

1.

Riley

I'd never expected to lose nearly everyone I loved by the time I was twenty-five.

I felt the grief rise again as I parked in front of the small, nondescript post office in Pollocksville. The three-hour drive from my apartment in Durham had seemed more like six as I made a mental list of all the things I needed to do once I reached New Bern, and that list segued into thinking of how alone I felt. But I didn't have time to dwell on my sadness.

The first thing I had to do was stop at this post office, ten miles outside of New Bern. I'd get that out of the way and cross one thing off my list. Digging the flimsy white postcard from my purse, I went inside the building. I was the only customer, and my tennis shoes squeaked on the floor as I walked up to the counter where a clerk waited for me. With her dark skin and perfect cornrows, she reminded me of my friend Sherise, so I liked her instantly.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

I handed her the postcard. "I'm confused about this card," I said. "My father died a month ago. I've been

getting his mail at my address in Durham and this card came and—”

“We send these out when someone hasn’t paid their bill for their post office box,” she said, looking at the card. “It’s a warning. They don’t pay it in two months, we close the box and change the lock.”

“Well, I understand that, but see”—I turned the card over—“this isn’t my father’s name. I don’t know who Fred Marcus is. My father was Frank MacPherson, so I think this came to me by mistake. I don’t even think my father *had* a post office box. I don’t know why he would. Especially not in Pollocksville when he lives—*lived*—in New Bern.” It would take me a long time to learn to speak about my father in the past tense.

“Let me check.” She disappeared into the rear of the building and came back a moment later holding a thin purple envelope and a white index-type card. “This is the only thing in the box,” she said, handing the envelope to me. “Addressed to Fred Marcus. I checked the records and the box is assigned to that name at this street address.” She held the index card out to me. The signature did look like my father’s handwriting, but his handwriting was hardly unique. And besides, it wasn’t his name.

“That’s the right street address, but whoever this guy is, he must have written his address down wrong,” I said, slipping the purple envelope into my purse.

“You want me to close the box or you want to pay to keep it open?” the clerk asked.

“I don’t feel like it’s mine to close, but I’m not going to pay for it, so . . .” I shrugged.

“I’ll close it, then,” she said.

“All right.” I was glad she’d made the decision for me. I smiled. “I hope Fred Marcus doesn’t mind, whoever he is.” I turned toward the door.

“Sorry about your daddy,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said over my shoulder, and my eyes stung by the time I got to my car.

Driving into New Bern, I passed through the historic district. Old houses were packed close together on the tree-lined streets and gigantic painted bears, the town’s iconic symbol, stood here and there among the shops. A pair of bicycle cops pedaled down the street in front of me, lightening my mood ever so slightly. Although I hadn’t lived in New Bern since I went away to college, it still had a hometown pull on me. It was such a unique little place.

I turned onto Craven Street and pulled into our driveway. Daddy’s car was in the garage. I could see its roof through the glass windows—one of them broken—of the garage door. I hadn’t thought about his car. Was it better to sell it or donate it? I had an appointment with his attorney in the morning and I’d add that question to my ever-growing list. The car should really go to my brother, Danny, to replace his ancient junker, but I had the feeling he’d turn it down.

My old house was a two-story pastel yellow Victorian in need of fresh paint, with a broad front porch adorned with delicate white railings and pillars. It was the only house I could remember living in, and I loved it. Once I sold it, I’d have no reason to come to New Bern again. I’d

taken those visits home to see my father for granted. After Daddy's sudden death, I came back for two days to arrange for his cremation and attend to other details that were now a blur in my memory. Had he wanted to be cremated? We'd never talked about that sort of thing and I'd been in such a state of shock and confusion that I couldn't think straight. Bryan had been with me then, a calming, loving presence. He'd pointed out that my mother'd been cremated, so that would most likely be my father's wish as well. I hoped he was right.

Sitting in my car in the driveway, I wondered if I'd been too hasty in ending it with Bryan. I could have used his support right now. With Daddy gone and Sherise doing mission work in Haiti for the summer, the timing couldn't have been worse. There was no good time, though, for ending a two-year-old relationship.

The loneliness weighed on my shoulders as I got out of my car and looked up at the house. My plan had been to take two weeks to clean it out and then put it—and the nearby RV park my father owned—on the market. Suddenly, as I looked at all the windows and remembered how many things were in need of repair and how little my father liked to throw things away, I knew my time frame was unrealistic. Daddy hadn't been a hoarder, exactly, but he was a collector. He had cases full of vintage lighters and pipes and old musical instruments, among zillions of other things I would have to get rid of. Bryan said our house was more like a dusty old museum than a home, and he'd been right. I tried not to panic as I pulled my duffel bag from the backseat of my car. I had no one waiting for me in

Durham and the summer off. I could take as much time as I needed to get the house ready to sell. I wondered if there was any chance of getting Danny to help me.

I climbed the broad front steps to the porch and unlocked the door. It squeaked open with a sound as familiar to me as my father's voice. I'd pulled the living room shades before I'd left back in May and I could barely see across the living room to the kitchen beyond. I breathed in the hot musty smell of a house closed up too long as I raised the shades to let in the midday light. Turning the thermostat to seventy-two, I heard the welcome sound of the old air conditioner kicking to life. Then I stood in the middle of the room, hands on my hips, as I examined the space from the perspective of someone tasked with cleaning it out.

Daddy had used the spacious living room as something of an office, even though he had a good-sized office upstairs as well. He loved desks and cubbies and display cases. The desk in the living room was a beautiful old rolltop. Against the far wall, custom-built shelves surrounding the door to the kitchen held his classical music collection, nearly all of it vinyl, and a turntable sat in a special cabinet he'd had built into the wall. On the north side of the room, a wide glass-fronted display case contained his pipe collection. The room always had a faint smell of tobacco to me, even though he'd told me that was my imagination. Against the opposite wall, there was a couch at least as old as I was along with an upholstered armchair. The rest of the space was taken up by the baby grand piano I'd never learned to play. Danny and I had both taken lessons, but neither of us had any interest and our parents let us quit.

People would say, *They're Lisa's siblings. Surely they have talent. Why don't you push them?* But they never did and I was grateful.

Walking into the dining room, I was struck by how neat and orderly it appeared to be compared to the rest of the house. My father had no need for that room and I was sure he rarely set foot in it. The dining room had been my mother's territory. The wide curio cabinet was full of china and vases and cut-glass bowls that had been handed down through her family for generations. Things she'd treasured that I was going to have to figure out how to get rid of. I ran my fingers over the dusty sideboard. Everywhere I turned in the house, I'd be confronted by memories I would need to dismantle.

I carried my duffel bag upstairs, where a wide hallway opened to four rooms. The first was my father's bedroom with its quilt-covered queen-sized bed. The second room had been Danny's, and although he hadn't slept in our house since leaving at eighteen—*escaping*, he would call it—it would always be “Danny's room” to me. The third room was mine, though in the years since I'd lived in the house, the room had developed an austere air about it. I'd cleaned out my personal possessions bit by bit after college. The memorabilia from my high school and college years—pictures of old boyfriends, yearbooks, CDs, that sort of thing—were in a box in the storage unit of my Durham apartment waiting for the day I got around to sorting through them.

I dropped my duffel bag on my bed, then walked into the fourth room—my father's office. Daddy's bulky old

computer monitor rested on a small desk by the window, and glass-fronted curio cabinets filled with Zippo lighters and antique compasses lined two of the walls. My grandfather had been a collector, too, so Daddy'd inherited many of the items, then added to them by searching through Craigslist and eBay and flea markets. The collections had been his obsession. I knew the sliding glass doors to the cabinets were locked and hoped I'd be able to find where my father had squirreled away the keys.

Propped against the fourth wall of the room were five violin cases. Daddy hadn't played, but he'd collected stringed instruments for as long as I could remember. One of the cases had an ID tag hanging from the handle, and I knelt next to it, lifting the tag in my hand. It had been a long time since I'd looked at that tag, but I knew what was on it: a drawing of a violet on one side and on the other side, my sister's name—*Lisa MacPherson*—and our old Alexandria, Virginia, address. Lisa had never lived in this house.

My mother died shortly after I graduated from high school, so although I would never stop missing her, I was used to her being gone. It was strange to be in the house without Daddy, though. As I put my clothes in my dresser, I kept expecting him to walk into the room and I had trouble accepting the fact that it was impossible. I missed our weekly phone calls and knowing he was only a few hours away. He'd been so easy to talk to and I'd always felt his unconditional love. It was a terrible feeling to know that there wasn't a soul in the world now who loved me that deeply.

He'd been a quiet man. Maybe one of the quietest people to ever walk the earth. He questioned rather than told. He'd ask me all about my own life, but rarely shared anything about his own. As a middle school counselor, I was the one always asking the questions and I'd enjoyed being asked for a change, knowing that the man doing the asking cared deeply about my answers. He was a loner, though. He'd died on the floor of the Food Lion after a massive heart attack. He'd been alone and that bothered me more than anything.

Bryan had suggested I have a memorial service for him, but I wouldn't have known who to invite. If he had any friends, I didn't know about them. Unlike most people in New Bern, my father hadn't belonged to a church or any community organization, and I was certain my brother wouldn't show up at a service for him. His relationship with our father had been very different from mine. I hadn't even been able to *find* Danny when I got to New Bern after Daddy's death. His cop friend Harry Washington told me he'd gone to Danny's trailer to give him the news, and I guess Danny just took off. He'd left his car parked next to the trailer, and Bryan and I hiked through the forest looking for him, but Danny knew those woods better than anyone. He had his hiding places. Now, though, he had no idea I was in town, so this time I'd surprise him. I'd plead with him to help me with the house. I knew better than to hope he'd say yes.