

TO KEEP LITTLE SECRETS, THEY TELL BIG LIES

# Little Secrets

CHAPTER 1-4 PREVIEW

A NOVEL

ANNA SNOEKSTRA

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# Prologue

By the time the first wisps of smoke rose into the night, the arsonist had made their escape. The streets were empty. A dull orange glow emanated from the courthouse, not yet bright enough to challenge the moon or the neon beer signs of the tavern across the road.

The smoke thickened quickly. Angry, dense clouds were rising in rolls, and yet when a car drove past, its only response was to speed up.

Soon, orange flames grew from the roof, replacing the smoke. The fire was so dazzling now that a contracted pupil could no longer distinguish between the dark gray and the black of the sky. People emerged in time to witness the windows exploding, one after another in a series of dry pops. The fire extended its arms out of each window, waving crazily at the gathering crowd.

Sirens began, but no one could hear them. The sound of the fire overtook everything, its low, light roar like the warning sound made at the back of a cat's throat. Two girls appeared from the tavern, late to the party. One ran toward the flames,

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asking if anyone was inside, if anyone had seen anything. The other stood still, shoulders fixed, her hand over her mouth.

When the firemen pulled up, the bright street looked like daytime. The crowd had stepped back, the ones who had been closest damp with sweat. Everyone's eyes were wet. Perhaps from the ashes in the air, or perhaps because by now the news had circulated.

Yes, there was someone inside.

# PART 1

'Tis a lesson you should heed:

Try, try, try again.

If at first you don't succeed,

Try, try, try again.

—Proverb

# 1

Laura hurried to keep up with Scott and Sophie, her school-bag thumping against her back.

“Wait for me!” she yelled, but they never did.

She had hesitated at the memorial outside the burned-out courthouse. A big picture of Ben was surrounded by lots of flowers and toys. The flowers were all brown and dried up, but there was a little plush cat that would have fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. Ben didn’t need it; he was dead. But when she’d gone to take it, she’d looked up at the photo of him. His accusing brown eyes looked straight into hers. So she’d left the toy there, and the twins hadn’t waited and she’d had to run as fast as she could to make sure they didn’t leave her behind.

The sun bounced off the twins’ blond hair, making Laura squint. They were sword fighting with sticks now. Galloping and fencing up the street, screaming “En garde!” at regular intervals. They wore the same white-and-green school uniform as Laura, except her shirt was no longer quite white. It was a pale alabaster from being washed a few hundred times

at least. It had belonged to Sophie once, and to their older sister, Rose, before her, as had her shorts.

Despite her every possession being a hand-me-down, Laura was unique. She knew that she was the cutest child in her kindergarten class. Her fringe was cut blunt, accentuating her large dark-lashed eyes. Her nose was a button, her mouth a little pink tulip. She lived for coos and pats on the head.

“Hurry up, Laura!” Scott yelled.

“My legs aren’t as big as yours!” she yelled back, her little black school shoes clip-clopping on the pavement as she hurried.

Then she saw it.

A bee.

She slid to a halt. It was the shape of a jelly bean, with mean-looking yellow and black stripes. The bee buzzed in front of her, blocking her path as it hovered near a bush of pungent purple flowers. Laura was overwhelmed by the urge to see what it felt like. Squishy, she was fairly sure. She wanted to pinch it between her thumb and forefinger to see if it would pop. Laura had never been stung by a bee but Casey at school had once and he had cried in front of everyone. It must hurt a lot.

Very slowly, she inched around it, walking like a crab on the very edge of the pavement until there were a good two meters between the bee and her.

When she turned, the street was empty. Sophie and Scott had turned one of the corners, out of Laura’s sight. If she really thought about it, she would probably know which one, but she couldn’t think. The suburban street seemed to be growing bigger and bigger and Laura felt like she was shrinking smaller and smaller. A sob rose slowly and heavily in her throat. She wanted to cry out for her mum.

“En garde!”

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Laura heard it loud and clear from her left. She ran, as fast as she could toward the sound.

Sophie and Scott changed into T-shirts then continued their sword fight in the backyard. Laura wasn't invited. They didn't like to play "baby games," even though Laura told them that now she was at school she was officially not a baby. She sat up at the kitchen bench, listening to the screams and laughter from outside and staring down at the three plates of crackers that Rose had left for their afternoon tea.

Laura could hear Scott yell so loud it came through the glass. "You're dead!"

She watched as Sophie feigned a dramatic and violent death. It was a stupid game; she wouldn't have wanted to play anyway. While they were distracted, Laura quickly reached over, took two crackers from each of their plates and stuffed them in her mouth.

She chewed happily, swinging her legs and kicking the bench. The house filled with the banging sound. She knew she was being naughty. If her mum was at home she'd be in big trouble. But she kept kicking, trying to leave some little brown scuffs to blame on either Sophie or Scott. She hadn't decided yet.

Rose's bedroom door opened and Laura stopped kicking. Her older sister stamped down the corridor. Some days Rose would want to braid Laura's hair, or put makeup on her and tell her how pretty she was. *Just like a little doll*, she would say. Laura hoped it was one of those days but the angry stomps of Rose's feet told her it wasn't.

"How was school?" Rose pulled open the fridge door and put her head inside, as if she was trying to absorb all the cold.

"It was good. Nina said she could climb the big tree but she couldn't and she fell out and broke her bum."



Rose stuck her head out and looked at Laura, a can of Coke in her hand. Her lips were tugging up as if she was going to laugh.

“Really?”

“Yep!” Laura began to giggle, and then Rose laughed too. Laura liked it when she made Rose laugh. Rose was the prettiest girl Laura knew, even when she frowned, which was most of the time. When she laughed she looked like a princess.

“Poor kid,” Rose said. She stopped laughing and rested the Coke against her forehead.

Laura didn’t say anything. Nina hadn’t really fallen out of the tree. Actually, she had made it the whole way to the top and then bragged about it all afternoon.

“What was that banging noise before?”

“Dunno. Can we braid my hair, Posey?”

“You know I don’t like it when you call me that.”

“Sowwy,” she said. Sometimes when she pretended to still be a baby, Rose would like her more, but this time Rose didn’t even look at her. Instead, Rose cracked open the can and took a swig. Laura looked at the pictures on Rose’s arm. They went all the way from her elbow to her shoulder and looked like pen, but were there forever. Laura thought they were beautiful. Rose looked up at the clock and groaned.

“I’m going to be late. Fuck.” Rose slammed the can on the bench, and little specks of brown liquid came out.

Laura gasped. She didn’t know what that word meant exactly, but she knew it was one of the worst ones.

“I’m telling!”

Rose didn’t even care; she just walked right out of the kitchen and back to her room to get ready. She was definitely not going to braid Laura’s hair.

Laura jumped down from her stool. “I’m running away. You can’t stop me!”

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She ran to the front door and opened it and slammed it shut. Then she very quietly tiptoed away, so Rose would think she had left.

Laura decided to hide under her bed. She wriggled down on the floor and pulled the box of her winter clothes in front of her. If she stayed there for long enough, someone would notice she was gone. They would look for her but they wouldn't find her. Hiding was the one good thing about being small.

After a while, she started to get bored. It smelled funny under there, like the sports socks she wore all week long for her PE classes. She pulled herself back out. She was sick of this game now. As she sat cross-legged in the middle of her room, deciding whether it was the stuffed turtle's or the fluffy dog's turn to be played with, she noticed a shadow pass her window. Someone was coming to the front door of the house. Maybe her mum was home early!

She scampered to the entrance hall and opened the door but there was no one there at all. A wave of disappointment washed over her. Then she looked down. Someone had left her a present! She knelt down to look at it, wondering if it was a gift from Ben's ghost. To say thank you for not taking his little cat.

## 2

The denim shorts and tank Rose wore to work were crumpled in the corner of her bedroom. They were in need of a wash but she hadn't bothered today. Tugging the wrinkled clothes on, she could smell the sweat and beer caught in the fabric. By the end of her shift she'd reek.

Rose slipped her phone into her back pocket. Her fingers itched with its absence. All day, she had refreshed her email again and again and again. It was difficult to be patient.

She took her shoes out from under the bed. They were new, after the soles of her old ones had split from the canvas. They had been held together by threads and then she'd tripped on a beer keg and they'd ripped open like a mouth, her foot left exposed in the middle like a tongue. These new ones were cheap white sandshoes that already looked dirty. They had rubbed her heels raw last night. She winced a little as she pulled them on. Hopefully soon the material would soften, or her feet would harden.

Rose pulled her hair into a ponytail as she walked down the hall, her wrists flicking expertly. At first she didn't notice Laura, who was sitting on the floor, her back to Rose. It

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wasn't like her to be quiet. The only time she ever was was when she was hiding under her bed.

She knew she'd be late, but still Rose stopped. Laura looked so tiny when she was quiet. Her shoulders were narrow as she hunched forward over her crossed legs. Moving closer, Rose realized she was talking very, very softly in a strange high-pitched voice.

"No, I want chocolate, please. Thank you. Yum, yum, yum."

"What are you doing?"

Laura looked up at her. "None of your beeswax!"

Rose squatted down next to Laura to see what was in her hands. It was an old-fashioned doll, with a porcelain face and hands and a cloth body. It was nothing like any of Laura's other toys. Weirdly, she noticed that it looked just like Laura, big brown eyes, brown hair in a bob, cut sharply at its jaw.

"Why'd you cut its hair? You've ruined it," she said.

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"Did not!"

"You did. You cut its hair so it would look like yours."

"I didn't! The person who gave it to me did it. They left it outside the front door. It's a present for me."

Rose touched the soft skin under Laura's chin so that she would look up.

"Are you fibbing? I won't be mad."

Laura held the doll in front of her and put on the high-pitched voice again. "Posey's just jealous. You're all mine!"

A strange feeling crept inside Rose then, a sense of something not being right. She considered taking the doll away, but Laura looked so content playing with her tiny twin. She was being stupid, she decided; of course someone didn't leave it for Laura. She must have borrowed it from another girl at school.

Leaving Laura to play, Rose left the house. She pulled the flywire screen door shut behind her and poked her finger through the broken netting to snip the lock closed. The thing was pointless. She remembered when she and her mother had installed it, years ago now, for security. These days it wouldn't have a hope of keeping intruders out; it would barely even protect them against blowflies.

The door was just like everything else in her life, in this town. After the car factory shut down, Colmstock had quickly lost its sense of purpose. Once, it had been pleasant. The largest town in the area and right off the Melton Highway, it was considered a nice place to stop off for a night on your way to the city. Small enough to have a strong community, but big enough that you could walk down the street without knowing every person you passed.

These days everything in Colmstock was broken and ugly. People weren't so friendly anymore. Too many residents had swapped a social drink or two for a meth habit. Crime rates were up, employment was down and yet the population stayed the same. It was as though everyone felt a sense of loyalty to the place. Well, Rose certainly didn't. She was getting out of here. Even the idea of it made her smile. The idea that this wouldn't be where she lived anymore, that she could have a whole different life. Realizing that her pace was slowing, she forced herself to stop dreaming. Her new life would start soon, but right now she was late for work.

Rose headed for Union Street, waving a hand over her face to keep away the flies. Even though the sun was up, she didn't feel safe walking alone. There was a much quicker route, but it meant going past the fossickers. She wouldn't do that no matter what time of day it was, so she had to circle around the long way. Slipping her phone out of her pocket, she refreshed her email again. Nothing. Her heart sank. They'd said they

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would get back to her today. She couldn't bear to wait any longer. She had never been so ready for anything.

Since she was a kid, she'd always wanted to be a journalist. There had been a lot of setbacks, the local paper *The Colmstock Echo* closing being the worst one. Then she'd got an email saying she had been long-listed for a cadetship at the *Sage Review*, a national paper. A week later she was told she had been short-listed. Still, she hadn't let herself get too excited. It was just too good, too amazing to happen to her. Then just eight days ago she was down to the final two. It was just her and one other hopeful person out there refreshing their emails today.

Her friend Mia was certain she would get it. Rose had laughed and made some joke about whether she'd seen it in her crystal ball, but really, she had believed her. In her gut, Rose knew she was going to get the cadetship, for the simple fact that no one could want it as much as she did. It just wasn't possible.

She hurried past the lake, which was surrounded by dry knee-high grass, home to snakes and mosquitoes. It reeked of stagnant water. Next to it, the bare frame of a swing set stood, taken over by an insistent flowering weed. Someone had cut down the swings a few years back, leaving the skeleton of the frame. She wondered if the swings had been rehung in the backyard of one of the nearby houses or if they had been destroyed just for the entertainment of a few kids.

Rose turned away and picked up her pace, the rubber soles of her new shoes slapping against the sticky bitumen, trying not to remember how, once upon a time, when the water was still blue, she'd gone for picnics by that lake with her mother. Her mother, who had sat mute next to her new husband Rob James when he'd told Rose it was time for her to move out. It was okay, since the cadetship was in the city and board was part of the deal, but still, it had hurt.

She crossed over toward Union Street, careful to hop over the cane toad that was squished into the road. Here, people would swerve onto the wrong side in order to squash one. They'd stay there, flat as pancakes, covered in ants, until they turned stiff and hard like dry leather in the baking sun.

The main street of Colmstock was three blocks long. There was only one set of traffic lights and, farther up, a pedestrian crossing in front of the squat redbrick church. Not far from where she stood was a pub. She could see the dog racing on screens through one of its grimy windows, which were often splattered with blood from bar fights by the time it closed. There was the Chinese takeaway joint with its loud red lit-up sign, nestled between the Indian restaurant and the antiques store, which had both closed years ago.

Farther down was the primary school and the Colmstock council building. From where Rose stood, waiting for the lights to change so she could cross the street, she could almost see the burned-out courthouse. It stood between the library, which had escaped the blaze, and the grocery store, which hadn't. In front of the steps to the courthouse was the memorial to the kid who had died there, Ben Riley. The picture of him was fading, bleached by the constant sun. The building was cordoned off with plastic tape. Barricades should have been put up, but it hadn't happened yet.

Rose stared at the charred remains. Now that all the files inside the courthouse were ashes and the computers were melted blocks of plastic and wire, did that mean the scheduled trials wouldn't go ahead? Did it mean that people who would have been criminals no longer were? Would the law be put on hold until they rebuilt the place? Even from here, she could smell it. The burned wood, bricks and plastic frying in the sun. It had been three weeks and the smell hadn't

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gone away. Maybe that was just how Colmstock would smell from now on.

Her pocket buzzed. Forcing herself to keep her hand steady, she took out her phone. She half expected it to be some dumb text message from Mia or a spam email. But it wasn't. She opened the *Sage Review's* email, her mouth already tugging at the corners, ready to grin, ready to hold in a scream of excitement.

Dear Ms. Blakey,  
Thank you for applying for the *Sage Review* Cadet Program.  
Unfortunately

Rose didn't read the rest. She couldn't.

Her mouth hadn't caught up yet. She was still smiling a strange hollow smile as she crossed the road to Eamon's Tavern Hotel.



# 3

Like many of the businesses on Union Street, Eamon's Tavern Hotel had once been one of the grander houses of Colmstock. It was larger than the others and more imposing with its wide stoop and double windows. However, any opulence the place had once possessed was long gone. It had been due a fresh coat of paint about twenty years ago. Now the facade of the building was crumbling and dirty. In the windows were neon beer signs: Foster's. VB. XXXX Gold.

Inside Bruce Springsteen played on repeat. The smell was musky: stale air and beer. The lighting was always dim, probably an attempt to hide the deterioration. Still, no darkness could hide the fact that everything was just a little bit sticky. It was the kind of place that had a few motel rooms around the back but no one would ever want to sleep there if they weren't drunk off their arse.

The bar was half-full of tradies and cops downing their paychecks, sitting heavily on dark wooden chairs. The place was popular with the law. The police station next door served the smaller towns in the region as well as Colmstock, though the boys didn't like to drink more than a stone's throw from the

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station. Seeing the things they saw some days, even walking the ten paces to Eamon's felt like too far for a beer. The other pub down the road was where you went if you wanted it to be clear that you didn't like the company of cops. Still, anyone who still drank in public rather than staying home with a baggie of crystal and a glass pipe was considered an asset, no matter where they chose to do it.

Underneath a faded black-and-white portrait of the Eamon family, the original occupants of the house, was the L-shaped bar where Rose chatted with Mia. They had worked at the tavern together for years and had spent hundreds of hours doing exactly what they were doing now: leaning against the bar, drinking Coke and talking shit.

Laura wasn't the only one who thought Rose looked like a princess. Senior Sergeant Frank Ghirardello, for one, was watching her from the corner of his eye as he drank his beer. Even with the tattoo up her tricep, she looked as pure and perfect as a movie star. That first sip of cold amber poured by Rose herself was the closest thing to bliss he knew. Frank had been keen on Rose from her very first shift at the tavern. She had served him a beer with foam six inches deep. The way she had looked at him, he was sure in that instant, she was The One. So he had taken the beer, tipped her and tried to drink the thing even though he had received a face full of froth with every sip. Frank had never been big on alcohol, but in the last few years he had developed a small drinking problem just to be close to Rose.

Around him, his squad discussed their theories on the most recent case, which had already replaced Ben Riley in their minds. Not for Frank. Some asshole pyro had been causing a stir all year. It had been small blazes at first, a bush or a letter box smoking and smoldering. They'd liked to believe it was bored teenagers, although that had never been very likely.

The high school had shut down this year because of low enrollment, the class sizes less than a quarter of what they used to be. Most of the teenagers either worked at the poultry farm or had adopted the pipe full-time. The ones on meth were still committing crimes, assault and robbery mostly, but none of them seemed to have the patience to light a fire just for the joy of watching it burn.

Then, last month, it had escalated very suddenly. The psycho had been too trigger-happy with his lighter and burned down half a block of Union Street. Ben had only been thirteen, and he was what they called “special.” “Brain damaged” was the real term. The boy acted more like a little kid than a teenager, but he was the darling of Colmstock. A smile for everyone. His parents owned the grocery store and sometimes he would play in the storage shed behind the courthouse next door. He had made it into a little cubbyhole. Poor kid had no idea the smoke meant run.

At first he’d been sure it was Mr. Riley, his dad. The guy had made a mint from the insurance and Frank suspected that he wouldn’t have been opposed to lighting up his own son if it came to that kind of cash. But he had an airtight alibi. Frank had checked it and no way it was bogus.

Around him, the other men were joking now. Enough was enough. It was no time to be laughing. He cut into the conversation.

“Any headway?” He was looking at Steve Cunningham, who was the council chair. He knew what the answer was going to be, but he asked Steve every time he saw him anyway. He needed them to demolish the wreckage of the courthouse; it’d been almost a month. The rest of the group stopped talking and looked at Steve.

“Not yet,” Steve said, and even in the dim light Frank could

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see his shiny bald patch reddening. “We’re still trying to bring together the funds. It’ll happen.”

“Right,” he replied.

“I’ll get the next round,” Steve said, standing. “Frank?”

“I’ll pass, mate.” He knew it wasn’t Steve’s fault, but he liked to have someone to blame. That black mess felt personal to him. It was a sign, blaring his failure to the whole town.

Frank had seen a lot of bad things. Of course he had. But seeing Mrs. Riley, telling her the fire was already too bad, that he couldn’t go inside, that he couldn’t save her son. The expression on her face as she was forced to stand back and let her child burn. He’d never forget it.

He ignored his friends again and watched as Rose finished pouring Steve’s round and went back to flicking through the newspaper. She was talking quietly to Mia Rezek, whose father, Elias, had been a cop himself before he’d had a stroke about five years back. The two of them were acting as if they were hanging around at home rather than on the clock. Rose smoothed a hand over her hair. The movement was so simple, so casual, yet it made his throat constrict. God, he wanted her. It was almost unbearable.

He leaned back in his chair. The tavern was just quiet enough for him to hear what she was saying.

“With Saturn lingering in Aquarius, nothing is off-limits,” Rose read. “Something unexpected will surprise you today.” She snorted back a laugh. “Look out, single gals.”

“It doesn’t say that,” he heard Mia say. Then their voices quieted.

Raising his head, Frank saw they were looking over at his table. He quickly downed the dregs of his drink and made his way toward them.

“Ladies, what are you staring at us for? See something you like?”

He flexed his biceps at Rose, but she wasn't even looking at him. She was already pouring his beer. Mia had noticed it though, and she smiled. He noticed the pity in her eyes and hated it.

"Don't waste your breath, Frankie," she said, leaning her elbows on the bar. "Rose is getting out of here."

"I still have a few weeks, don't I?" he asked. He was hoping she, or Mia, might give him news on the program Rose was hoping to get into. They'd talked about it like it was already guaranteed, but he didn't think it was. Or at least, that was what he hoped. His life would be so empty without her.

Looking at Rose, he saw her hand shake ever so slightly, spilling a droplet of ale onto her wrist. She rubbed it onto the seat of her shorts and handed him the beer.

"Something like that," she said. He was about to question her further, probe her like he would a perp in his interview room, but Mia interrupted.

"Let's see, then." She picked up his empty glass from the bar and peered into the foam inside it intently.

"Anything about my love life in there?" he said, looking at Rose again. Her smile back at him was thin. He should stop; he knew it. He should ask her out for real, not keep making these lame, obvious jokes. He was past thirty now and he was acting like a horny teenager. It was embarrassing.

"Well," said Mia, spinning the glass around, "I'm seeing a lot of positivity here. It's telling me that nothing is off-limits. That something unexpected is coming. Something that will surprise you."

They looked at each other, not knowing that he was in on the joke. It didn't matter; he took the opportunity.

"Is it an invitation for a double date? I think I could convince Bazza."

Frank's partner, Bazza, a newly-minted sergeant, was a

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good-looking guy. He was tall, he had muscles and he used to be one of their best footy players a few years after Frank had. Frank loved him like a brother, but even he knew the guy was more Labrador than man. His eyes lit up with pure delight every time Frank mentioned lunch, he eyed strangers with suspicion and he was as loyal as he was thick. Frank was fairly sure if he told the man to sit he would do it, without a thought.

They turned to look at him, just as Bazza burped and then chuckled to himself.

“We’ll let you know,” Rose said, and Frank smiled as if he was only kidding, turning before the hurt could show on his face. He had to grow some balls and ask the girl out properly. Otherwise she’d leave town and that would be that.

Behind him he heard Mia say, “You know, I think Baz is kind of hot.”

His shoulders tensed, hoping like hell that Rose wouldn’t agree.

Thankfully, he heard, “He’s a moron.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

They laughed quietly, and he sat back at his table, thankful it wasn’t him they were laughing at, and took a sip of his beer. He could picture it: Mia with Bazza and him with Rose, barbecues on the days off; Bazza at the BBQ; Mia tossing a salad; Rose bringing him a beer and sitting on his knee as he drank it.

# 4

Rose heaved the keg onto its side. It was heavy, pulling on the sockets of her arms and tightening the ligaments in her neck. She let it fall the last few centimeters, for no other reason than to enjoy the violent thud as it hit the cement floor. The windowless storage room at the rear of the tavern smelled like damp. Squeezed into the small space were the beer kegs, a large freezer full of frozen meat and fries, and a few boxes full of dusty beer glasses.

Bending over, butt high in the air, she pushed the keg around the tight corner into the back corridor with little baby steps. She looked ridiculous. If Frank could see her now maybe he would stop looking at her like she was hot shit. Or maybe he'd get off on it. The thought of that made her straighten up. She hated having men's eyes on her. It made her feel as though she didn't own her own body. As if by staring her up and down they were possessing her flesh. If it weren't so damn humid she'd wear long pants and turtlenecks and never, ever shave her legs.

She was starting to get blisters. Every step she took her heels grated down against the rough fabric of her shoes, slicing through another layer of skin. She was starting to wince as she

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gently kicked the keg down the corridor. She passed the stain on the carpet from where Mark Jones had puked up his beer and the crack in the wall that seemed to be getting slightly bigger every day. She tried to remind herself that sometimes she didn't totally hate this job. Quiet nights goofing around with Mia could be fun. But right now she wanted to pull her hair out. Every night, for years and years, the same bloody thing, one shift identical to another. The only difference was the aging of the patrons.

The numbness she'd felt earlier had worn off now. Her stomach was crumpling inward with shame and disappointment at the email from the *Sage Review*. She hadn't told Mia yet; she couldn't. If she did, then it would be real. Mia would ask her what she was going to do, where she was going to live, and she didn't have the answers. Instead, she kept her body moving and tried to breathe. Rose had written about everything she could think of. She'd written about the financial crisis and its effects on her town; she'd written about the search for the arsonist who had killed poor Ben Riley and burned down the courthouse. She'd written film reviews, celebrity gossip and, worst of all, attempted an awkward video series on YouTube.

Regardless of the topic, the rejections were always the same. "Thank you for submitting..." they would begin, and already she knew the rest. Everyone always said the only person who stood in your way to success was yourself. She knew that; she really did. Rose just needed one good story, something truly unique. If she just had a great story, they couldn't say no.

This cadetship had been made for her; she'd fit the requirements exactly. It had been so perfect, so exactly right.

The corner of the keg whacked against the wall, causing a framed picture to fall to the floor.

"Fuck." She hadn't been paying enough attention. She couldn't cope with this. There was now a large crack in the glass across



the photograph of the Eamon family: the husband with his war medals, the wife with her strained smile, the little curly-haired girl with her curly-haired doll and the boy with his frilly shirt. Rose hung it back on the wall.

The feeling in her stomach was turning to pain, and she was struggling to swallow it away. It was like acid reflux, spilling out from her gut in a poisonous torrent and into her throat.

She put her head into the kitchen. “All right if I take my break now?”

“Sure,” the manager, Jean, said, not turning around as she chopped a mound of pale tomatoes.

Sometimes she took her break up at the bar, attempting to eat something Jean had made and continuing to chat with Mia and whoever else was sitting there. But if she was going to get through today she needed to have a few minutes to herself. She grabbed the first-aid kit off the shelf and went back into the corridor. She pushed open one of the motel room doors and sat on the end of the bed. Carefully she slid one of her shoes off and examined her heel. The skin was bright red. A blister was forming, a soft white pillow puffing up to protect her damaged skin. Carefully, she traced her finger over it, shuddering as she touched the delicate new skin.

Unclipping the first-aid kit, she rummaged through the out-of-date antiseptic and the bandages still in their wrapping until she found the box of Band-Aids in the bottom. She pulled one out and stuck it on her skin, stretched it over her blister and then fastened the other side down. The process of putting on the Band-Aid reminded her of being a little kid. Of being looked after, of knowing there was someone there to make everything okay. Her throat constricted and she couldn't hold it in. Holding a hand over her face to muffle the sound, she began to cry. Horrible, aching sobs rose from inside her.

Clenching her eyes closed, she tried to force herself to stop,

but she couldn't. She was so tired, too tired. Her eyes turned hot, tears overflowing them and burning down her cheeks. Crying was easier than not crying.

She stood, looking up to pull the door closed so there would be no chance they would hear her at the bar. Through her watery vision she saw someone. A man, standing in the hallway, staring at her. She tried to reset her face, wiping her cheeks with her hands.

"I'm sorry," he said and, weirdly, he looked like he might cry too. She stood, her hand still on the doorknob, staring at him, not knowing what to say, so aware of her crumpled forehead, of a tear inching down one of her wet cheeks. His eyes flicked away from hers and her face prickled with humiliation.

She pulled the door closed and sat back on the bed. Staring at the back of the door, she took some deep breaths. The surprise of seeing him had made the crying stop, at least, but now her heart was hammering in her chest. Rubbing her hands over her face, she wondered who that guy had been. She'd never seen him before. That wasn't common in Colmstock. Not just that. He didn't look like the other men in town. His face was so unusual, she wasn't sure what his ethnicity was, and he was wearing a T-shirt with a band's logo on it and blue stovepipe jeans that looked brand-new. Definitely not the usual uniform for the men around here. She crept over to the door again and opened it an inch, peering out, sure he was going to be standing there still. He wasn't. But she noticed a Do Not Disturb sign hanging from the knob of the other motel room. Of course, they had a guest.

Closing the door, she went into the bathroom to throw some cold water onto her face. She had been rejected before; she should know how to handle it by now. If she could make it through the rest of her shift, she'd figure everything else out tomorrow. That was all she had to focus on now, get-

ting to the end of the shift. She stood still, centering on just the feeling of her bare feet on the carpet. Then quickly and cleanly she put the Band-Aid on her other heel and, gritting her teeth, pulled her shoes back on.

Back in the kitchen, Jean was flipping a burger on the grill. It sizzled and smoked. Rose's nose felt itchy with the acrid smell of burning, but she didn't say anything. She would never tell Jean how to cook and not just because she was her boss. No one would say a word to Jean even if their meat was as black and rubbery as a tire, which was often the case. Even though she was nearing sixty, no one would want to cross her. You'd know it if she didn't like you.

Rose still remembered the one and only time someone did insult one of Jean's steaks. Some dickhead friend of Steve Cunningham's had demanded a refund. He'd told Jean that if she wanted to cook bush tucker she should go back to her campfire. That man had never got his refund, and he had not been allowed to set foot in Eamon's again. Rose herself would have made sure of that if she'd had the chance, though Jean never needed any help. Even thinking about the guy now made Rose's blood boil. Steve was lucky; he'd apologized repeatedly to Jean, and Rose could tell he meant it, so eventually he was allowed back.

"Do we have a guest?" Rose asked as she bent down to install the keg she'd brought in earlier.

"Yep. William Rai." You could hear the pack-a-day habit in Jean's voice.

"What's he like?" Mia called from behind the bar.

"Quiet."

Rose wiped her wet hands on her shorts and went around to the bar. She put a jug under the beer tap and began running the froth out, happy to be away from the stink of singed meat.

"Have you seen him yet?" Mia asked, quietly.

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“Yeah,” Rose said. His eyes had looked so shiny, but surely that was just the light.

“And?”

“What? You think he might be your soul mate?” she joked.

Mia shrugged. “You never know.”

Rose smiled and leaned back, watching the white creamy froth overflow from the jug as it slowly turned to beer.

“So I’m guessing you haven’t heard back from *Sage* yet?” Mia said, looking at her carefully.

Rose flicked off the beer tap. “No.”

“Don’t stress about it—one more day won’t make a difference.”

Rose looked up at Mia and smiled feebly. She wanted to tell her, she really did, but she was afraid she might start crying again in front of all their customers. Just as she was opening her mouth to ask if they could talk about it later, the tavern went silent. It was the sudden, loud kind of silence that felt wholly unnatural. Mia and Rose looked around.

It was the guest. Will. He was paused in the doorway, every single pair of eyes in the bar on him. Rose had been right before—this man was not from Colmstock. He took the stares in, not appearing unsure or uncomfortable, and sat down at the far table. The cops turned back to their beers and the talking resumed.

“Wow. He’s not bad,” Mia said quietly.

“He’s all yours,” she told Mia. She could feel the humiliation crawling back. He must think she was such a weirdo, sitting there with the door open, crying. Hopefully he wasn’t staying long.

Rose watched Mia peel a plastic menu from the pile. She walked swiftly over to Will’s table and put the menu down in front of him. Mia put her hand on her hip and, even without being able to see her face, Rose could see that she was flirting.

The girl was hardly subtle. Will smiled at her, only politely, Rose noticed, and pointed at something on the menu. He didn't know yet not to order Jean's food. His eyes flicked away from Mia, and he looked straight at Rose, making her breath catch ever so slightly. She turned away and busied herself washing glasses.

By the time his meal was ready, Mia was on her break. She was sitting up at the bar, eating what she normally did for dinner: a burger bun, the insides slick with tomato sauce and nothing else.

"Order up," Jean called.

Mia shrugged at Rose, her mouth full. "I donf fink he fanfies me."

Rose looked around, trying to think of a way to avoid a second encounter with the stranger. Maybe she could ask Jean to do it? But she knew then they'd want to know why and telling them would be even worse.

Grabbing the plate, fingers below and thumb on top, she strode toward him. Looking down at it, she saw that he seemed to have ordered a burger without the meat, just limp lettuce, pale tomatoes and cheese on the white bun. He was leaning back in his chair, reading a book, but she couldn't see the title. As she stepped in front of his light, he looked up at her.

"Here you go," she said.

He leaned forward. "Thanks." He paused. "I wanted to ask...are you all right? Before I—"

"I'm fine," she snapped. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She looked him right in the eye then, daring him to mention what he'd seen. He didn't.

"Just checking," he said and half smiled, creating little crinkles around his dark eyes.

At closing time, when all the stools were on the tables and the floor was mopped and drying, Springsteen was singing

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about dreams and secrets and darkness on the edge of town, and Mia and Rose sat on the bar, drinking beers. Their aching feet feeling blissful now that they weren't on the hard concrete. Jean stood behind them, counting the money in the register.

"How long is our guest staying?" Rose asked, trying to sound casual.

"He's booked in for a week," Jean muttered, writing down figures on an order pad.

"You keen?" Mia asked.

"Nah, the opposite. He seemed like a dickhead. Really patronizing."

The sound of something banging on the window interrupted them. It was Frank, rapping his knuckles on the glass. He waved good-night, his brown eyes so hopeful that he looked more like a small scruffy street mutt begging for a scrap than a policeman in his thirties. They waved back.

"That man needs to take it down a notch," Jean said, slight disapproval in her voice.

Rose didn't respond.

"He's a nice guy," Mia said, pushing it.

"It's not about that," Rose said. "There's just no point. This won't be where I end up." She took a swig. Mia watched her, carefully.

"You heard back from *Sage*, didn't you?"

Rose didn't look at her; she couldn't.

"I was so sure you had this one," Mia said.

Rose felt warmth on her hand and looked down. Jean had placed her weathered palm on top of Rose's fingers.

"You're a fighter—it'll happen for you. It might take a while, but it will happen."

For the first time that night, the tightness in Rose's throat loosened.

Jean withdrew her hand and placed two envelopes between them on the bar.

“Patronizing or not, our guest tips well.”

The air felt cooler as Mia and Rose stepped off the porch outside. The cicadas were trilling loudly. Despite everything, Rose felt a sense of victory. She’d done it. She’d got through the shift, and now she could go home to grieve, while she still had a home. She looked back at the tavern as they walked toward Mia’s car, wondering again about the guest, Will. He must be a relative of someone, down for some family occasion. She couldn’t think of any other reason someone would want to stay in this town for a whole week.

“Oh.” Mia paused next to her.

“What?”

Mia ran to her beat-up old Auster and pulled a parking ticket from the windscreen. She looked at her watch.

“I was only three minutes late!”

“They must have been waiting for it to tick over.”

They looked around. The street was empty. Getting in the car, Mia held the ticket up to the interior light.

“It’s more than I even made on my shift.”

Rose took her envelope from her bag and put it on the dashboard.

“You don’t have to,” Mia said, but Rose could already hear the relief in her voice.

“I know.”

They didn’t talk as Mia drove. The radio played some terrible new pop song that Rose had heard one too many times, but she knew better than to mess with the stereo in Mia’s car. She stared out the window, looking forward to the oblivion of sleep. She slid her heels out of her shoes. Tomorrow, she

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decided, she wouldn't wear shoes at all. The tavern was closed on Tuesdays, so maybe she wouldn't even get out of bed.

The car went past the fossickers. At first it was just a few tents set up in and around a gutted old cottage that had been there for forever. Now it was a real community. People lived in cars; structures were set up. Some people just slept under the stars. It was warm enough. They kept to themselves, so the cops didn't seem to bother them, even though they all sported missing teeth and raging meth addictions. Rose hadn't known why they were called the fossickers at first, but then found a couple of years back that they fossicked for opals and sold them on the black market. That was how they got by. Her stomach clenched with fear and she looked down at her hands. She would never end up there.

"So, I heard some great gossip today." Mia couldn't stand to sit in silence for too long. No matter how miserable she was, Mia always seemed to feel better when she was talking. "Maybe you can write your next article about it? Working at a cop bar has got to be good for something."

Unlike Mia, Rose often craved solitude. She didn't need to answer anyway. Mia usually seemed perfectly happy to just listen to the sound of her own voice chirping away.

"Apparently someone has been leaving porcelain dolls on doorsteps of houses, and the dolls look like the little girls that live in the house. How freaky is that?"

Rose snapped her head around.

"The cops are worried it might mean something. Like maybe it's a pedophile marking his victims."

Rose gaped at her.

"What?" asked Mia.

Rose scrambled through her bag, trying to find her cell phone, the image of Laura in her mind, sleeping cheek to cheek with her tiny porcelain twin.



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ISBN-13: 978-0-7783-3109-4

Little Secrets

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