



CHAPTER I



I REMEMBER WHAT was playing when the car slammed into us. It was Igor Stravinsky’s *The Firebird*. Like most pieces of classical music I’ve ever heard, it started out pretty slow, then sped up, then peaked, then slowed down again. My sister, Isabelle, asked Dad to put her orchestra practice CD in his SUV’s new, super-fancy, twelve-disk player. Isabelle unbuckled her seat belt, leaned over, and handed the CD to Dad from the backseat. Isabelle wanted to hear the music as the “Maestro” had intended it, she said, before she and her friends butchered it at Morrison High’s spring orchestra concert.

The car ride was a quiet one because our parents had announced two weeks earlier that they were separating. They had even stopped wearing their wedding rings. We were all still

living under the same roof, until Dad could find a place of his own and move out.

“You want us to wait for you, or do you want to get a bite with your friends?” Mom lowered the volume on *The Firebird* to ask Isabelle.

“If we’d left fifteen minutes earlier, we would have missed all this traffic.” Dad sounded irritated.

Even though he had sworn that nothing was going to change, that he would still “accompany” Mom to our school activities whenever he could, I was thinking that the four of us wouldn’t be eating together that much from now on, so I hoped Isabelle would choose us over her friends, at least for the night.

“Can Ron come with?” Isabelle asked.

Ron Johnson was a relatively new friend. I didn’t know much about him, except that he didn’t run around with Isabelle’s music crowd. He liked pilot whales, bird-watching, rock climbing, and all types of other outdoorsy things. He was a nature geek, like Isabelle.

“Sure he can come,” Dad said. He had calmed down a bit and was adjusting his muscular build in the driver’s seat. His voice was cool, but his hands weren’t. He was looking over the long line of cars ahead of us. They were packed so closely together that their lights seemed to merge. There was nowhere for him to go.

At first it seemed like a mirage, some type of optical illusion, like when water distorts light and the light gets misdirected. Suddenly the traffic began moving forward, then a red minivan sped up, crossed the middle lane, and slammed into the back door, on Isabelle's side.

I remember Isabelle trying to face me, her long thin braids, which were the same length as mine—our only concession to twindom—grazing her shoulders, then covering her face like a shield. She raised both her hands to her eyes at the same moment that Mom started screaming.

“*Vire! Turn! Vire!*” Mom shouted in the mix of English and Haitian Creole that she and Dad sometimes spoke, especially when they were anxious or angry.

But even as the cars around us tried to scurry out of the way and Dad did his best to follow their lead, there was still nowhere to turn. On one side of us was a concrete wall protecting a gated community from the street. Dad tried to steer the car as close to the wall as possible and as Mom's and my doors dragged against the wall, the tension created fireworks-like sparks. The scraping was loud, too, like thousands of fingernails against as many blackboards. I remember thinking that even if we made it out of this okay, between all the screeching and Mom's screaming, and the other cars on the street honking, we'd all be deaf for a long time.

The red minivan rammed into Isabelle's door one more time.

"Turn the other way. *Lòt kote a!*" Mom yelled, then began coughing as the smell of burning tires filled the inside of the car.

And here I am prolonging this so I can spend a little more time in this part of my life, in Dad's SUV, on an ordinary Friday evening heading to a concert where my sister was supposed to play.

In this part of my life, my sister, Isabelle, and I are identical twins, as identical as two drops of water, my grandparents liked to say, even though it's not completely true. Yes, we are both tall, five feet and eleven inches, like our dad. But Isabelle and I each have a small dot of a birthmark, on opposite sides, behind our ears. We are different in other ways, too. Even though I like to draw and think of myself as an artist—a future one anyway—I'd rather swim a hundred laps at high noon in the Miami sun than play the flute or the piano.

Before the second, bigger crash, I remember Isabelle saying, "The flute. The flute."

At first I thought it was because she was worried about the flute, but as Dad's car swerved closer and closer to the wall, the black leather flute case shot up from Isabelle's lap to her face, then bounced off her chin, pushing her head into the side window. The side window cracked, and I like to think that it was the impact of the red minivan, and not Isabelle's head,

that shattered the glass. Still, the flute case bounced back and struck the other side of Isabelle's face, before pounding into her ribs.

People say that things like this happen in slow motion, as though you suddenly become an astronaut in the antigravity chamber of your own life. This wasn't true for me. Things were speeding up instead, and I did my best to slow them down in my mind.

Mom was still screaming our names, taking turns calling Isabelle and me by both our proper names and our nicknames: Isabelle, Giselle, Iz, Giz, Izzie, Gizzie. She then called Dad ("David! David! David!"), shouting his name over and over again.

Isabelle didn't need to call my name. Not because of the twin telepathy thing people always talk about, but because we were holding hands. We were holding hands the tightest we have ever held hands in our entire lives. We were holding hands just as we had been holding hands on the day we were born. We had shared the same amniotic sac, and during Mom's C-section, the doctor told our parents that he would need to untwine our fingers to separate us. We were born holding hands. And now, even as our heads bobbed and our bodies flopped—mine strapped behind the seat belt and Isabelle's loose and unprotected—we screamed for our parents, who were screaming for us, but we wouldn't let go.