

EVERY STORY WORTH TELLING BEGINS LIKE THIS: I WOKE up thinking my life was the same as it always had been, and then it wasn't.

For some people, the change comes in the form of bad news: a car accident, or an illness diagnosed, or a secret revealed. For others—for the lucky ones—it's a good-news kind of change: a winning lottery ticket, a large inheritance, the news that the Home Shopping Network just bought a million units of your latest invention, and you're set for life. Not that good news necessarily means more money, but those are the first examples to spring to mind.

My point is, that's how this story begins, too: I woke up thinking my life was the same as it always had been. And then it wasn't.

My sister died.

She died by suicide, and she didn't leave a note to explain why. Just a list, written on a sheet torn from a spiral notebook, folded over five times, tucked into the front pocket of her jeans.

I woke up thinking my life was the same as it always had been, and then it wasn't, and I didn't know why. But the list was where I'd start.



chapter one

WE CALLED MY SISTER TALLEY, WHICH WAS SHORT FOR Natalie.

Natalie Belle Weber. That was her full name.

The Natalie part was for our maternal great-grandmother, Nellie, who died before either of us was even a thought in our parents' heads. The Belle part was because our mother's maiden name was Bellstein.

Weber was her last name because it's Dad's last name, and we live in a patriarchal society where kids automatically get their dads' last names, which Talley told me is completely sexist, and I agree with her. Mothers are the ones who have to squeeze their kids out. Shouldn't *their* names be the ones that get passed on? At the very least, they should get to draw straws to settle it.

But that's not a subject I'm going to take on just now.

I want to talk about Talley. Talley, herself. She was . . . well, she was everything. She was a ray of sunshine. She was a beam of moonlight. She was lightness and darkness and all that comes in between. Talley was small, smaller than I am, which is just a smidge over five feet tall. I've always been the smallest in my grade. In elementary school there were all sorts of nicknames I hated: Shorty Spice, Small Fry, El Shrimpo. I used to stand on my toes a lot, trying to be at least as tall as the next shortest person.

Talley was a smidge *under* five feet. But she never stood on her toes. It's like she didn't realize she was so tiny. I don't think anyone else noticed, either, because she was MIGHTY. I used all caps there on purpose.

Maybe you think that I sound like a typical younger sister, idolizing Talley the way I did. But I wasn't the only one who looked at Talley like that. I watched how other people reacted to her, too—friends and strangers alike. They were as enthralled with her as I was. When Talley walked into a room, people noticed her. They woke up. It reminded me of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. We read it in school sophomore year, but Talley told me about it long before then.

Talley was always telling me things like that—things she thought were interesting or important. Sometimes she'd make up puzzles for me to figure out, or she'd make me play the Imagine If game, which is what I called it when she tried to teach me perspective by telling me stories about people who had it way worse than I did. Like if I complained about how long a bad cold was lingering, she'd tell me about a book a father had written about his daughter who'd been sick—really sick, for way more than a week or two,

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and they didn't know if she'd *ever* get better. Or if I was having a meltdown over the internet acting wonky when my research paper on industrialization after the Civil War was due the next morning, she'd tell me how long Puerto Rico had been without power after Hurricane Maria, and wasn't I so lucky that my biggest problem was a wonky internet.

The Plato story was about perspective, too. Here's how it went: a prisoner lived in a cave, and all he'd ever seen were shadows of things, not the things themselves, so he thought that's all there was to the world. One day he was freed from his shackles. He turned around and saw all the actual things—dwellings and statues and people and animals, along with the fire that had cast the shadows of them. Then he got out of the cave, and there was more to see. It went on and on.

Why did this remind me of Talley? (I mean, aside from the obvious reason that she was the one to tell me about it in the first place.) Because that's what it was like to be around her. She helped people see beyond their own limited perspectives. She made things appear bigger and brighter than they were before.

Don't think my sister was oblivious to her own charm, because she wasn't. She never danced like no one was watching. She danced like *everyone* was. It was like she went through life pretending she was the star of a show: The Talley Show. As if you'd bought a ticket to see her, and she didn't want to disappoint.

Often, she let me be part of the act. "Sloane, today we're going to go to McDonald's, and you have to order in a British accent." "Will you be in a parade with me, Sloaners?" "I just decided to be a

model and I need someone to take my head shots!”

Even for all her doom-and-gloom Imagine If stories, I’d never met anyone who could enjoy life more than my sister could. She could get positively giddy about things, and it was catching. I’d find myself practically breathless, saying, “Sure, Talley!” “Of course, Talley!” “Let me help you, Talley!”

As we grew up, we grew apart in some ways. There was the geographical apartness. Talley was five years older, and she’d graduated high school. She moved out even though she didn’t go to college. And while she was living back home the last month of her life, she was still gone for the bulk of my high school years.

And then there was the emotional apartness, the kind that you can’t measure in physical distance, which means it’s hard to measure at all. While it’s happening, it’s so gradual, you don’t even realize it. But then you look back, and you can point to times when you felt closer than you did at the end.

The end. My sister’s life had an *end*.

I didn’t see it coming. It was my fault. I was so, so unforgivably careless.

The day it happened, Thursday, I stayed late at school for orchestra practice. I play the flute. My best friend, Juno, watched us rehearse, which was not something she usually did. But her boyfriend, Cooper, had just officially broken up with her. A couple weeks earlier, he’d said he needed to take a break, because he had so much school stuff and track stuff on his plate. “Let’s try not texting or talking for two weeks,” he said. He also told her not to read too much into it, the way she usually did.

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Juno tried not to read too much into it, but over those fourteen days, every other sentence out of her mouth was something that had to do with Cooper. I did my best to distract her, and made plans to do things she'd loved to do well before Cooper was in her life. Watching cheesy eighties movies in her basement, mining local thrift stores for secondhand treasures, taking aimless drives in her beloved car, that sort of thing. Still, she was always bringing Cooper into whatever activity we were doing. Cooper loved *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. That shirt would look perfect on Cooper. She'd once driven down this same road with Cooper.

"I think you should focus on the things about him that were sucky," I said. "Like how he wasn't ever that nice to you . . . and how he's kind of shaped like SpongeBob SquarePants."

"Remember what Ms. Gomez told us in third grade," Juno said. "Don't yuck my yum. Just because he's not your type doesn't mean he's not mine."

"I'm sorry."

"Making fun of him isn't going to stop me from loving him."

"I just hate that you're so sad, Ju, and I think talking about him all the time is making you even sadder. Maybe we could put a limit on it. You can talk about Cooper for a half hour a day, and for the rest of the time, we'll talk about non-Cooper things. It'll train your brain to not obsess about him all the time. It'll be hard at first—Talley says it takes sixty-six days to form a habit. But you'll get there."

"In sixty-six days, we'll be back together again," she said. "Before then, even."

“See, you can do it. You don’t even have to make it that far.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

We still had a heck of a lot of Cooper convos. As soon as the two weeks were up, like to the second, Juno texted him to check in. He wrote back that he wanted to make the break an official breakup.

Juno, understandably, didn’t want to be alone. After orchestra practice wrapped up, our friend Soraya, who plays cello, said we should go out for pizza. I looked at Juno, who nodded faintly. “Or anything else you want to eat,” I said.

“Oh yeah, you pick,” Soraya told Juno. “We could go to that salad place.”

“Sloane hates salads,” Juno said.

“I’d eat one for you,” I assured her.

“You’d eat a *salad* for me?” She sounded like she might cry.

“Of course,” I said. Really I’d just eat the cherry tomatoes and the shredded cheese that came on top, and leave the lettuce behind. But I wouldn’t mind.

Juno blinked back the tears and shook her head. “It’s okay. I’m not really hungry.”

“You’re giving Cooper too much power over your life,” I said. “You’ve got to eat.”

“If you guys want pizza, that’s fine,” Juno said.

We went to Trepiccione’s, because our friend Brody’s brother Mack worked there and, as long as his boss wasn’t around, he always let us order beer. It wasn’t a huge draw for me, since I hate beer. Soraya’s girlfriend, Rachel, had joined us and she ordered a pitcher.

When she started to pour me a cup, I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“Juno?” Rachel asked.

“Can’t,” she said. “I’m the designated driver.”

“You know, Sloane,” Soraya said, “you’d make the perfect designated driver if you actually drove.”

“Yeah, I know.” I felt especially bad about it since Juno was heartbroken and could probably use a drink. But I hadn’t taken my driver’s test yet, so all I had was a permit. In the state of Minnesota, you can’t drive with a permit unless the person in the front passenger seat is herself a licensed driver and at least twenty-one. It was a relief that my friends were all under twenty-one, because I wouldn’t have done it anyway. “I really hate the taste of beer,” I told Soraya.

“Yeah, me too,” she said. “But I drink it anyway.”

“That sounds like a metaphor for high school,” I said, glancing over at Juno. Coming up with metaphors was a joke between us. She said I used them more than the average person, and she was always trying to come up with her own—the more ridiculous, the better. As for me, I think it had something to do with writing and looking for connections between things. I planned to be a writer when I grew up.

Actually, my English teacher, Dr. Lee, would argue that I was a writer *already*: all you need to do to be a writer is write, she often says. She also says being a writer doesn’t mean you think writing is easy; it means you’re willing to do it even when it’s hard.

I love writing. I’ve loved it for as long as I can remember. It wasn’t until fifth or sixth grade that I realized that creative writing

wasn't everyone's favorite part of school, and that was such a shock to me. Sure, I understood that people like different things. Some people are Team Chocolate, and some are Team Vanilla. Some people like creamy peanut butter, and some people prefer crunchy. (Which is ridiculous.) But how could they prefer math worksheets, or memorizing where the oceans are, over using words to create new things? That's the best part of writing, in my opinion. Everyone gets ideas all day long. They pop up out of nowhere, and most of the time we let them go. But when you write, you get to keep your ideas and build on them. You get to make something where there was nothing. It's like magic.

It turned out that Juno dreaded when we got creative writing assignments in school. As soon as we were old enough to pick the kinds of classes we wanted to take, she swore she'd never take another writing class again. What can I say? She also likes crunchy peanut butter. But she was still amused by a good metaphor.

Except not this time. She didn't even smile.

"You know in the movies when they say, 'We'll take a break, and then if we miss each other enough, we'll meet at such-and-such time, and if we both show up, we'll know we're meant to be together?'" Juno asked.

The three of us nodded.

She went on, "It always works out in the movies. The couple realizes how much they've missed each other, which means they love each other, and they recommit in a major way and live happily ever after. I guess they don't make movies about when the guy decides he doesn't want to be with you, and he doesn't show up."

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“You guys had a designated meeting place?” Rachel asked.

“No. But if we had, Cooper wouldn’t have come, and that’s why there’ll never be a movie about me.”

“Sure there will be,” Soraya said. “You’re just in the middle of your movie right now, when it seems like all hope is lost because the guy didn’t show up. You’ll get a new boyfriend before the end, a much better boyfriend, and you guys will fall madly in love with each other in a way that you never knew was possible. Boom. End of movie.”

“I don’t want a new boyfriend. I just want *Cooper*.”

“You won’t want him by the end of the movie,” I said.

“I *will* still want him,” she insisted. “I’d rather have a bad time with Cooper than a good time with anyone else.”

“Oh, Juno.” I stroked her ponytail, and my hand caught the magnet part of her cochlear implant that was snapped to her head behind her right ear. Juno had had spinal meningitis when she was a year old and almost died. The high fevers destroyed her hearing.

As soon as she was well enough, Juno had surgery to get the cochlear implants. There are little microphones that sit right on top of each of her ears, and then pieces that snap onto magnets implanted under the skin. As long as she’s wearing them, she can hear nearly as well as everyone else. But at night, when she takes them off, she can’t hear a thing. She has special alarms to wake her up every morning—one under her pillow that vibrates, and another that flashes light. Plus her mom comes in to check that she’s up, just in case.

Juno snapped the magnet back onto her head, a swift, automatic

movement, like she wasn't even thinking about it. She slumped against me. I knew she was legitimately in pain, but there was a part of me that felt jealous. I was the only person at our table who'd never been in love, and I wondered when it would happen for me. I didn't say anything out loud though. I just squeezed Juno closer to me.

These were the things that were happening, and what I was thinking and feeling. I was living my last-ever normal moments before my life was completely upended. You don't ever get to know when you're living your last normal moments; if you did, they wouldn't be normal at all.

So even though Talley had already made her decision and done what she'd done, I remained unaware. All the while, a few miles away, my dad was getting home from work, the same time he always did. He would've pulled up into the right side of our double-wide driveway, walked up the steps, and wiped his shoes on the mat, regardless of whether they needed wiping. My dad is nothing if not a creature of habit, which is how I know that he walked into the kitchen first, put his briefcase on the counter, and grabbed a glass from the cabinet above the sink. He would've pulled open the freezer and grabbed a couple cubes of ice—he's the only member of our family who actually likes ice in his drinks—then added water from the tap and continued down the hall, toward the bathroom that is equidistant between Talley's bedroom and mine (we measured once, using our feet as measuring sticks).

That's where he found her.

Talley, still breathing, but faintly. She was on the floor, and

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the empty pill bottles were by the sink. My dad called 911. The attendants didn't let him in the ambulance with her, so he drove, and as he did, my dad, Garrett J. Weber, the calmest, most play-by-the-rules person I've ever known in my life, could not make himself obey the traffic laws. He was pulled over by a member of the Golden Valley police force, no doubt a well-meaning officer who thought Dad was one of those people who speeds behind ambulances just to get to their destinations faster. By the time he reached the hospital, there was a team working on Talley.

Dad called me from the waiting room. My phone buzzed at the precise moment that there was a lull in the conversation I was having with my friends. It was maybe a five-second window of relative silence. If Dad hadn't called right then, maybe I wouldn't have heard it. Juno was still leaning against me, and she shifted as I reached for my phone.

I look back on those seconds—unzipping my bag, glancing at the caller ID, then pressing the phone to my ear, “Hi, Dad”—those seconds were the last seconds that I was one kind of person. Then my dad told me where he was and why, and I was a different kind of person. Before becoming after, just like that.

Juno drove me to the hospital, and she was right behind me as I banged through the doors of the emergency room. I ran to the front desk screaming, “My sister! My sister!”

Someone led us to the waiting room. Dad was pacing back and forth. I sat on a well-worn blue chair; its arms were wooden. I remember that because my palms were sweating profusely, and I was making a slippery mess of things. I rubbed my hands down the

length of my thighs, drying them on my jeans, and leaned forward. Juno put a hand on my back. How quickly the comforter became the comfortee. I felt the heat from her hand, and it felt good until it felt like too much. I was too hot. I stood up, paced with Dad for a bit, then sat down again.

It was fifteen minutes, or maybe twenty, or thirty, or a few hours. It felt endless. Finally a doctor came in to talk to us. She told us her name, but it didn't register. She told Dad to sit down, which I took as a sign to spring up from my seat, like a kangaroo who'd been cattle-prodded.

You know when you just know something? Even before you really know it, you *know* it?

I knew my sister was dead. I *knew* it.

Dr. No-Name wouldn't have asked Dad to sit down if Talley was okay. I ran into a corner of the room. I was looking for somewhere to hide. I would've gone under a chair if that would've helped, even though I was seventeen years old, and seventeen-year-old high school juniors don't hide under chairs. They don't press their hands to their ears to keep from hearing the words. But if I didn't hear what the doctor was going to say, it was like anything was still possible. Talley could still be okay.

"Sloane," Dad said sharply, and I dropped my hands to my sides. My eyes darted from Dad to Juno and, finally, to the doctor herself.

"We did everything we could," the doctor said. "We used all our capabilities. But we couldn't save her."

The words were spoken and I heard them. There was no going

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back. Talley was gone. She'd been alive hours earlier. Her heart had been beating, and her lungs had been pumping, and blood had coursed through her veins. She'd scratched her itches and rubbed her eyes and gone to the bathroom. But now, everything had stopped.

It's so weird. One moment, you're a living, breathing person in the world; and the next, you're not.

Talley was not.

Natalie Belle Weber, age twenty-two, had been declared dead, in the same hospital where our mother had died fifteen years earlier. Fade to black, roll the credits, leave the theater.

The Talley Show was over.