

The Last Song

Prologue

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Ronnie

Staring out the bedroom window, Ronnie wondered whether Pastor Harris was already at the church. She assumed that he was, and as she watched the waves breaking over the beach, she questioned whether he was still able to notice the play of light as it streamed through the stained-glass window above him. Perhaps not—the window had been installed more than a month ago, after all, and he was probably too preoccupied to notice anymore. Still, she hoped that someone new in town had stumbled into the church this morning and experienced the same sense of wonder she'd had when she'd first seen the light flood the church on that cold day in November. And she hoped the visitor had taken some time to consider where the window had come from and to admire its beauty.

She'd been awake for an hour, but she wasn't ready to face the day. The holidays felt different this year. Yesterday, she'd taken her younger brother, Jonah, for a walk down the beach. Here and there were Christmas trees on the decks of the houses they passed. At this time of year, they had the beach pretty much to themselves, but Jonah showed no interest in either the waves or the seagulls that had fascinated him only a few months earlier. Instead, he'd wanted to go to the workshop, and she'd taken him

there, although he'd stayed only a few minutes before leaving without saying a single word.

On the bedstand beside her lay a stack of framed photographs from the alcove of the small beach house, along with other items she'd collected that morning. In the silence, she studied them until she was interrupted by a knock on the door. Her mom poked her head in.

"Do you want breakfast? I found some cereal in the cupboard."

"I'm not hungry, Mom."

"You need to eat, sweetie."

Ronnie continued to stare at the pile of photos, seeing nothing at all. "I was wrong, Mom. And I don't know what to do now."

"You mean about your dad?"

"About everything."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

When Ronnie didn't answer, her mom crossed the room and sat beside her.

"Sometimes it helps if you talk. You've been so quiet these last couple of days."

For an instant, Ronnie felt a crush of memories overwhelm her: the fire and subsequent rebuilding of the church, the stained-glass window, the song she'd finally finished. She thought about Blaze and Scott and Marcus. She thought about Will. She was eighteen years old and remembering the summer she'd been betrayed, the summer she'd been arrested, the summer she'd fallen in love. It hadn't been so long ago, yet sometimes she felt that she'd been an altogether different person back then.

Ronnie sighed. "What about Jonah?"

"He's not here. Brian took him to the shoe store. He's like a puppy. His feet are growing faster than the rest of him."

Ronnie smiled, but her smile faded as quickly as it had come. In the silence that followed, she felt her mom gather her long hair and twist it into a loose ponytail on her back. Her mom had

been doing that ever since Ronnie was a little girl. Strangely, she still found it comforting. Not that she'd ever admit it, of course.

"I'll tell you what," her mom went on. She went to the closet and put the suitcase on the bed. "Why don't you talk while you pack?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

"How about at the beginning? Jonah mentioned something about turtles?"

Ronnie crossed her arms, knowing the story hadn't started there. "Not really," she said. "Even though I wasn't there when it happened, I think the summer really began with the fire."

"What fire?"

Ronnie reached for the stack of photographs on the bedstand and gently removed a tattered newspaper article sandwiched between two framed photos. She handed the yellowing newsprint to her mother.

"This fire," she said. "The one at the church."

Illegal Fireworks Suspected in Church Blaze *Pastor Injured*

Wrightsville Beach, NC—A fire destroyed historic First Baptist Church on New Year's Eve, and investigators suspect illegal fireworks.

Firefighters were summoned by an anonymous caller to the beachfront church just after midnight and found flames and smoke pouring from the back of the structure, said Tim Ryan, chief of the Wrightsville Beach Fire Department. The remains of a bottle rocket, an airborne firework, were found at the source of the blaze.

Pastor Charlie Harris was inside the church when the fire started and suffered second-degree burns to his arms and hands. He was transported to New Hanover Regional Medical Center and is currently in the intensive care unit.

It was the second church fire in as many months in New Hanover County. In November, Good Hope Covenant Church in Wilmington was completely destroyed. "Investigators are still treating it as suspicious, and as a case of potential arson at this point," Ryan noted.

Witnesses report that less than twenty minutes before the fire, bottle rockets were seen being launched on the beach behind the church, likely in celebration of the New Year. "Bottle rockets are illegal in North Carolina, and are especially dangerous considering the recent drought conditions," cautioned Ryan. "This fire shows the reason why. A man is in the hospital and the church is a total loss."

When her mom finished reading, she looked up, meeting Ronnie's eyes. Ronnie hesitated; then, with a sigh, she began to tell a story that still felt utterly senseless to her, even with the benefit of hindsight.

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Ronnie

Six months earlier

Ronnie slouched in the front seat of the car, wondering why on earth her mom and dad hated her so much.

It was the only thing that could explain why she was here visiting her dad, in this godforsaken southern armpit of a place, instead of spending time with her friends back home in Manhattan.

No, scratch that. She wasn't just *visiting* her dad. *Visiting* implied a weekend or two, maybe even a week. She supposed she could live with a *visit*. But to stay until late August? Pretty much the entire summer? That was banishment, and for most of the nine hours it had taken them to drive down, she'd felt like a prisoner being transferred to a rural penitentiary. She couldn't believe her mom was actually going to make her go through with this.

Ronnie was so enveloped in misery, it took a second for her to recognize Mozart's Sonata no. 16 in C Major. It was one of the pieces she had performed at Carnegie Hall four years ago, and she knew her mom had put it on while Ronnie was sleeping. Too bad. Ronnie reached over to turn it off.

"Why'd you do that?" her mom said, frowning. "I like hearing you play."

"I don't."

"How about if I turn the volume down?"

"Just stop, Mom. Okay? I'm not in the mood."

Ronnie stared out the window, knowing full well that her mom's lips had just formed a tight seam. Her mom did that a lot these days. It was as if her lips were magnetized.

"I think I saw a pelican when we crossed the bridge to Wrightsville Beach," her mom commented with forced lightness.

"Gee, that's swell. Maybe you should call the Crocodile Hunter."

"He died," Jonah said, his voice floating up from the backseat, the sounds mingling with those from his Game Boy. Her ten-year-old pain-in-the-butt brother was addicted to the thing. "Don't you remember?" he went on. "It was really sad."

"Of course I remember."

"You didn't sound like you remembered."

"Well, I did."

"Then you shouldn't have said what you just said."

She didn't bother to respond a third time. Her brother always needed the last word. It drove her *crazy*.

"Were you able to get any sleep at all?" her mom asked.

"Until you hit that pothole. Thanks for that, by the way. My head practically went through the glass."

Her mom's gaze remained fixed on the road. "I'm glad to see your nap put you in a better mood."

Ronnie snapped her gum. Her mom hated that, which was the main reason she'd done it pretty much nonstop as they'd driven down I-95. The interstate, in her humble opinion, was just about the most boring stretch of roadway ever conceived. Unless someone was particularly fond of greasy fast food, disgusting rest-stop bathrooms, and zillions of pine trees, it could lull a person to sleep with its hypnotically ugly monotony.

She'd said those exact words to her mother in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, but Mom had ignored the comments every

time. Aside from trying to make nice on the trip since it was the last time they'd see each other for a while, Mom wasn't one for conversation in the car. She wasn't all that comfortable driving, which wasn't surprising since they either rode the subways or took cabs when they needed to get somewhere. In the apartment, though . . . *that* was a different story. Mom had no qualms about getting into things there, and the building super had come by twice in the last couple of months to ask them to keep it down. Mom probably believed that the louder she yelled about Ronnie's grades, or Ronnie's friends, or the fact that Ronnie continually ignored her curfew, or the *Incident*—especially the *Incident*—the more likely it would be that Ronnie would care.

Okay, she wasn't the worst mom. She really wasn't. And when she was feeling generous, Ronnie might even admit that she was pretty good as far as moms went. It was just that her mom was stuck in some weird time warp in which kids never grew up, and Ronnie wished for the hundredth time that she'd been born in May instead of August. That was when she'd turn eighteen, and her mom wouldn't be able to force her to do anything. Legally, she'd be old enough to make her own decisions, and let's just say that coming down here wasn't on her to-do list.

But right now, Ronnie had *no choice* in the matter. Because she was still *seventeen*. Because of a *trick of the calendar*. Because Mom conceived *three months earlier than she should have*. What was that about? No matter how fiercely Ronnie had begged or complained or screamed or whined about the summer plans, it hadn't made the tiniest bit of difference. Ronnie and Jonah were spending the summer with their dad, and that was final. *No if, ands, or buts about it*, was the way her mom had phrased it. Ronnie had learned to *despise* that expression.

Just off the bridge, summer traffic had slowed the line of cars to a crawl. Off to the side, between the houses, Ronnie caught glimpses of the ocean. Yippee. Like she was supposed to care.

"Why again are you making us do this?" Ronnie groaned.

"We've already been through this," her mom answered. "You need to spend time with your dad. He misses you."

"But why all summer? Couldn't it just be for a couple of weeks?"

"You need more than a couple of weeks together. You haven't seen him in three years."

"That's not my fault. He's the one who left."

"Yes, but you haven't taken his calls. And every time he came to New York to see you and Jonah, you ignored him and hung out with your friends."

Ronnie snapped her gum again. From the corner of her eye, she saw her mother wince.

"I don't want to see or talk to him," Ronnie said.

"Just try to make the best of it, okay? Your father is a good man and he loves you."

"Is that why he walked out on us?"

Instead of answering, her mom glanced up into the rearview mirror.

"You've been looking forward to this, haven't you, Jonah?"

"Are you kidding? This is going to be great!"

"I'm glad you have a good attitude. Maybe you could teach your sister."

He snorted. "Yeah, right."

"I just don't see why I can't spend the summer with my friends," Ronnie whined, cutting back in. She wasn't done yet. Though she knew the odds were slim to none, she still harbored the fantasy that she could convince her mom to turn the car around.

"Don't you mean you'd rather spend all night at the clubs? I'm not naive, Ronnie. I know what goes on in those kinds of places."

"I don't do anything wrong, Mom."

"What about your grades? And your curfew? And—"

"Can we talk about something else?" Ronnie cut in. "Like why it's so imperative that I spend time with my dad?"

Her mother ignored her. Then again, Ronnie knew she had

every reason to. She'd already answered the question a million times, even if Ronnie didn't want to accept it.

Traffic eventually started to move again, and the car moved forward for half a block before coming to another halt. Her mother rolled down the window and tried to peer around the cars in front of her.

"I wonder what's going on," she muttered. "It's really packed down here."

"It's the beach," Jonah volunteered. "It's always crowded at the beach."

"It's three o'clock on a Sunday. It shouldn't be this crowded."

Ronnie tucked her legs up, hating her life. Hating everything about this.

"Hey, Mom?" Jonah asked. "Does Dad know Ronnie was arrested?"

"Yeah. He knows," she answered.

"What's he going to do?"

This time, Ronnie answered. "He won't do anything. All he ever cared about was the piano."

Ronnie *hated* the piano and swore she'd never play again, a decision even some of her oldest friends thought was strange, since it had been a major part of her life for as long as she'd known them. Her dad, once a teacher at Juilliard, had been her teacher as well, and for a long time, she'd been consumed by the desire not only to play, but to compose original music with her father.

She was good, too. Very good, actually, and because of her father's connection to Juilliard, the administration and teachers there were well aware of her ability. Word slowly began to spread in the obscure "classical music is all-important" grapevine that constituted her father's life. A couple of articles in classical music magazines followed, and a moderately long piece in *The New York Times* that focused on the father-daughter connection came next,

all of which eventually led to a coveted appearance in the Young Performers series at Carnegie Hall four years ago. That, she supposed, was the highlight of her career. And it was a highlight; she wasn't naive about what she'd accomplished. She knew how rare an opportunity like that was, but lately she'd found herself wondering whether the sacrifices had been worth it. No one besides her parents probably even remembered the performance, after all. Or even cared. Ronnie had learned that unless you had a popular video on YouTube or could perform shows in front of thousands, musical ability meant nothing.

Sometimes she wished her father had started her on the electric guitar. Or at the very least, singing lessons. What was she supposed to do with an ability to play the piano? Teach music at the local school? Or play in some hotel lobby while people were checking in? Or chase the hard life her father had? Look where the piano had gotten him. He'd ended up quitting Juilliard so he could hit the road as a concert pianist and found himself playing in rinky-dink venues to audiences that barely filled the first couple of rows. He traveled forty weeks a year, long enough to put a strain on the marriage. Next thing she knew, Mom was yelling all the time and Dad was retreating into his shell like he usually did, until one day he simply didn't return from an extended southern tour. As far as she knew, he wasn't working at all these days. He wasn't even giving private lessons.

How did that work out for you, Dad?

She shook her head. She *really* didn't want to be here. God knows she wanted nothing to do with any of this.

"Hey, Mom!" Jonah called out. He leaned forward. "What's over there? Is that a Ferris wheel?"

Her mom craned her neck, trying to see around the minivan in the lane beside her. "I think it is, honey," she answered. "There must be a carnival in town."

"Can we go? After we all have dinner together?"

"You'll have to ask your dad."

“Yeah, and maybe afterward, we’ll all sit around the campfire and roast marshmallows,” Ronnie interjected. “Like we’re one big, happy family.”

This time, both of them ignored her.

“Do you think they have other rides?” Jonah asked.

“I’m sure they do. And if your dad doesn’t want to ride them, I’m sure your sister will go with you.”

“Awesome!”

Ronnie sagged in her seat. It figured her mom would suggest something like that. The whole thing was too depressing to believe.