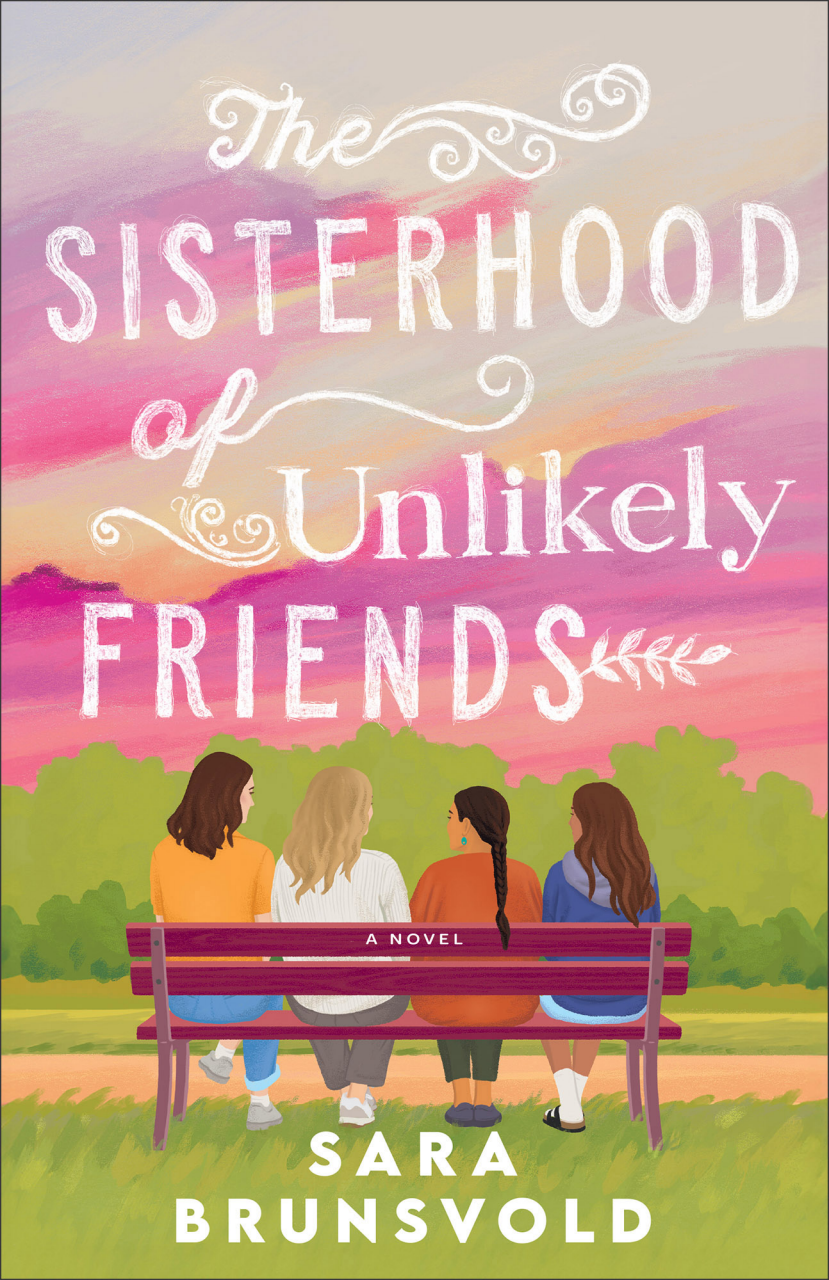
The Sisterhood of Unlikely Friends



A NOVEL

SARA BRUNSVOLD

The Sisterhood of Unlikely Friends

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Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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For the women I walk with
shoulder to shoulder,
toward Home.
May you see your influence
in these pages.

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PART 1

ALONE

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1

MID-AUGUST BAKED the Flint Hills. It fired into my skin once more as I lumbered sideways down the front steps of my childhood home with a dining chair at each amply padded hip. A dry Kansas breeze carried the chaff of little bluestem grass from the vacant lot behind the house to new destinations and kicked the leaves of the cottonwood towering above the limestone-sided cottage into a chorus of goodbye waves. My Chevy truck rested in the pool of shade on the lawn that Thursday, all of my slowly replenished possessions arranged like a jigsaw puzzle in the bed. The grip of heat stirred up a vague tingle in my left hand, a stubborn remnant of an injury I don't remember sustaining. Since turning forty-two, I had trouble pinpointing the origins of most of my musculoskeletal tweaks.

Behind me, Dad hobbled out the front door, the steady click of his cane measuring his steps. "Sure did pick the finest day to move," he muttered.

"I have a track record of stellar decision-making, Dad."

"Hmmmpf." It was the most he had said in one stretch the whole time we'd worked to load the truck over his lunch break.

I reached the front walk and bowed my head in an attempt to avoid the sun burning holes into my retinas. My shirt clung to

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my chest with the same sticky sweat that pulled my makeup off in cloudy drops and dribbled down my neck. My hair, which never laid the way it was instructed to anyway, flopped against my ears. Some of the strands caught in the murky rivers of perspiration and stuck to my skin.

I reached the open tailgate and set down the chairs, then paused a moment to stretch my back. Middle age did not play nicely with lugging furniture in the heat, or really anything else.

Dad arrived next to me and held up the yellow Dollar General sack he had carried from the kitchen. "Where you want this, Jess?"

"Floorboards by my plants would be great. Thank you."

He glanced down at the sack. Peanut butter, tortillas, and applesauce. "You sure you don't want to take more?"

"Whatever I'm leaving is all yours. I can get more. Supposedly there's a grocery store right in my neighborhood, walking distance."

He set his mouth in a straight line, the most common answer he gave when I started talking about my two-hour move to Kansas City. He would stay silent when I told him about my remote data entry job with the law firm, had spent all of thirty seconds reviewing the photos of my rental house, and would veer to talk of Woodfield High football if I mentioned anything about said house having room for both of us.

He couldn't see the potential. Somehow, I would get him to see, to believe as strongly as I did that Woodfield was not where we were meant to thrive. Especially not me, the one who had only her seventy-two-year-old father to help her pack.

He click-stepped toward the passenger door to deliver the sack. Sweat had moistened the back of his work shirt along his spine, cutting through "Becker Automotive" across his shoulder blades. His tin-colored Dickies pants retained the old oil stains that I had been unable to release no matter how many times I washed them. He needed to get back to the shop before long.

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I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand and dried it on the waistband of my cotton shorts. The chairs were the last things to tie in. I heaved myself into a seated position on the tailgate, then eased up onto my feet. My knees crackled with the movement. A bit of space remained on the driver's side of the bed, between the foot of the twin-size mattress and the sidewall. The bed frame, a folded futon, a nightstand, and a dresser held up the mattress on the passenger side, and a small square dining table, TV stand, and folding table on the other. My bedroom in Dad's house, the place I never thought I'd ever have to live in again, had steadily filled to the gills over the past two years as each item found its way into my possession. I lifted the first chair from the ground by its back and wedged it into the space.

Dad returned from the cab, rested his cane against the tailgate, then held up the second chair to me. I tucked it seat to seat on top of its partner.

"Be sure to tie those down extra tight," he said. "Don't want them flyin' out on the interstate."

"On it." I grabbed the bungee cord already anchored to the sidewall and began the tie-down process. As I crisscrossed the mound of my meager belongings, Dad instructed me where to direct the cords and which parts needed more than one. He was good for such practical advice, but not the kind that would have kept his only child from chasing things—people—she was never meant to hold and going down paths that eventually led only to turned backs and half-true rumors. My choices were my choices, though, and at least I had made one that was right.

Across the street and a block over, the steeple of my Sunday morning home for the past two years rose above the tree line. In that little church, I had chosen the only One who did not view me as a pariah or a pawn in small-town games.

Last cord secured, I eased to the ground again. Dad looped around the truck, tugging on each cord to ensure its security.

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"All good," he said at last and reached for the old-school tire pressure gauge he kept as a permanent accessory in his shirt pocket. "Let me check your air real quick."

"I did that already, Dad."

"What about the oil? Fluids?"

I patted the tailgate. "I take care of Hank, and he takes care of me." Some dads taught their kids math or how to throw a ball. Kevin Becker taught car maintenance. I had amassed more facts about carburetors than about my own late mother. He was the reason I had known that Hank, despite his age and all his hard farm miles before I purchased him, was a good bet.

Dad repinned the gauge to his pocket, then scratched the side of his head, mussing the hair above his ear. The back stood up like a mangled rooster tail, thanks to his philosophy of "If I can't see it, why bother?" The skin on the backs of his hands was dried and cracked around the knuckles, the natural consequence of his lack of urgency in personal care or partaking in medical care of any kind. In Kansas City, I could ensure he went to the doctor, ensure he actually enjoyed his golden years, maybe even take him to watch the Chiefs at Arrowhead. The 2023–24 season promised lots of home games, according to the team's website. He could be the happiest he'd ever been. We could be the happiest, together.

I had been too young to do anything to help my mom tend to her diabetes, but I was far old enough and almost together enough to take care of him. If only he would let me.

He dropped his hand to his side. "Guess that's that, then." His pale gray eyes lifted to mine. The lenses of his glasses needed a good clean, his shock of white eyebrows a good trim. A dozen different versions of him flashed one after the other on his form. The dad of my youngest years, standing in my bedroom door asking if I was ready for school. The dad of my teen years, rousing in his recliner as I attempted to sneak in well past my curfew, asking where I'd been. The dad of those seven years I lived with Mick, never asking either of us why rings were not exchanged.

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The dad who opened his front door after the breakup two years ago when I had nowhere else to go, and who never asked for any rent. The dad with a furrowed brow, standing in the kitchen one summer Sunday shortly after that, when I had come home and declared my life was different from that point forward.

All the versions of him I ever remembered had the heady scent of automotive fluids and the stained hands of a working man. All of them launched an urge within me to throw myself into his arms and insist he stuff himself in with my plants. But we Beckers didn't hug. We certainly didn't cry in front of each other.

The backs of my eyes burned. I blinked against the sensation. "Guess that's it," I echoed. Words ballooned within me. All I could get out was, "Stay out of trouble."

He nodded at my words, spoken and unspoken, and pointed at Hank. "Keep an eye on that oil. You know how he gulps it."

Hidden among the words were the "I love you" I had never stopped longing for. I nearly broke. Instead, as he would expect of his offspring, I swallowed down the rise of bare honesty, climbed into my truck, and turned the key.

We nodded to each other, and then I drove away.

His was the only farewell I received from the town of a thousand, and his would be the only hello I craved to hear again soon.

I cried for the first one hundred miles.

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2

"THE TRICK IN FORGETTING what lays behind is believing in what lays ahead," the pastor at the Woodfield church once said.

As I-35 pulled me into the outskirts of the Kansas City metro, belief grew. Every exit thrummed with activity. People with objectives going here and there. The roads were smooth and wide, overpasses pristine and modern, the stores and businesses more numerous and diverse than seemingly the rest of Kansas combined. The tears forgot to come, my eyes forgot to burn. The place was alive with possibility and promise. In a metro of two million people, I could be who I wanted to be. No one knew Mick or understood the influence of his Shuckers Bar and Grill or what it meant to be shunned out of the employment and company of both.

The interstate crossed into Missouri within a mile of the downtown high-rise buildings and the four signature pylons of Bartle Hall convention center. As the highway curved to take aim directly at them, it dipped sharply and slid under the dense city core. It emerged again on the other side, then swept north toward the Missouri River and the suburbs beyond. I held tightly to Hank's wheel, guiding him through the crush of vehicles and big rigs all competing for space in the multiple lanes of traffic. Belief bloomed in my

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chest and sent rays of anticipation through me and down to my fingertips. The sensation usurped the vague tingle in my left hand.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into my new neighborhood off North Oak Trafficway. The bustle of the thoroughfare quieted the farther I followed the street down the row of houses. It narrowed to barely wider than two car widths before winding into a long, sloping curve.

Then, finally, there it was—the house that before then was only an image on my phone screen. The narrow, cream-colored bungalow, all nine hundred square feet of it, was the runt amid the sprawling ranches and split-levels all around it.

I eased Hank into the driveway and stopped adjacent to the front yard on my right. The asphalt slanted downward on a gentle grade along the side of the house and spilled into a paved pad at the back. The covered front porch was a little longer than Hank's bed, and the outdated windows and worn siding spoke of their vigilant fight to stave off the elements. A long, wide, empty lot of freshly trimmed grass stretched between my driveway and the Dutch Boy blue ranch next door. Full, mature trees stood sentinel along the back property line, the shadows of the canopies not quite reaching my roof.

"It's adorable." Nicer than any home I had ever had, far better than the single-wide Mick and I had shared. And it was all mine. The new life I had dreamed of for so long was about to begin.

I checked my phone. Five minutes until two o'clock, the appointed time for me to meet my landlord, Seymour Bove. Until that point, he had been only a voice on the other end of the phone line, saying he lived near downtown and didn't come to my neighborhood much but would drive up to meet me on move-in day. So far, though, Hank was the only vehicle at the house.

With the skill Dad had taught me before I could legally drive, I arranged Hank so that his tailgate was mere feet from the porch steps. While I waited for Seymour, I could at least start untying my load.

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As I cut the engine, a glint across the empty lot caught my eye. An older man stepped through the glass storm door of the blue ranch. He hooded his face with his hand, his attention full bore on me.

"Already got myself an audience." I lifted my hand from the steering wheel in my best country-girl wave.

In response, the man launched into a brisk march, aimed squarely my direction.

"Oh, all right." Quickly, I gathered my keys and pushed open my door. With my phone at the ready in case I needed proof I belonged there, I stepped around to Hank's front grille. Waves of heat from the long drive puffed against my bare forearm, carrying with them the aroma of motor oil.

The man was halfway across the lot, his strides as rigid as his sinewy arms at his side. His military-straight posture tracked with his blue T-shirt with "Navy" in gold letters across his chest. He wore it tucked neatly into his cargo shorts. The first person I was to meet in Kansas City stared me down as if I were a threat to all he held dear.

I smiled, assuring him I came in peace. "Hi there. I'm—"

"Jessica Becker?"

I reared back. "Uh, yes?"

"Ron Torres, property manager. Seymour asked me to meet you. He got called away to something else." Ron stopped on the opposite side of the driveway. His salt-and-pepper eyebrows, more pepper than salt, accentuated the undertones of his golden-oak complexion.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't realize there was a property manager. You live next door?"

"Seymour likes to have a trusted eye on his properties at all times." He settled his hands on his hips and looked me over, then Hank. The below-market rent Seymour charged probably did warrant the extra vigilance.

"Nice to meet you, Ron. Please, call me Jess."

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"You can come to me if you have any issues. I also take care of the mowing." The cut lines in the grass of the lot between our houses were almost as perfect as his undercut hairstyle. "Just you, right?" he asked.

"Just me, and my dreams."

His expression remained unchanged. I took it as a sign of mild amusement.

At the far end of the lot, in the shade of the mature trees, lazed a regulation-size soccer goal. The net hung like loose skin from the crossbar. I nodded toward it. "Neighborhood kids play in this lot?"

"My granddaughter. She lives with me."

He had a granddaughter. There was even more potential he had a softer side socked away. "How old is she?" I asked.

"Fourteen. Started high school this week." He craned his neck to peer over my shoulder at the haul in Hank's bed. "Got somebody to help you unload?"

Clearly we were moving on to other topics. I followed his lead. "I don't have much stuff. I can probably get it."

"I can help once we're done with the walk-through."

The softer side emerged. I nodded. "That would be nice."

"Ready to see the place?" He started for the front door before I could answer.

Perfunctory and efficient. Two of Dad's favorite things.

Two short steps led up to the porch. The treads needed a coat or two of paint.

"Are you a Navy man?" I asked, clunking up to the porch behind him.

"I am. My daughter's in the service now. Kyla's mom. She's on the *Roosevelt*, underway in the Mediterranean."

"Sounds exotic."

He pulled his keys from his pocket without a reply.

I tucked my hair behind my ear and waited for him to unlock the front door, which bore the same Dutch Boy blue as his house

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and a large, gold-trimmed oval of frosted glass. I folded my hands at my waist. In a matter of seconds, I would be standing in the house that had occupied my thoughts every minute of my extra shifts at the Red Rooster gas station.

The dead bolt clacked open under Ron's command. The hinges whined as he pushed open the door. He stood aside. "After you."

I held my breath, then stepped inside. The pictures from the rental listing burst into life. Hardwood floors throughout. Sunlight streaming through the bare windows, highlighting the brush marks on the khaki-colored plaster walls. From the front door, the entire length of the house was visible. The living room ended about ten paces from the door, the boundary marked on the right by a pass-through window into the kitchen and on the left by a knockout bay window. The square table would fit perfectly in the nook.

I crossed the living room, gathering whiffs of fresh paint. "This is nice," I said.

The bay window overlooked the lot and the soccer goal at the end. I turned right, through the arched doorway framing the galley kitchen.

"Fridge is new," Ron said. "The back right burner of the stove doesn't work, but I can't find parts for it."

"I don't really cook anything more difficult than canned ravioli anyway." I opened every cabinet and drawer. They offered minimal storage space, but that was more than enough for me. I turned around and joined Ron in the hall.

He pointed at the door next to the kitchen entrance. "Basement. Runs under the back half of the house. Your laundry's up here, though, just across from the bedrooms there." He indicated a set of accordion doors next to the nook on the left.

After the basement door came the bathroom, the only one in the house. The pastel-pink tile and aqua-colored tub were straight off the set of *The Golden Girls*. But the toilet was new, all the grout was intact, and the tub faucet lacked calcified hard-

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water buildup. In that regard, it far surpassed the bathroom in Dad's house back in Woodfield.

Next came the smaller of the two bedrooms, barely large enough for a twin bed and a dresser. The only window faced east.

I stepped into the room and spun slowly around to see it from all angles.

"Previous renter had bunk beds for her kids in there," Ron said. "Bigger than it looks."

"Big enough for a desk, and that's all I need. I work from home. Data entry for Henson-Miden Law Firm. First job I've ever had where I didn't need to be on my feet all day." I stopped and looked at him. "Not sure why I felt you needed to know that, but there it is."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Good to know you're employed."

That I was. Employed, and gainfully so. Much more than Red Rooster or burger flipping at Shuckers ever offered. Yet more proof that Woodfield was not where I was meant to thrive.

He moved us on to the laundry closet. The accordion doors screeched on their tracks. Behind them hid two ancient Kenmores, the kind with clicky dials and metal buttons.

"They're old but still work," Ron said.

"I know the feeling," I quipped.

It drew the slightest uptick in his lips before he continued. "This used to be a closet, so you've lost some storage space."

Capping off the hallway was the door to the second bedroom. Though double the size of the first one and possessing two side-by-side windows with a view of the backyard, it was still only large enough for a queen-size bed, a dresser, a nightstand, and maybe a bookcase. I had only two of those things, but I vowed to someday have them all. And someday was bound to come soon enough.

Last on the tour, the basement. Ron led me down the stairs, the angle of which was not as sharp as I expected for the age of the house. They pivoted at a landing halfway down and finished against the east wall somewhere under the first bedroom.

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Ron reached the bottom and switched on the main light.

A single open room ran the length and width of the back half of the house. The spaces between the exposed floor joists overhead were stuffed with insulation, draped with wires, and partially filled by air ducts. At the opposite end was an insulated outside door flanked on each side by a window. Tucked under the upper flight of stairs were the HVAC system and water heater, along with a closet. The cinder-block walls were painted white to pull in as much light as possible, but the concrete floor remained its natural steely hue.

"Previous renter used it as a rec room for her kids," Ron said. "Even had a mini fridge and high-top table. She put down rugs to keep the floor warmer, though it stays pretty comfortable down here."

Instead of playthings, though, my imagination drew a twin bed against the wall. Dad's TV, his recliner. Some freestanding cabinets I might find on clearance at the home improvement store. If the landlord was up for me paying for the renovation, maybe I could convert the closet to a half bath with a toilet and a pedestal sink. It could be Dad's own space, private and cozy, with a separate door for all the coming and going he cared to do, maybe to ask Ron to have a beer. It could all be his. It could be amazing. After all I had squandered, all the years wasted waiting on someone else to get himself in gear so I could follow along, God had given me a chance to lead, to create more good in life than I ever thought possible. I wasn't about to screw it up.

My chin trembled. I covered it with my hand.

"How's everything look?" Ron asked.

I shook my head, took a steadying breath. "I think it's better than I could have asked for."

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3

WITH RON'S HELP, it didn't take long to get my furniture moved in and set up. The little square dining table indeed fit into the nook across from the kitchen as if that spot was its destiny. Off to the side of the bay window, within arm's length of the table, I set up my one-year-old, pink-striped rubber tree plants, Shania and Mariah, on their wire stands. It was the perfect spot for "the divas" to bask in the indirect sunlight. They had each grown to over a foot tall, and their new environment would surely keep them vivacious.

As I cleaned the road dust from Mariah's waxy leaves with a wet paper towel, Ron tromped into the house carrying the last box. "Got any more furniture coming?" he asked.

"Nope, that's it."

"Really?" He set the box on the table and looked around at the sparseness. The futon and television on its stand made the compact living room seem twice as large. "Did you come from a studio apartment or something?"

"Or something," I said, starting on Shania's bath.

He didn't dig into that answer. Instead, he told me about the "pretty good" thrift store in the same shopping center as the grocer. His allowance for my personal stuff to remain personal was

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a clear sign he'd do nicely as a neighbor. As was his quick exit thereafter to "let you get settled."

When the latch clicked behind him, I paused to soak in the moment. My first solo moment on my first day in my first house. *My.* That had a nice ring to it. In the hug of the bay window, I closed my eyes and gathered in as much air as my lungs could hold. A soft prayer wove into my exhale. "Thank you, God."

The rest of the afternoon blazed by with all the tiny to-dos that creating a nest entails. Clothes to be put away. DVDs to stack in the TV stand. Dishware to be organized. Shower curtain to be hung. Bath rug to be unfurled and placed just so.

A little before four o'clock, a Henson-Miden Law courier arrived with my tech equipment, along with an IT quick-start guide and the direct number of my HML boss, Paul. According to the note that human resources had included with the delivery, I was to log in for orientation at eight o'clock the next morning. The recruiter had told me during the offer call that they didn't typically start people on a Friday, but I had insisted I didn't want to wait around any longer than I had to.

I placed my new laptop and monitor on a folding table in the small bedroom, scooted a camping chair into place, and stood back to admire the small beginning of a big adventure.

Such a beautiful sight, that little setup. I was big time. In the city, with a real, respectable job, one with real benefits and a predictable income. I could support the Jess Becker of that moment and the Jess Becker a year from then, and still have enough left over for Dad. Me.

I chuckled. The sound bounced off the empty walls. "Who would've thought, Jess?"

Certainly not Mick, or any of the "friends" I had until our breakup. As soon as he turned his back on me, he ensured they all did too.

With the house in order, I roused up Hank for our next great first: city grocery shopping.

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Cost Cutter was five times bigger than anything near Woodfield, and far more opulent. Its sleek roofline was held aloft two stories from the ground by steel-framed glass. Large chrome letters spelled out its name between the two sets of sliding doors. Winging out from the grocer were nearly two dozen businesses. A gym, a clothes resale shop, two banks, a coffee shop, a dollar store, several fast-food joints, and the thrift store Ron endorsed. All within a mile of my house. Sweet Hank with his rusty wheel wells and oil cologne offered a perfect socioeconomic bookend to the Mercedes sedan I parked next to.

I picked my way through the lot on my way to the entrance. Ahead of me, a woman in a dinky tank top that could double as swimwear strolled with graceful confidence and a designer handbag slung over her forearm. Her ribs showed under her skin as she walked.

I turned my head to the right, not needing another reminder of how far from skeletal my sagging body had become.

In the distance, across the busy street on the south side of the shopping center, a sizable brick church crowned a hill. Its massive, snowy steeple jutted straight into the atmosphere. Ten copies of the church I attended back in Woodfield would have fit inside. No one there would know about my ex, my dirt, or the butterfly tattoo on my shoulder that had seemed like such a wise choice when I was twenty-four. Maybe that brick church on the hill was where I needed to be, able to choose whether I was seen or not.

Twenty minutes later, I returned to Hank with four plastic bags of generic-brand staples suspended from my hands and not a single hello exchanged with anyone who was not paid to greet the customers. Anonymity was refreshingly easy to come by in the city.

Hank and I rattled our way back to our little home on the narrow street. A stiffness crept into my joints in the most pleasant way. It wasn't from standing for hours ringing up bottles of sodas

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and packs of cigarettes for earth-splattered customers, to earn pennies that someday, maybe, Lord willing, would fund a way out. It was from completing the foundation upon which all that came next would be built.

Who would have thought it?

I pulled into my driveway with a grin and visions of what the next weeks would bring, the freedoms to be enjoyed, the paths to be carved. But when I started looping the sack handles around my wrists, a different kind of sensation took over. Someone was watching me.

I sat up straight, dragging the sacks and my purse across the seat. On the other end of the grassy lot, a teenage girl stood with one foot on a soccer ball and her gaze fixed my direction. Both her complexion and her studious stance hearkened to Ron's. She stayed put the whole time I pulled myself and my possessions from my truck and shut the door.

I waved with my least burdened hand. The gesture was met by absolute stillness.

"Definitely takes after her grandfather," I mumbled and headed to the porch.

The girl returned to her practice before I reached my front walk.

Such, then, would be our relationship—me waving from a distance and her stoically entertaining the notion about reciprocating. She was a teen, after all, and I was the sweaty, non-skeletal tenant next door. No need to push it further than that tenuous social balance.

So why did I come to a stop on the porch steps?

I sighed. We weren't strangers passing in the grocery store aisle. We lived one grassy lot apart. The whack of her foot against the ball reached me there on the porch. The refrain of her play would likely bleed through the windows too. I couldn't just gloss by that forever.

I gritted my teeth and set the sacks and my purse on the top

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step. Then I turned around and headed toward my next chance to be awkward.

The girl had her back to me, her ponytail of thick, dark hair swinging as she worked through a semicircle of balls she had arranged in front of the goal. After checking the alignment of one ball near the top of the arc, she backed up several paces, launched into a running start, and sailed it into the net with a force the placekickers at Woodfield R-1 High would have envied.

I whistled softly to myself and continued my trek through the grass.

The next ball. *Whack*. Sail. Net!

"Wow, you're pretty good at that," I called.

She jerked around to face me, her expression somewhere between shock and mortification. I would have had the same reaction at her age had any unknown adult dared to enter or be near my personal space.

I stopped several yards away, giving us both a buffer. "Wanted to introduce myself. I'm Jess Becker, your new neighbor. You must be Ron's granddaughter. Kyla, right?"

She crossed her arms and nodded.

"Your grandpa told me you were a soccer player."

She only nodded again, which was fair because I wasn't giving her much to work with.

I folded my hands and tapped my thumbs together, willing the action to somehow jar loose an engaging next line. "So," I said, "do you play for a team?"

Her voice was quiet. "Hoping to play for my school."

"Right. High school. You're a freshman?"

Another nod. She eyed the next ball a few feet away.

"Seems weird I know all this about you and you've never met me, doesn't it?" I chuckled. It sounded weird and forced, and like something I should never do again.

"Is high school as delightful as I remember it?" I asked. "And by delightful I mean the worst thing ever invented?"

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We progressed to a shrug.

"Math was always my worst subject," I said. "Or chemistry. PE wasn't all that great either. English was probably my favorite." Rambling was not helping my cause by any means, but to my utter shock, she tilted her head as if receiving every word.

After a brief pause, she nodded toward my driveway. "I like your truck."

"Thank you. That's Hank. He's a good truck."

Her eyebrows pushed together. "You named your truck?"

"Sure. In my family, it's tradition. I mean, I started the tradition, but still. I've named every vehicle I've ever had."

A grin played on her lips. "Nice."

A teenager thought something I had said was nice. That was my signal to quit while I was ahead. "It was great to meet you, Kyla. Thanks for letting me interrupt your practice. Hope it goes well."

She nodded a thanks and then, breakthrough of all breakthroughs, waved.

My first day in the city, in this new life I had secured, would end on a high note.

I headed back to my groceries, swishing my shoes against the grass the way I used to on my way to right field for my high school softball games.

Whack. The next soccer ball was on its way to the net. It had been a long, long time since I had challenged myself in any kind of athletic endeavor, or been anywhere close to Kyla's age. She seemed far more determined than I had been to make it as an athlete. The only thing I had been that fixated on as a freshman was learning from the older girls how to have the same kind of draw over our male peers as those women in the girlie calendars hanging in my dad's shop had over his crew. Because trying to fill a hole I was too young to name was my real favorite subject. Unfortunately, I was a good student.

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4

BY THE END of my orientation for HML on Friday morning, two things had become clear. One, the remote job was a blessed fit for someone with a preference for elastic waistbands and not ending the day smelling like gas station pizza. Two, I would be hard-pressed to find meaningful conversation with anyone at HML.

The day began with a virtual meeting with an HR trainer who led me through the employee handbook and benefits package with an efficient deftness. The only thing I starred on my yellow legal pad (because how appropriate) was the fact my benefits kicked in September 1. I bookmarked the link to the enrollment site she sent me over Slack.

Then came Paul, my supervisor, senior paralegal, and Jeff Goldblum lookalike who was nothing like his famous, goofy doppelgänger. He jumped right into business, forgoing any kind of warm-up breeze shooting. He rattled off what application to go to for my project assignments, which one to use to track my time for each case I worked on, and how to fill out each client's spreadsheet of data that the attorneys would use as an exhibit for demand letters and in mediation.

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"We work primarily with the PI team," he said, "but occasionally you might be asked to fill in for the business clients."

PI was personal injury. Exhibit meant attachment. Demand letters were what the attorney sent to the defense to prove the injured party deserved the requested funds. I already felt like a legal insider.

"We'll have weekly calls to go over your assignments for the week," he told me. "Outside of that, you can use Slack to chat me any questions."

Lunch break rolled around, and I spent it standing in the nook with a peanut butter sandwich and my newsfeed. My lack of posting much of anything in the two years since Mick said I was no longer "what he needed" meant that the algorithm fed me far more perimenopausal weight-loss trends and 1990s entertainment trivia than was healthy. But in the midst of the suggested content was an update from someone I actually knew. Jill Norman had been a mutual friend of mine and Mick's. Her post contained a handful of pictures from someone's birthday party at Shuckers. Mick was in three of the pictures, with his latest woman hanging on him in all of them. She was younger than me, skinnier, with hair that stayed where she styled it. In the last picture, her left hand was draped over his shoulder. A gold ring glinted on her finger.

Seven years. That was how long I had lived with Mick. Had dated him for a decade prior to that. Not once had we talked about rings or anything with gravity other than who was paying which bill and where the party would be after closing time on Saturday.

I exited out of my feed, but the smiling faces and frozen laughs clung. It had been my world for so long. I still knew all the regulars' orders by heart. I could still predict with some accuracy how much each would drop on a Friday night at Shuckers, and which of them would spend far more on drinks than they should with kids at home. I knew which ones were most likely to break out in

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song and which were most likely to attempt to hustle a newcomer at darts. I could hear every picture in that post.

It's a weird feeling knowing a people and place well enough to name every color in every memory but wishing those years had never been part of your existence. It was a feeling no one else in my life understood.

I tossed the mostly eaten sandwich on the table and switched to something more productive: calling Dad.

The rat-a-tat-tat of an impact wrench competed with his voice. "Hello?"

"Hey there. How's your day?"

"Fine."

"Not 'better than average'?" It was his signature reply to any customer who asked him how he was.

"I said I was fine." The background noise quieted, an indication he had moved into his office at the back of the shop.

I stepped over to the divas on their stands. Their pink stripes were extra bright on the clear day. I stroked Shania's large top leaf, soothing myself with the dichotomy of smooth top and fuzzy bottom. "Don't know if you checked the deep freeze," I said, "but I left some burger patties and chicken tenders in there."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I wanted to."

He harrumphed. "I can take care of myself. Who do you think did all that cookin' and cleanin' when you were growin' up?"

His memory and mine of those years after Mom died when I was eleven had always been drastically different. Making sure bologna was in the fridge did not equate to cooking any more than stocking the toilet paper counted as cleaning. I stopped trying to fill the gaps by the time my first boyfriend came along my sophomore year. Dad hadn't noticed.

I let go of the leaf. "Yes, you can cook for yourself. I was only trying to save you a trip to the store, is all."

Instead of words, the creak of an office chair seeped through

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the speaker. It wasn't hard to picture him leaning back, free arm crossed defiantly over his rounded belly.

"Busy at the shop today?" I asked.

"Every minute. Got someone coming in now, looks like. Good thing I'm here today. Two of my regulars called about their repairs going sideways and they need to bring in their vehicles again. I swear these boys don't have a lick of sense sometimes."

He said that a lot, his dogged campaign to prove the shop couldn't survive without him. He would never retire, never sell, never admit he grew weaker each year. The "boys," who were men with families and mortgages of their own, could at least lower themselves onto a creeper to inspect the underside of a Ford.

"Sounds like a full day," I said.

"Mmm," he replied.

The end of my lunch break ticked closer. He would hole up in his office only so long too. "Just wanted to check in with you, Dad, and let you know my first day on the job is going well. I've got a nice little setup in my spare bedroom. They gave me my own laptop. Did you know I can write off a portion of my internet and utilities since I work at home?"

"Weird job you got there," he said.

"Maybe, but it pays nearly twice as much as I was making. Plus benefits and a retirement plan."

Silence. He was stubborn in his refusal to show any interest, despite the fact my job was better than ninety-five percent of all jobs in Woodfield. And I had learned only an hour prior that part of the benefits package was a tuition reimbursement clause. HML would pay for me to earn my paralegal certification. That was the cherry on the sundae for me. For him, it would be noise.

I tapped the side of my thigh. "My house is comfortable. Got two bedrooms now, and a nice bay window." My better judgment told me to stop there, but I had so little practice listening to it. "The basement has a ton of potential. It's big enough to be a studio with a half bath. Has its own entrance too."

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He saw right through me. "I'm not moving to Kansas City, Jess."

"Never say never," I said.

"I can and I did. I'm not moving!" He used a couple more colorful words in those statements. Until I stopped using profanity, I had never noticed how much he relied on it.

I bit my lip. Sinking people often reject the lifeline right in front of them. For so many years, I had done the same thing. Then all my poor judgments collided, leaving me to salvage what clothes and personal effects I could from the trailer's front lawn in the middle of a downpour. Tillie Watts later found me soaked and sobbing in my truck in the gravel lot of her church. Why I ended up there, I never put together. But it happened to be choir practice night, and she had stopped on her way inside to knock on my window. She stood in the torrent, under the shield of her umbrella, and asked with a serenity I envied if I wanted shelter from every storm. She'd passed away two weeks before I was baptized.

Her offer was the one I was determined to give to Dad—a shelter from every storm.

I switched the phone to my other ear and moved us on to neutral topics. I asked him what he was working on. He told me about the Johnston boy's stock car engine, new tires for Mrs. Woolworth, an alternator replacement for the Munsuns' farm truck. All the things he thought proved that his life was full and worthy right where he was.

When at last we said our goodbyes, I stood in the quiet with my fingertips resting on the table. The empty table, in a house that suddenly seemed bigger than necessary.

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