

# THAT NIGHT

CYN BALOG

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*For all the beautiful fools.*

No amount of fire or freshness can  
challenge what a man will store up  
in his ghostly heart.

— *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald

## Now

*It didn't end with you blowing your head off in the back shed behind your house.*

It didn't end with your funeral, where we stood without umbrellas in a driving rain that couldn't disguise our pain.

It didn't end after my resulting spiral into depression, or my six-month stay at Shady Harbor, or the thousands of hours of therapy I endured.

It didn't even end with your mom going through your stuff a year later to make room for the new baby—the replacement Weeks child.

Maybe that was when it started. With what your mom found.

I thought being the girlfriend of a boy who'd blown his head off was rock bottom. I thought I'd been through hell.

But I can't come out of this. Hell isn't a hallway between two

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better places. It is a chasm, so deep and wide that the more I try to pull myself out, the farther I fall in.

There is no way I'll ever get out.

The best I can do is try to make myself comfortable.

## 754 Days Before

*Kane Weeks likes to be first at everything.*

He was the first kid to learn to tie his shoes in kindergarten. The first of us to use the f-word, the first to get drunk, the first to own a cell phone.

So it was only natural that he was the first to have sex.

It was years ago, and *that* eventful. Everyone knew about it. I know, because I was the one he had sex with.

Kane's had a long line of girls since then. But it's hard for me to forget, since he's it. The one. The only. The end.

I was *his* first too. We were fifteen, too cool to play in all the snow that had graced us with a glorious three-day weekend. Instead, we sat cross-legged on the shag carpet in Kane's room, playing some zombie video game. I kept losing. After my brains were eaten for the hundredth time, I threw down my controller

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and shouted obscenities at the television, then turned to him, about to ask what we should do next.

As usual, he read my mind. He quirked a quarter smile at me and drew out a mischievous “So...”

That one word, coming out of Kane’s mouth, always means trouble. His blue eyes turned stormy, and his hair fell into his face in a way that recently made my heart flutter. I hated that flutter, hated that the charm I’d been immune to all my life suddenly had an effect on me. At fifteen, he’d never had a gangly or awkward day in his life. He said, “Don’t you ever wonder what it’s like? What all the talk is about?”

“Um. What are we talking about?”

“You know,” he whispered, checking the door. “*It.*”

Oh. *It it. It* consumed everyone at the school like the plague. Everyone spoke about it, whispered about it, joked about it. You couldn’t avoid the subject, but I did my best. In a lot of ways, it was even scarier to me than that clown in Stephen King’s *It*.

But nothing scared Kane.

“Sometimes,” I said. I did wonder, vaguely. Mostly I fantasized about having my first kiss with some debonair Prince Charming, and occasionally my mind would stray past that to things I’d only seen in movies. But Kane was used to kissing. He’d had girlfriends since fifth grade.

“So let’s do it,” he said.



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I didn't *always* blindly follow Kane Weeks. But he was my best friend. We didn't have to swear blood oaths or cross our hearts; we trusted each other, the way you'd trust that your welcome mat would be under your feet the second you stepped to your front door. Whatever he was saying, I was usually thinking. We'd played doctor when we were kids, him groping under my shirt and making me giggle because I knew it wasn't right but it didn't feel all that wrong either. So I agreed.

"Here?" I asked.

"Yeah."

Not that we would have gone anywhere else. The tension in my home suffocated me. His house was the only place we ever hung out. The door to his bedroom was closed. Even so, I could hear his dad down the hall, rattling the keys on the laptop in his office. His dad rarely left that office. Dishes piled up in a fortress around his desk, the smell of stale oatmeal and rotting fruit sometimes wafting down the hall. But Kane's room was like a trophy showroom—dozens of little gold figures wielding baseball bats stared down at us, our only audience.

Kane untied his sweatpants. I undid the zipper on my jeans and pulled them off, hiding my panties in them as I neatly folded my pants at the foot of his bed.

"Now what?" I asked. I looked at his penis and started to get scared because I'd never seen one that didn't include arrows

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pointing out the scrotum, the sperm duct, and other anatomical parts I couldn't quite remember. He was looking at me too, at everything I didn't have. Not in a lustful way, like in movies—he craned his neck and cocked his head to the side with scientific curiosity.

He told me to lie down, so I did. He climbed on top of me and told me to spread my legs. He weighed a ton. Suddenly, his body was so much more than a picture in a textbook. It was between my thighs, poking me. I had to stifle a giggle. I was pretty sure that while it was okay when I was seven and we were playing doctor, giggling wasn't appropriate now. Having his skin against mine was no big deal because we were close, but he'd never been *there* before. “Is that the right place?”

“Um,” I managed. The right place for what? “I don't know.”

“Geez, Hail. Haven't you ever watched porn?”

“No,” I mumbled. *Had he?* He probed and prodded against me, and I finally had to tell him I didn't think he was in the right place after all. Frustrated, he moved his hand between us and guided himself closer, his eyes never meeting mine. He pushed again. This time, he got it right. It didn't hurt. He sank into me like a hypodermic needle without the pinch, like the tampons I'd started using earlier that summer. Then he stayed there, bearing down on me for the longest time, until his heartbeat and the clattering of laptop keys all mingled together and I imagined being so flattened like Silly Putty that he'd have to peel me off

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his sheets later. The sweat coming through his T-shirt soaked my stomach.

“Oh shit,” he’d said before I could ask him what was supposed to happen next. More doubt crept in. I’d helped Kane on many of his adventures—trying to sail his raft in the retention pond out back, making barbeque-sauce-flavored ice cream, holiday caroling to make money for a trip to Disney (we made \$3.50, and most of that was from our own parents)—but this was certainly one of our stupider ones. He pulled off me, looked down at his sheets, and grimaced. “Whoa.”

I could’ve asked him to kiss me. He would’ve, maybe, because I never asked for much. But for some reason, that seemed scarier than what we had just done. I knew his mouth much better than the part of his body that had been inside me. Those parts we could hide afterward—forever, if we chose. Go on with our regularly scheduled lives and pretend it had never happened between us. But as I scooted up to the headboard and reached out for my pants, I realized how backward it had been. I’d never had a real kiss, but I’d had sex.

But this was what everyone was talking about. I figured that if sex was *that*, then kissing probably sucked hardcore.

“Is that all it was?” I’d said to him breezily when he sat on the side of the bed and leaned over to retrieve his underwear. “Hardly seems worth the buzz.”

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We never talked about it after that. It was like a footnote, something that I could almost believe hadn't happened. After that, he went back to having a steady stream of girlfriends, so I guess it *was* worth the buzz, considering the way they lined up for him, and the way he never turned them down.

But to me, he was just Kane—nothing and everything at once.

## Present Day: Thursday, February 14

*I've lost a lot of memories, but not that one.*

That day—that seemingly stupid, insignificant day—hadn't only settled in my mind. It oozed around every cell inside my head like glue, taking up all available space. Even now, I can't think of another memory without that one shading it. Though so much has happened in between, it's like I'm right back there again in his bed when we were fifteen. As I lean against the door of my Jeep, watching Kane say goodbye to some of his admirers, I'm doing it again, trying to pick that thought out of my brain.

*Damn him.*

Kane Weeks doesn't have to lift a finger to be a magnet to the opposite sex. He has female admirers coming out his ears, more girls than he knows what to do with.

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“Please tell me those aren’t all yours,” I mumble as he saunters up to me holding a cardboard shoebox filled with flowers.

“They are,” he says, smiling down at them. “I only sent one, though.”

“Stupidly.” I pull the sleeves of my oversize sweatshirt down and hook my thumbs through the holes I’d ripped in the seams of the cuffs.

He ignores my comment. “You got it, right?”

“I did. Homeroom. Thanks.” I try to sound sincere, but I didn’t want a dumb pity flower. From him, from anyone.

Every February, the Key Club sells carnations, which are delivered to students throughout the day on Valentine’s Day. It’s never mattered to me in the least, but there are always rumors about girls giving blow jobs to win the honor of receiving the most.

The male winner is no contest. It’s yet another talent that comes effortlessly to Kane. He inspects his fingernails nonchalantly as he waits for me to pop the locks. I watch him secure the lid and toss the box into the back seat of my Jeep as if it’s his gym bag.

That’s the most perplexing thing. He doesn’t even care about the attention.

“You like what it said?” he asks.

I nod as I squeeze into the driver’s seat, cranking the heat to ward off the frigid 20-degree air. *Happy Day of Suck*, it’d said.

Valentine’s Day. This time last year, it’d been snowing. We’d

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huddled together in the backyard of his house, his arms around me, and I'd cried so hard that I couldn't breathe. That was the last time Kane touched me.

"I was going to text you, but I forgot about your technological deficiency," he says. "When are you going to remedy that situation?"

I haven't had a phone in nearly a year, ever since I smashed mine. Not that I care. Other people seem to miss me having it more than I do. "Never," I reply.

He scowls. "Your parents?"

"No. Me. I don't want one."

"Weirdo."

*I know.* That's actually being kind. I shrug.

I drive him the three miles to our neighborhood as he uses the glove compartment, the center console, his thighs, my head to pretend to play the drum solo to the music on his iPhone. No one would ever accuse my red Wrangler that's just shy of two hundred thousand miles of being a smooth ride. When I got it the August after my sixteenth birthday, Declan called it my Pretty Piece of Crap. He'd managed to fix it up to run, but it's been withering from his lack of attention, so it has trouble doing even that now. Every one of its parts rattles, and the wind blows steadily through the Swiss-cheese soft top. Kane has to yell to talk to me when I drive, so we don't talk much.

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I don't mind that. I don't mind the noise either. It helps me avoid thinking too much. I don't want to think too much. Not today.

He yells over the roar of the engine to tell me that he won't need a ride for the rest of the week. Baseball is beginning soon, and he needs to start lifting again to get in shape. Last spring, he made Varsity All-Stars. Somehow he was able to get right back into the swing of sports and after-school activities. Unlike me. His college application shines. Unlike mine.

We live in a gated community, which might sound fancy, but it's not. Our houses make up half of the homes on the Fox Court cul-de-sac. The homes are tall and thin and right on top of each other, so they remind me of dominoes. Kane's house is almost a mirror image of mine. When Declan and his mom moved in three years ago, the Mayflower truck got stuck in the throat of the roundabout. Thank God for trees, Declan once said, or we'd all know each other's business.

Kane texts Luisa as I downshift and cruise into the court. "She's insane, you know. How've you guys been friends this long?"

He has to know that we're not friends anymore. I haven't been friend material for anyone except the cocoon of my bed for a long time. I haven't been a lot of things I used to be. "What are you talking about? You're the one who's been going out with her for years."

"Not consistently. I can only take her in small doses."



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That's Kane. Most people annoy him. I'm the only one who knows this. On the surface, he's this happy-go-lucky guy who loves everyone. Underneath? He has this dark, glass-half-empty, biting sarcasm. That bitterness is one of the reasons I can still tolerate him. I don't need anyone telling me, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life!" or "Time heals all wounds." When we get together, which is rare these days, we grumble. We complain like two old men who were denied their free senior coffee at McDonald's. "So what's bugging you about her currently?"

"Everything. She had an attitude today."

I scratch the side of my head and pretend to think. "Gee. Maybe it's because you sent *me* a flower instead of her?"

He shakes his head like that can't be it. "I only had two bucks. And I explained how it was to her."

I cringe. *How it was* makes it seem like I'm some bald, three-legged cat he decided to adopt from the animal shelter. Like I need Kane to take care of me. I'm fine. I'm just peachy—until people start asking me how I'm doing, not in a casual, *what's up* way, but in a lingering, *oh you poor thing* way. Whenever I answer "fine," they always seem suspicious, as though they want me to have a nervous breakdown at their feet.

My eyes trail to Kane's backyard. They removed the shed months ago, but there's still a stark brown rectangle of dirt. A giant scar. So, so ugly and sad.

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So unlike the Declan I knew.

I shiver, recalling the day the world tilted. The day everything got a little brighter, more intense. The day I met him.

“You okay, Hail?” Kane asks me.

I’m gripping the steering wheel so hard that my knuckles are white. I loosen my hands. “Yeah. I hope you’re doing something nice for that girlfriend of yours. Girls expect that.”

He frowns. “You don’t.”

I give him a smile and bat my eyelashes. “I’m not a girl. I’m a woman.”

He laughs like it’s the most hilarious joke in the world. Like he wasn’t the one who made me that way, if it can be said that sex makes a girl a woman. Which honestly is a crap thing to say, since it didn’t make me feel any different and it gives him way too much credit. He took my virginity, not my freaking soul. “Whatever. Today is just another day.”

He’s only saying that for my benefit. It’s not a day of suck because I have no one to share it with. I’ve never shared Valentine’s Day with anyone, ever, and I’ve survived.

Before, it was simply another day.

Now, it’s the anniversary of the worst day of our lives.

If that isn’t the definition of a day of suck, I don’t know what is.

I climb out of the Jeep, and Kane comes around to the driver’s side, standing there as if he wants to say something. When we

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were fifteen, he was about my height. Now, he's a solid nine inches taller than me, and I hold my own at 5'6". It's a good thing he's this tall, because from down here, it's easier to avoid his eyes. I look at the scuffed toes of my black Converse high tops and tell him I'll see him later.

Halfway up the drive to my house, Kane's stepmom calls to me.

I've talked to Mrs. Weeks about a dozen times since our worlds collectively turned to crap. Funny, she used to be such a straight-laced, business-suit-wearing, un-Californian person. Since she left the West Coast, though, she's become about as California hippie as you can imagine, with wild blond hair and a soft, faraway voice that makes you think she's been sucking on some really strong weed. The only feature she shares with her son is the arched, expressive shape of their eyebrows, though his were black as tar and hers are the color of honey.

But it's enough. Enough to make me see his face in hers, *every single time*.

It's both sad and pathetic that something as innocuous as an eyebrow tears me apart.

She waddles down the drive toward me, the bottom of her amorphous maxi skirt dusting the asphalt, her expanding belly poking out the front of her cardigan. I break into a run, because she looks like she's about to give birth on the sidewalk. When I get across the street, I notice the bulging black garbage bags

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on the porch. “We’re getting ready to paint the nursery,” she huffs out.

The nursery, a.k.a. no-man’s-land. Hell of a time to clean out Declan’s room. But she’s said before that keeping busy helps her cope. In the past eight months, she’s remodeled the house from top to bottom.

All except for one room.

Since I’ve gotten out of the hospital, that room has had its door closed every time I’ve stopped by. It’s at the end of the hall and is visible from the foyer, right when you walk inside. Inescapable.

Mrs. Weeks told me, months ago, that I could take anything I wanted, anytime I wanted.

I didn’t want.

I take a breath.

I fasten my eyes on a patch of gray snow on the sidewalk as she hands me a large Yuengling beer box. “I know you’d like to keep these things.” Wrong. “But come on up and see what else.”

“Actually, this is good.” I hold the box like it’s toxic waste. I don’t want to go in his room. I imagine it smells like him, like soap and woodworker’s glue and motor oil. Even this box does. Or maybe that’s my imagination.

She looks over her shoulder as Kane helps lug the bag to the curb. She calls out, “Kane, there are a few more upstairs, for Goodwill.”

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“On it,” he says, jogging inside.

She lowers her voice for me. “I wanted to get you alone, because I have to ask you something.”

She starts unfolding an envelope. I already know it’s something I don’t want to see, like that brown scar in the backyard. Instinctively, I step back.

“Do you know what this is?”

She pulls a tiny photograph out of the envelope, the kind from one of those instant cameras. My gaze catches on it, and I can’t look away.

It’s like one of those kids’ puzzles where objects are magnified to such an extent you can’t really tell what they are. Body parts melding. Hair. Light and dark, smooth and textured, some shadowed, some overexposed. Skin upon skin. Declan’s skin. My skin? And in the white space underneath, printed with a Sharpie in harsh block letters, the words:

**THIS ENDS HERE.**