part-time job reshelving books at the local library. Kate didn't mind; she loved everything about the old library: the sharp, musty smell of the outdated hardbacks, the quiet hush that calmed her nerves.

2014

The shrill ring of the phone pierced the air, tearing Kate away from her thoughts.

"Hey Mom," James's voice instantly soothed her frayed nerves. "What are you up to?"

"Hey James!" She hadn't heard from him in almost a week, which was unlike James. Normally, they spoke every other day or so. He was unlike most twenty-one year olds in that way. "Not much. Just sitting here waiting for your dad to get home. How are you?"

"I'm cool." Kate smiled at his casual attitude, the way the word 'cool' encapsulated everything from his health to his social life to his studies. "I had a big Biology exam this morning.

I studied for three days straight. I didn't even leave the dorm on Saturday." He drew a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "Glad that's over."

"I was wondering why you didn't call this weekend, but I didn't want to bug you. I'm glad it's over too. I'm sure you aced it."

"Ha. We'll see." He paused. "Now don't freak out or anything, but I was wondering if I could come home for the weekend and invite someone for dinner Saturday night?"

"Of course!" Kate's spirits lifted. "Who is she?"

"Amy. I just met her, so don't go getting all Mother of the Groom on me." He was laughing when he said it.

"We would love to have her. I wish your sister could be here, but it's just too long a trip for her to make on such short notice." Kate spent the better part of the next hour talking with James, trying to get more information from him. She asked the usual and polite questions, taking care not to appear too nosy or excited. ???.

After hanging up, Kate sat for a moment, absently stroking the arms of the antique wing-back chair covered in navy blue toile. Her life. It had been so different from what she'd imagined it would be.

Jim, after coming back from overseas, was riddled with anxiety. Bi-polar disorder and post-traumatic stress, he called it, almost proudly. Now that it had a name, Jim accepted his diagnosis and sought to conquer it. He got help, and slowly, week by week, month by month, Kate caught glimpses of the wonderful man that was buried under all that rage and sadness.

The two of them found their stride, settled down in suburban Atlanta, and built a life. She became pregnant with James the first month Jim was home. His birth restored a piece of her. Elizabeth was born only 14 months later. Having his children was something of a penance that she believed she owed him, or the universe. Those pregnancies, those births; she vowed to go through them graciously and without complaint. And she did.

Over the years, Kate often found herself frozen with an odd mixture of gratitude and fear. *Is this my life? Is this real?* She was president of the PTA and on committees all over town. Every night of the week was filled with soccer practices and piano rehearsals, and in the middle of it all, Kate found herself fulfilled when she stopped to look at the family she'd built. She thrived on the duties of motherhood. Being a mother gave her someone to *be*. It was a beautiful distraction.

But in the dark, when there were no little voices calling her name, the soundless, more disturbing voices came alive. *You can't get away with this. It will catch up with you.* Staying busy helped to quiet those sinister voices, and so she threw herself into motherhood with everything she had.

1991

Kate sat, slowly and heavily, on to the weathered lounge chair that faced the ocean. A storm had everything stirred up; the waves tumbled angrily against the shore. She inhaled deeply, trying to soothe her nerves. Here, alone, at Jim's family's house, Kate had the chance to think. She still had time to make some decisions. But all that filled her mind was Sam.

When Kate met Sam, he was working at the library to pay back his father, who loaned him money to have his motorcycle repaired. He planned to move to California to work construction for ten dollars an hour; Sam could make more in one year out there than he'd make here in five years. The way he explained it all to Kate made perfect sense. Sam was a dreamer, a true idealist, and he inspired her. But for Kate, disappointment was expected, welcomed even, because it was the only thing that she'd ever been able to count on. Until she met Sam, Kate hadn't known that there was another way to live.

Sam was almost fifteen years older than Kate, and confidence radiated from his crooked smile, the way he said exactly what was on his mind, rather than masking his feelings behind something he believed she wanted to hear, as most people did. They spent months working together, sharing whispered conversations while shelving books. There was something about Sam, some vastness, something Kate couldn't quite define, but sensed. He made her feel alive, less lonely. More than anything, he intrigued her. She loved him immediately, inexplicably.

When he touched her, Kate felt something inside her stretch and come to life. She was bound to Sam by something, some force. It was as if she'd known him from somewhere else. He listened for hours as she talked about her upbringing: the abusive, alcoholic father and the terrified, enabling mother. It was cathartic for her, revealing and releasing all of the things that made her ashamed of who she was. Kate discovered a part of herself in Sam, and in return, realized that she and Jim didn't really know each other at all. Time had not allowed Kate to reveal herself to her husband, though she wasn't sure she wanted to.

When he finally took her in his arms one evening after work, Kate knew that she loved Sam. She felt connected to him by their energy. She gave herself to him completely. She imagined that Sam was her husband, not Jim, and that he bought the whole library just for her to have a quiet place to dream and read. Of course she didn't tell Sam this, but he knew what she was thinking without having to ask. It was part of their magic.

"Come with me," Sam said simply and without pretense. It would have been easy enough to leave Jim, to run away to California with Sam, at least logistically. But something inside Kate wouldn't let her go. She was tethered to her fear, and without it, Kate wouldn't know who she was.

"Sam, I want to," Kate told him, "but I..." Kate couldn't finish the sentence.

"You *what* Kate?" He held her face tenderly and searched her eyes.

"I'm scared. I've never loved anyone like this before."

"Don't you see the irony? That there's nothing to be afraid of? Nothing to fear? It could be this way forever."

But she knew better than that. It could be this way for now, but forever? *Everything falls apart, Kate. Nothing lasts forever.* In her mind she heard the voice of her mother, dripping with pain and sarcasm. She saw her mother's hollow, tear-stained face as she wiped down the counters where her father had hurled a pot of spaghetti sauce across the kitchen. *You think anybody's going to love you forever? Going to be there forever? You can't count on anybody Katherine. You can't. You'll see.* Her mother's ghost still haunted the corridors of her mind.

Jim stood across the room at the bar, making his usual after-work whiskey and water. He turned to her, smiled. He was a handsome man; age had given Jim a look of distinction, and one that he certainly deserved.

A sudden bolt of tenderness and joy spread throughout her body; an unexpected moment of clarity or peace of mind. She'd made it. She managed to get through this phase of her life, raising a healthy and happy family, and now she would be able to sit back and enjoy the fruits of her labor.

For so long, she had been her secret's master, and it obeyed her every command. One fearful thought caused it to grow and threaten to overtake her; in the absence of fear, it sat in the corner of her mind, slowly withering away. Or was it the other way around? Kate felt that it was she who had been a slave to the secret. But now, Kate had the feeling that she'd paid for her sins in full. Maybe this was it. Maybe this was a foreshadowing of what was to come: weddings, more babies; she would revel in her role as a grandmother. Could it be that it was really all behind her? *This, too, shall pass*. She repeated the mantra in her head. Perhaps it really was true.

"I talked to James today," Kate said to Jim.

"How is he?" Jim asked, taking a seat on the sofa against the window.

"He sounds good," she smiled. "Did you know he was planning to come this weekend?" She chuckled out loud. "Just chattering away about this girl. Amy, I think. And he's taking eighteen hours this semester. I cannot believe he's graduating in May. When did he turn into a man?"

Jim shook his head slowly in silent agreement. She turned to face Jim, scooted to the edge of the seat. "Jim, I know I don't say this much, but I want you to know how much I love and appreciate you. How much everything you've done and everything you are means to me." Hot tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, and she felt her face flush.

"I love you too, Kate. You're the best mother our kids could ever hope for." And he meant it. Jim had always found it effortless to praise Kate for her unwavering devotion to her family. It was what he admired most about her and what made him love her more deeply every day. "Where's all this coming from?" He smiled and set his drink down, giving her his full attention.

And just as it had a thousand times before, the urge to tell Jim everything rushed up from her chest. *Tell him. Tell him. Tell him*. But she couldn't. She might have been able to twenty-three years ago, with so little time and distance between them. So few lies. *We didn't really even know each other then*, she envisioned saying to Jim. "I don't know. I think I just realized that I'm happy. We've worked so hard for all these year That's all."

"Well, sweetie, I'm the lucky one. You've given me everything that's worth having in life." Jim had grown tender, sweet even, in his middle age. He smiled back at her. For the first time, she noticed the deep lines around Jim's eyes and the way his skin was beginning to hang just slightly. They were both getting older. The thought comforted Kate and she looked forward to the peace and nothingness that would surely come with death.

She needed to get some rest. She had so much to do before James arrived the next afternoon.

1991

Sam was gone, leaving behind only a letter explaining how he'd be back for her in a few months, six tops. He outlined the plan in his letter: He'd make his trip, giving her the time and space to end things with Jim, and then come home to Kate. She would welcome him back with unrestrained, unfettered love. Kate was devastated, not only because Sam was gone, but because she knew the fantasy would never be realized. Perhaps it was her guilt that convinced her she was stuck. Whatever the reason, Kate knew with certainty that she would never leave Jim. For reasons that she couldn't comprehend, the thought both comforted and terrified her, a prison sentence that was both her salvation and her demise.

For the following month, Kate lay at the bottom of a deep and very dark pit, swaddled tightly in the same heavy blanket of sadness that threatened to suffocate her when Jim left. When she was finally able to crawl out, Kate knew without a doubt that she was carrying Sam's baby.

The only thing worse than Kate's overwhelming guilt was her unfulfilled longing for Sam. She still loved him, deeper and more intensely than ever. Their love was, she knew, not something dependent upon circumstance or time or geography. It was still there, burning, aching and she felt Sam loving her back. She hated herself for possessing none of Sam's courage. *Follow your heart.* Sam's words echoed in her head, tempting her. But Kate's heart was full of fear.

Many times, Kate considered contacting Sam, telling him that she was carrying his baby, taking him up on his offer to run away. But just as quickly as the thought occurred to her, Jim's face appeared in her vision. She couldn't leave the man who'd saved her from her pathetic life in her mother's old trailer, who'd defended her against his own mother's upper-middle class prejudices. Besides, Kate didn't know what Sam would say if she managed to find him and tell him the truth. Maybe he'd be afraid too. A baby wasn't exactly part of his plan. Maybe he'd run away without her. Then she'd have no one, just as her mother predicted. She was too scared to take the chance. She knew what she must do, though the mere thought of giving her baby away hurt almost as much as the idea of destroying it. She wasn't sure where she'd find the strength.

Standing on the deck overlooking the expanse of ocean before her, Kate began to hum a lullaby. *Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream/Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.* When she felt the baby move inside her, Kate took it as a gesture of solidarity. She breathed deeply, letting the humid, salty air fill her lungs with warmth.

2014

Screwing in the backs to her diamond earrings, Kate thought that perhaps she was overdoing it a bit, but she couldn't contain her excitement at the idea of spending the evening with her James. A subtle but distinct joy illuminated her thoughts, giving everything a warm glow. Kate had spent the last three hours putting the finishing touches on the roast, dusting

every surface in her house and dressing herself meticulously in her most recently purchased, stylish black pencil skirt and blue silk blouse. With her fear shrinking, Kate felt invincible. Hearing the door slam downstairs, she smiled to herself.

"James," she whispered to her own reflection in the mirror. She turned toward the bathroom. "Jim, hurry up! They're here!" Kate bounced down the stairs and followed the sound of James's voice floating up from the dining room.

"Yeah, she's really into china and stuff," she heard James say.

"James! You're finally here." Kate hadn't seen him in over a month and didn't realize how much she'd missed him until she felt him in her arms. The lean, rosy muscles of his shoulders and back. The scruffy hair touching the top of his shirt collar. She breathed in the scent of college James, cigarette smoke and wintergreen.

"Mom!" He let her hold him in her embrace for almost ten seconds before finally letting go. "This is Amy." He beamed, turned to face a hauntingly beautiful girl with almond-shaped eyes and soft brown curls that fell around her shoulders.

Kate almost stumbled backwards, catching herself on the corner of the dining room table. Kate couldn't breathe. It was as if the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. She heard nothing but the thunderous thumping of her heart. The walls came crashing down around her.

1991

"Okay, Katherine. This is it. I need you to push." Kate squeezed the nurse's hand with the full force of her contraction and groaned. With her eyes closed, her breath held, Kate pushed and felt the pressure relent from her partially numbed lower body. She exhaled and sobbed at the same time as the doctor held up a slick and squirming baby covered in blood and thick white paste.

"It's a girl!" Kate knew it was going to be a girl, and she didn't want to look. One look could change everything. She ignored their suggestion that she at least hold her baby, look at her and remember this moment before she gave her away. Kate knew that if she so much as touched this baby, she would feel the love she felt for Sam and the way he looked at her and promised to love her. The baby would be made of the same energy that connected the two of them. If she felt it again, Kate would take the baby and run right back to him.

Instead, Kate asked for more drugs, ones that would put her into total darkness, where she wouldn't be haunted by what she'd done. She shook her head no. In fact, Kate had requested complete anonymity and had taken every step in ensuring that there would be nothing to link her to this day, this hospital, this baby. She would run away from this as quickly and silently as possible.

"Well, okay, if you're sure," the nurse said, a hint of judgment in her voice. Or was it pity? Kate turned her head just as they carried the baby out, the medicine already taking effect. She caught a glimpse of beautiful, almond-shaped eyes, the color of a pitch-black night. Below her left eye was a small, half-moon shaped birthmark the color of red wine. She was the most magical thing Kate had ever seen. But she was already gone, and so Kate let herself wander to a place where she could float, freely and weightlessly above her spent mind and body.

2014

She looked straight into the girl's dark eyes. She'd seen those eyes before. Below the left eye, the unmistakable sliver of dark red skin. It was small, but distinguished.

"Mom? Have you been drinking?" He asked jokingly. "She loves her wine." He smiled at Amy, laughed. His words sounded far-away, foggy.

"It's nice to meet you Mrs. Sanders. I've heard so much about you." Amy leaned in to hug Kate politely.

"You too, sweetie." She managed to choke out. "Why don't you guys make yourselves comfortable and I'll be right back." Kate stumbled into the kitchen, letting the swinging door shut behind her. Her twenty-three-year-old daughter was sitting in her dining room. She knew it the minute she saw those eyes. She felt it, too. That was her daughter. And she was dating her own half-brother. Kate tried to choke down the vomit that rose up in her throat, but to no avail. She unloaded her lunch into the kitchen sink, trying to make as little noise as possible.

*Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.* She considered for a moment that she was dreaming, that this was some hellish nightmare from which she'd awake any minute, terrified and relieved and humbled. But it was real. A million questions buzzed in her head. What if it's not really her? Could it be possible that there's another girl with the same eyes, the same birthmark? But Kate knew the truth instinctively. It was her daughter. There was no doubt. The energy. The connection. She felt it. And James was in love with her. She could tell by the way he looked at her when she talked, enraptured by her every word. It was how she used to look at Sam.

"...So that's basically how we met. My friends like to joke that I'm a 'cougar' because James is younger." Amy smiled and turned to look at James. Kate's stomach twisted as she attempted to swallow the roast, each bite a jagged rock sliding down her throat.

Amy was so graceful, so naturally charming and beautiful. She understood why James had chosen her. Was it that, or was it the fact that they shared half of the same DNA? The thought made her panic, and at last, Kate understood with clarity what she'd done, filling her life with roles and titles and vacations and tasks, keeping her past from destroying her present by trying to outrun it. She tried to erase the memory by replacing it with a million other things, but it had finally shown up. The secret had its own life, its own fate to fulfill. She was powerless to stop it.

Kate was trying not to sound so desperate, asking questions that would give her something, *anything*, that would prove she couldn't be who she seemed to be. When Amy revealed that her younger sister had been diagnosed with childhood diabetes, Kate jumped at her chance.

"So, Amy, is that genetic? Childhood diabetes? I mean, *you're* not diabetic, are you?" Kate held her breath.

“No. I mean, no, I don't have it. Yes, it's genetic.” Amy took a long sip of the wine that James said was her favorite. Kate went to three liquor stores to find the Chilean red. “But I'm adopted, so we don't share the same genes.”

Kate heard nothing that she said after that, though Amy continued to elaborate on the challenges of proper diet and daily insulin injections. Time stopped right then, and Kate merely nodded with an empty smile plastered on her face. She watched Amy's mouth moving, Sam's mouth, and the familiar way she wrinkled her nose when she laughed, but the throb of her heart pounding was all she could hear.

She cleaned up dinner in a trance-like state, grateful for something to keep her hands busy while her mind raced. Kate considered trying to get rid of Amy in some other way. Perhaps she could behave so terribly that Amy wouldn't want anything to do with James. But that wasn't fair. Besides, she couldn't stand the thought of hurting James or even losing favor in his eyes. She knew that this would be the unraveling of them all, that this revelation would change all of their lives forever. And they would hate her. All of them. Jim would probably leave her. She'd built a twenty-four year marriage on a lie, and one that walked and talked and lived among them. She'd raised two children, but buried the memory of the one that she couldn't bear to remember.

Hearing the door shut softly, Kate knew that James was back from dropping off Amy at her friend's house, the one who had introduced them at school and sent this terrible and ironic wheel of fate spinning. She'd tried to live her life. She'd had a decent marriage, wonderful children, a plethora of friends and activities to fill her days, but it was over for her. She would finally pay for what she'd done.

“Hey Jim? Can you come here for a minute?” Kate called into the den. “We need to talk.”

Jim didn't answer, so she stuck her head into the doorway and saw her husband in a familiar position: stretched out in his favorite leather recliner, head turned away, snoring softly.

“Can it wait until tomorrow, Mom? He's out.” She heard James turn on the television and the familiar sound of him plopping down onto the couch. She realized that it could be the last time she'd hear that sound. “And I'm not far behind him.” He yawned loudly and kicked off his topsiders.

The question lingered in her mind. *Can it wait until tomorrow?* She wasn't sure. *Perhaps.* She began to hum softly. *Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.*