

# 1

The cardboard box sat open on Elise Walker's lumpy twin bed, a note from her mother tucked inside. Three pens, half a dozen No. 2 pencils, two spiral notebooks and a pale blue binder. Under all that an old, worn red scarf. The tag was still on the frayed end. Goodwill. \$2.99.

She picked up the note and read it again.

Dear Elise,

You're only eighteen, and I know you didn't want to go. But it's for the best. Randy's still mad you left. He tells everyone who'll listen. I think he would've hurt you if you'd stayed. Or worse. He's crazy, that boy. You're allowed to move on, baby. Even for a little while.

Your Bloomington school starts later this week. The least I could do is get you a few supplies and something to keep you warm. In case it snows. Plus, the scarf suits you.

Fiery red.

Don't worry about being at a new place.

*You're gonna do great, baby. It's a good high school. Your aunt told me all about it. Nice part of town. Friendly kids. And they have an art club. Maybe you can join. Anyway, it's just a semester. You can come home this summer.*

*I miss you, Elise. Call you soon.*

*Love,  
Mom*

Elise ran her thumb over the words, her mother's writing. Why had she treated her mom so badly? Her mother wasn't exceptionally beautiful or daring or smart. She had never been married. Elise hadn't ever met the man who was her father. There had been no sign of him since Elise was born.

Still, her mama loved Jesus and she loved Elise. Loved her enough to work two jobs to pay the bills. The truth was, Elise felt treasured. Always.

*You're the best thing that ever happened to me, baby. The best thing that ever happened.* Elise could hear her mom's voice, hear the love in the melody of her words.

Even now. After all the ways Elise had come against her. A sigh slipped through her lips.

Everything Elise had, her mother had scraped and saved and worked to pay for. So that when Hattie Walker came home each night at six o'clock between jobs she was exhausted. She had to be.

All for Elise.

The two of them had never been apart. Mostly because Elise hadn't had the chance to leave. In fact, last summer Elise would've done anything to get out of Leesville, Louisiana. Because for all the good Elise could say about her mother, the woman was old-fashioned and out of touch. She didn't understand real life.

Elise moved the cardboard box to the shaggy carpet and flopped down on the bed. Dinner would be ready soon, but she still had a few minutes. A sigh slipped from her lungs and she looked around. The walls were closing in. A million tiny pink roses wallpapered over every inch. Even worse were the heavy green velvet drapes that covered the only window.

As if light were forbidden here. The way it was from Elise's heart.

A week ago, on her first day in this house, Elise had dragged a clothes hamper to the window to hold back one side of the curtains. She used the desk chair for the other side. When she saw what Elise had done, her aunt had given the setup a wary look. Under her breath she whispered, "This too shall pass."

Which Elise assumed pretty much summed up how her aunt felt about having her here for the semester. Elise didn't care. She felt the same way. She was a senior. She would be out of here soon.

*It's going to be a long semester.* Elise relaxed into the bed. She didn't blame her aunt Carol and uncle Ken for not quite embracing the situation. Elise barely knew

them, and still they were nice enough to take her in. Their two daughters—Elise’s cousins—had finished college. Successful. Married. Never got in trouble.

They were nothing like Elise.

She looked out the window. Streaks of pink and blue colored the sky. What about her? What was she doing here in Bloomington, Indiana? A million miles from Leesville? This morning she’d overheard her uncle Ken talking low in the kitchen.

“Exactly how wild was she, Carol?” He was a serious man, tall and thin. Wire glasses and the same gray suit every day. He sounded like he couldn’t decide if he was angry or worried. “She can get in trouble *here* just like back home.”

“She won’t get in trouble.” Her aunt hadn’t sounded quite sure. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Their words had stayed with her all day. Elise stared at the ceiling. She wasn’t wild. Not really. No matter how everyone else saw her, that wasn’t it. Until a year ago she’d been one of the good girls. Did her homework, stayed home Saturday night. Church on Sunday morning in the spot right next to her mama.

But two things happened midway through her junior year. Things that had changed her forever.

First, she became absolutely sure about what she wanted to do when she was older. The minute she graduated she would move to Manhattan and start classes at New York University. And she would study the only thing that stirred her soul. The one thing she wanted to spend her life doing.

Painting.

It wasn't that Elise wanted to be an artist when she grew up. She *was* an artist, born that way. She was most alive poised in front of an easel, brush in her hand. Bringing a scene to life, from her heart straight to the canvas.

Elise didn't see art as a pastime. It was her existence. Her future. Everything that mattered. And the night she figured that out, she had no choice but to tell her mother.

Midway through a dinner of grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, her heart missing beats, Elise had pierced the tired silence. "So, Mama . . . I know what I want to do when I'm out of school." Her voice sounded happy, upbeat. This moment would be a time of celebration.

Her mother narrowed her weary eyes. She was between shifts cleaning floors at the hospital and working as a 911 operator for the local police department. "You're a little young." She sipped at a spoonful of soup. Her eyes looked nervous. "You know . . . to have all the answers."

"I thought I knew a long time ago what I wanted to be." She had watched for her mother's reaction. "But now I'm sure."

"Okay." Her mother's smile seemed uncertain. "What is it? You wanna be a doctor or a lawyer, baby? A school-teacher?" She stared at her still full bowl, moving her spoon through it. Anxious. A quiet, defeated laugh came from her. "Please tell me you don't want to clean hospital rooms."

“No, Mama.” Elise looked at her mom for a long minute. She shook her head. “I don’t want to clean anything.” Her resolve grew. “I’m an artist. I want to paint.” Fear tried to stop her, but she kept going. “After school, I’m moving to New York to study. Gonna enroll at NYU.” She paused. “I’m good, Mama. I can make a living at it one day.”

Her mother lifted her eyes and looked straight at Elise. “An artist?” The tips of her fingers began to tremble. “Baby.” She shook her head. “You don’t get paid to paint pictures.” She didn’t wait for a response. “You’re smart. You can do anything you want. Be anything.”

“I know. You always told me that.” Her mom’s disappointment ran through Elise’s veins like a bad drug. “Which is why I want to be an artist.”

Her mom got up and paced to the kitchen stove. When she turned and looked at Elise, her eyes filled with tears. “Baby, I can’t afford New York. You know that.” She hesitated. “We’re simple folk. Any college would be a stretch. But NYU?”

“I can get scholarships, Mama.” Panic choked off Elise’s voice. “This is my dream.”

Her mom was quiet for a minute. Then her expression gradually grew hard. “Tell you what, baby. Let’s just settle this right now.” She crossed her arms and shook her head. “You will not be an artist. Period.”

“Mama!”

“No.” Her lips closed tight together. “You will go to community college and be a teacher. Or a doctor. Some-

thing respectable.” A final shake of her head, and her mama’s eyes were cold as ice. “But you will not be an artist. Is that understood?”

And in that moment Elise felt something inside her turn to steel. No matter what her mother said, Elise would go to New York University. She would get the training she needed and she’d open her own studio. Somewhere near Manhattan’s action and art scene. She’d wait tables until she could make a living selling her work. Maybe rent a flat in Chelsea, where other artists lived.

Whatever happened next in her life, Elise made herself a promise that day. She wasn’t going to talk to her mother about it. No more. She would go after her dream by herself. From that moment on.

Every day her resolve grew, and with it a distance between her mom and her. Something the two of them had never known before. Elise stopped going to church, and less laughter marked their dinners. Her mother definitely noticed. She would set her fork down beside her plate and look at Elise. Just look at her.

“How was your day?” she would ask. Same question every night.

“Good.” Elise would keep eating.

Images from the past dissolved and Elise stared at a patch of tiny roses on the wall of her new bedroom. She could’ve been nicer to her mama, should’ve tried harder. But her mother had no idea how serious Elise was about moving to New York. She was just a lonely single woman who talked often about how her best years were behind

her. Her mama didn't seem to fathom Elise actually moving to the East Coast. Even still, Elise figured things with her mom would work themselves out eventually.

But then the second thing happened.

Elise stood and walked to the window. The sky was mostly dark now. Nighttime settling in.

"Elise, time for dinner!" Her aunt's voice carried through the small house. "Big day tomorrow!"

Yes. Elise blew at a wisp of her dark hair. Big day for sure. She was going to get straight A's here in Bloomington. No friends or guys. Not if she wanted to be serious about NYU. And she'd never been more serious about anything.

Elise turned toward the door. "Be right there." Then she looked out the window again and lifted her eyes to the sky. Things got worse with her mother after that. When the second thing happened her junior year.

She met Randy Collins.

He was the same age, a linebacker on the football team with a reputation as bad off the field as on it. Tall with tanned skin, a Hollywood face, and brown eyes that challenged everything she'd been raised to believe.

Elise knew who he was, of course, but one Friday night, the two of them wound up at the same party. Randy had a beer in his hand when he walked up to her. "Hey, pretty girl." He moved so close she could smell his breath. His lips curved into a smile, his words slurred. "Where you been all my life?"

The pickup line didn't feel like one coming from

him. She lowered her chin. Then she did something that went against everything she'd known about herself until that moment. She played along.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." He pressed into her.

The new Elise was taking shape by the second. She didn't break eye contact. "Why . . . waiting for tonight of course." She batted her eyelashes and grinned at him. And as she did she felt something inside her shift. She was flirting, and talking close to a boy at a party. And a thought occurred to her.

She'd never felt this good before.

With Randy Collins so near she didn't need a drink. His presence was intoxicating enough.

"Elise!" Her aunt was coming for her.

She pulled away from the window and glanced at the mirror on the dresser. Randy used to say she looked like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. A wisp of a girl all long brown hair and big blue eyes. And he was the Beast. That's what he said.

A few blinks and Elise shook her head. "You don't look like Belle," she whispered to herself. "You look ordinary."

"Elise." Her aunt sounded beyond frustrated. "Dinner's getting cold! Please!"

"Coming." She moved away from the mirror and hurried out the door to the dining room. She wasn't Belle and she didn't believe in fairy tales. She was a bad girl, about to make good with her life.

Period.

Her aunt Carol couldn't cook, but at least she tried. Tonight was meat loaf, with ketchup and something crispy. Onions maybe. Elise wasn't sure. The green beans were cold, but that was her fault, for being late to dinner.

Uncle Ken spent most of the meal talking about a client. Someone loud and pushy. Ken wasn't sure he could handle the guy another day.

"I'm telling you, Carol, if he bursts through my door one more time with that tone, I think I'll . . . I'll tell him to leave." He shoved a forkful of beans into his mouth. One still poked out from his lips as he waved his free hand in circles. "I mean it. I don't need that kind of attitude in my office."

He caught the spare bean and chomped it. Then he poured himself a second glass of wine. Seemed the more Ken drank, the angrier he got. For the most part Aunt Carol nodded and sipped her own glass. These two drank a bottle a night. Ken kept talking, something about his boss. Carol seemed to do her best to look sympathetic. "Yes, dear," she would say every minute or so. Another sip of wine. "I understand, dear."

Elise focused on her meat loaf.

She didn't like being around so much drinking. Not now that she was away from Randy, anyway. Her mother never drank. "It's fine for some people," she would say. "But not for me." Elise understood. When she was in high school, her mama's daddy—Elise's only grandpa—died coming home from a bar. Crashed his pickup into a tree.

Anyway, the drinking made Elise uneasy. Or maybe just sad. Because the life her aunt and uncle lived felt meaningless. Empty. The walls were closing in down here, too.

When dinner was over, she helped Carol with the dishes. She'd agreed to this when she'd moved in. Take on her part of the chores. Elise didn't mind. It was the least she could do. Clearly having her stay here wasn't a part of her aunt and uncle's life plan.

Conversation with Carol wasn't easy. Not from the day Elise walked through the front door. Like her aunt wasn't sure what to make of Elise. Now though she seemed thoughtful. "Your mother must've been pretty upset to send you here." Carol was scrubbing the meat loaf pan.

Elise waited, towel ready. "I needed to leave." They'd never really talked about it before. The details about why Elise was here. Her mother had simply called her big sister over Christmas break and a week later Elise had stepped off a plane in Indiana.

Carol seemed to think about that for a minute. "She was too strict. I know my sister."

Her aunt's words were a little mumbled, directed at the soapy sink water and the meat loaf pan. Elise stared at her. "Ma'am?"

"Your mother." Carol turned to Elise. Something in her stuffy expression said she had all the answers. "She was too hard on you." A shake of her head, but she didn't look away. "All that God stuff, going to church, reading

the Bible. You're young." She sighed and turned to the sink again. "Kids need freedom."

"Excuse me." Elise felt a ripple of anger work its way through her. "It's my fault I'm here." She kept her tone in check. "My mama had nothing to do with it."

Aunt Carol looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "I'm just saying." She rinsed the pan and handed it to Elise. "Anyone would have a hard time living with her. People can't measure up to the Bible. No one's that perfect. Including your mother." A small burp sounded from her lips, but her fingers got there too late to cover it up. She didn't seem to care. "How do you think you came into the world?"

That was it. Elise's heart was pounding now. How dare her aunt criticize her mama? She clenched her teeth so she wouldn't say something she'd regret. Then she dried the pan and set it on the counter. "Aunt Carol." She hesitated, choosing her words. "Please . . . don't say another word about my mama. You don't know her."

"Well." Her aunt waved a soapy hand in the air and shot Elise a disgusted look. "I wouldn't have expected you to defend her. Of all people."

Elise didn't respond to that. Ten silent minutes later and she was back in her room. Her heart was still racing, her rage in full gear. Yes, she had been a terrible daughter this past year. Her sweet mother was no match for her and the things she'd done. And no, they weren't close like they used to be.

But still, Aunt Carol had no right to talk about her

that way. Elise wanted to scream at her. None of this was her mama's fault, not at all. She glanced at the rose-papered walls. They were closing in again.

Elise closed her eyes for a few seconds. Never mind that her aunt and uncle were doing her a favor. The semester couldn't get over fast enough.

She moved to a small suitcase in the corner of the room and took a sketchbook from inside. The only way to change her mood now was to draw. She grabbed a pencil and sat on the chair near the window.

Like it had a heart of its own, her pencil began to fly across the page. This drawing wouldn't be anything original or new. She'd sketched the scene a hundred times before.

The New York City skyline.

She couldn't wait to be there, breathing in the city air, surrounded by the sounds and feels of Manhattan. And now only one thing stood between her and a move to the city. A semester in Bloomington, Indiana, at a school she'd never heard of before.

Clear Creek High.