# ONE

I STARE. THE ARCHIVE ROOM STARES BACK. It's the size of a respectable closet, made from painted-over cinder-block and fluorescent lighting, near enough to a public school that I almost feel at home. It's crowded with stacks of cardboard boxes, sagging under the weight of one another and their corners dented carelessly. The cobwebs strung between them don't exactly carbon date the last time someone went in this room, but they give me the idea that it wasn't within recent memory. Something scuttles deep within its bowels, and I resist the urge to take a step back.

"This room?" I ask, trying not to sound judgmental. The Hermitage Historical Society is not a big place. There's not a lot of hope that Miss Vicki got turned around and opened the wrong door, or that she just wanted to show off the oldest junk room in town before moving on to what we were really looking for.

"This is the one!" Miss Vicki claps her hands together, her enthusiasm not quite infectious but charming. Maybe it's just

that she looks like somebody's grandma—not mine, but somebody's—with dyed strawberry blond hair and gray roots pulled into tight curls, and her habit of insisting on big, squishy hugs against her ample bosom. I've only met her twice now, but she seems to dress exclusively in T-shirts from blood drives and fun runs. Today a cartoon vampire winks at me from inside a big drop of blood.

"It's gotten a little out of hand these past couple of years," she goes on, bustling inside. Or at least bustling as much as the maze of boxes will allow for. "I didn't even realize how long it's been. You wouldn't believe the things people donate. If they had their way, the museum would look like a garage sale." She flaps her hand dismissively.

The museum is a similarly small room up front, long but narrow and stuck off the side of the Hermitage Municipal Building like a forgotten appendage. I'm not sure if they meant to put the historical society here from the beginning or if there was just nothing else to do with the room, but the effect is something like a poorly lit walk-in closet devoted to local history. We had to weave through a maze of folding displays and glass cases to get to the archive room at the back. The rest of the municipal building is better lit, but the building is clearly old enough that it might count as an artifact itself.

"So we're lucky to have you this summer, aren't we? I know it's not glamorous, but"—she shoots me a cheeky little smile, like we're sharing a secret—"I bet your uncle didn't tell you about that."

I smile awkwardly and force a little *heh* that's almost a laugh. Uncle Aaron didn't really tell me *anything* about the job except

that he could probably get me one. I don't think he was expecting me to agree to come stay in Hermitage for the summer at all when he suggested it. I wasn't either, honestly, but here I am. I don't want to tell Vicki that the only reason I'm here is because it's better than sitting at home and thinking about how much it sucks to have a dead mom.

Sorry. *Miss* Vicki.

"Looks like it should keep me busy," I say, which is absolutely true, even if the enthusiasm is feigned. "I appreciate the opportunity."

"Of course," she says, with that little smile and soft eyes people reserve for when they want you to know they feel bad for you but don't know how to say it. She clasps her hands in front of her. "We all loved Haley here. It's the least I could do."

My stomach flips, threatening to knock my breakfast back out of it. Of course she already knows about what happened. Mom grew up in Hermitage. I knew that—the only reason I'm here at all is because Uncle Aaron still lives here, but somehow I keep forgetting that all these strangers actually *knew* her.

I smile weakly. What do you say to that? "Do you mind if I go to the bathroom real quick?" I ask instead.

Miss Vicki directs me to the bathroom around the corner from the museum, where the walls are all painted peach and plastic signs point to where you can find different offices. There's a semicircle desk at the front of the municipal center that had someone bored sitting behind it when I came in, but I keep my eyes averted like I know what I'm doing. At least the bathrooms are single stalls so I can have an emotional breakdown without an audience. It's strange, the little things you learn to appreciate.

The door hangs crookedly and the toilet sits too low. The whole room is just a smidge below charmingly shabby, like everything else in the building. I ignore the toilet anyway, leaning against the white porcelain sink to stare at myself.

"What," I ask my reflection, "the hell were you thinking?"

She doesn't have an answer for me, which is fair enough, because neither do I. That Grace just looks back at me, a little harried, the bags under her eyes noticeable in the grayish fluorescent lights. I knew what I was doing when I decided to come to Hermitage for the summer. Dad hadn't agreed. I needed to focus on getting ready for college. Uncle Aaron is a flake. Why do you think Mom left and never went back? He had an unending supply of reasons, but I could only ever hear one.

He doesn't trust me to be on my own.

My hair is pulled up in a loose bun today, but I yank it out, the hair tie snagging painfully in tangles that weren't there this morning. My hair is longer than it's ever been, falling just past the small of my back now in blond waves that look yellow in the shitty lighting. My hands tremble just a little as I pull it over my shoulder and start braiding, my eyes fixed on the movement in the mirror. Over. Under. Through. My hands move of their own accord until the braid comes together, my tether to reality draped over one shoulder, and my fingers stop shaking, confident in this movement if not much else. It's a trick I taught myself when all the other ones didn't work. It's methodical and it keeps me from digging my fingernails into my nail beds. It makes my hair look nice too, which helps.

I tie the braid off at the end and hold it, the tail peeking through my fingers. I rub my thumb over it, taking just one last

moment of steadiness before I have to flush the toilet and step back out into the real world. I *know* why I'm here. I'm here because I couldn't stand the thought of a summer spent at home, looking at the empty place where Mom is supposed to be. Even after six months without her it's hard to wrap my mind around how it could look so wrong yet so familiar. When Uncle Aaron suggested coming here, it had all sounded so easy. Stay in his spare room, make a little extra money before college, get to know the place Mom came from. I didn't really care about those things as much as I did getting away, but it made sense.

Hermitage felt like a safe choice. Someplace I could belong without being noticed.

So much for that. *We all loved Haley here*. For people who loved her so much, only Uncle Aaron bothered to come to her funeral. I was hoping they wouldn't bother to care about her daughter either.

It's too late to change my mind now. I'll stay the entire summer if it means not admitting to Dad that maybe he'd been right.

I drop my braid and go through the motions of pretending like I was using the bathroom for its intended purpose and not quelling a panic attack, splashing a little water on my face instead of washing my hands.

I've got a smile back on by the time I step back into the archive room. "Okay," I say with as much enthusiasm as I can scrape together. "Just point me in the right direction."

Miss Vicki gives me a tour of the room, which mostly involves turning in place and pointing. The archive room is lit by two strips of fluorescent lighting and a single window on one of the walls. It offers a little natural light, though a stack of cardboard boxes

and an unhealthy sheen of dust make even the summer sunlight gray and murky. Industrial-looking shelving lines the walls and bisects the room, unofficially sectioning off an alcove by the door that I think is supposed to function as something like an office. Mine for the summer. And to think, some kids spend the summer before college at the beach.

"It could all use some dusting," Miss Vicki says unnecessarily, leading me into the back section, where disintegrating cardboard boxes vie for space. "But mostly this summer we're going to have you do a bit of digitizing for us."

"Oh," I say. "Okay." That makes sense. It's the modern age, and physical copies aren't going to last forever, especially in a room like this. Even if the internet infrastructure eventually collapses and we all end up subsistence farming, it'll be nice to have those digital copies in the meantime. "Do you have a scanner?"

"Not exactly," she hems.

"That's okay. Maybe the library—"

"They're not exactly scannable documents," Miss Vicki cuts in before I can get my hopes up too high. Despite her cheerful disposition, even she's not that optimistic. She sighs gustily. "Let me show you."

She gets on her tiptoes to pull down one of the boxes off the back shelves. It's one of those nondescript office kind of boxes, white cardboard that's gone yellow, the lid a little wonky where it was at one point bent out of shape and then back into it again. Miss Vicki stumbles a little under the awkward weight and I step forward—how old is she, seventy? I should've offered to grab it in the first place—but she's already recovered enough to set it down on top of one of the shorter stacks of boxes.

"Well!" She puffs, getting her breath back. Miss Vicki brushes off the top of it, kicking up motes of dust into the already murky air. "We thought about doing something similar in the nineties. Only we didn't have digital scanning back then, so we had some of our volunteers record them to audio. These were already starting to get a bit out of style back then, but, well, it's what we had." She pulls the lid off the box and sets it aside, but not before giving me a sharp look. She squints. "Have you even seen a cassette tape before?"

"Yes," I say, a little defensively. Of course I've seen a cassette tape before. Not that it's come up a lot, but I've volunteered in the school library and seen more obsolete things than a tape lurking in the storage closet. Still, I lean forward to get a better look at them. The tapes fill the box in three neat rows, two layers stacked on top of each other to fill the entire box snugly. I can't tell at a glance how many there are, which is probably a good thing, because I'm already starting to feel daunted.

"Well, it's a good thing we did it, because most of the originals were destroyed when the building flooded during Hurricane Andrew. We've got what's left on display in the museum, but we lost quite a few artifacts. Most of what we have of Hermitage's history is on these tapes," Miss Vicki says gravely, one hand resting protectively over the rows of tapes. "But tapes don't last forever, especially if it ever floods again. So we're so glad to have you this summer! We run on grants and donations, you know, so we don't really have anything extra for contracting out fancy scanning or anything."

Miss Vicki must be very good at applying for grants if she convinces anyone to give money to support the history of

Hermitage, Florida, of all places. My first impressions of the town so far have been small and sun-bleached, more *outdated* than *historical*, but I guess it matters to someone what's happened here. It clearly matters a lot to her.

So I guess it matters a lot to me too. At least until the end of the summer.

Miss Vicki sets me up at the desktop in the front corner, fussing over an unnecessary explanation of the login details written in cursive on a sticky note taped to the monitor. She spends more time on that than she does on the ancient tape player she unearths along with a connected pair of massive over-the-ear headphones. By the time she leaves me to get to it, the desk is crowded between the monitor, the tape player, and a small tower of boxes perched precariously close to the edge. I sink into the desk chair and the whole thing squeaks, except for the threadbare green cushion, which sighs along with me. Well. Here we are.

My hand goes to my braid, my thumb working between the twisted hair. I never really thought I would get this far. I don't know why—maybe I thought Dad would stop me, and every step of the way I think I waited a little to see if he would. Packing the car, pulling out of the driveway. The three-hour drive between Tampa to Hermitage, just down the coast but somehow a million miles away. I thought the drive would be worse, and maybe that's why we never visited, but it was entirely unremarkable except for a couple spots of traffic. I guess Hermitage is just a place that no one really wants to go back to.

Maisie called me once on the drive over, to tell me something about her cat trying to get into my room—little sister stuff. Maisie is fourteen and too old to be making excuses to call just because

she won't admit that she misses me, but Mom dying put us all in a weird place. I turned eighteen without her, three months after the accident. Sometimes I feel like a kid and sometimes I feel so old it's unbearable. It doesn't really make sense.

I sigh again and push the memories aside. I'm here, like I wanted to be, and no one ever said that finding emotional equilibrium had to be glamorous. It's work, the grief counselor said, and I don't think this is what he meant, but hopefully it's good enough. I face the tapes like they're an approaching army.

A small army. The box doesn't look that big on the outside, but I have no idea how long each tape will take. I open the lid, kicking up a fresh puff of dust as I pull back the folded cardboard. It's only half-full. There are maybe about thirty tapes nestled in a single layer, with a little empty space at the end where the last tapes tip over sloppily. I run my fingertips over them and pull the first tape out curiously. I *have* seen a cassette tape before, but that doesn't mean I've *used* them.

It's a little bigger than a credit card, a hard case of black plastic protecting the spools inside. There's a label on its face, protected from dust where it sat nestled against its brothers. This one says *Hermitage Census Records 1930* in tight, scrawling handwriting with the initials JCU in the corner. On one end of the box, in different, blockier handwriting, someone has written *THE UNDERWOOD TAPES*. I frown at it, frustrated already just on principle. The person who recorded them went through the trouble of labeling the tapes, at least, but someone else just shoved them in a box under a vague name and called it a day. Why would you sort them based on who recorded them and not what they're actually about? If these tapes are the last remnants

of Hermitage's precious local history, how is anyone supposed to find them?

God, I can't be caring this much already. There's no way Hermitage local history is that important, regardless of what Miss Vicki might think. When Miss Vicki retires and the grant money dries up they'll turn the entire museum into a storage closet. Or knock down the whole building for condos, the way they do everywhere else in Florida.

I take a deep breath and consider how to go about this in the least painful way possible. I don't know a lot about archives or preservation, but I know there are ways to digitize the audio directly from the tape. They're *also* ways that cost money. They can pay me minimum wage for the summer and get something almost as good. Later I'll play the tapes out loud and record the audio—probably on my phone, judging by the rest of the Historical Society's setup—but I'll transcribe them first. It's going to be the hardest part, and I get the feeling that by the end of the summer it's going to be the absolute last thing I want to do.

Better to start now, when it's actually a little bit interesting.

It takes a little finagling to get the tape player to cooperate. Not because it's especially complicated—the symbols are all the same as they are now, just set over clunky buttons practically the size of piano keys—but because the plastic cover sticks and I'm trying sincerely not to break anything. Finally I pull the headphones over my ears, my braid tucked away where my fingers can't find it, and the beleaguered hum of the air-conditioning drops away. I get my Word document ready, and like a maestro conducting the opening chord, I hit the play button.

The tape recorder jumps to life with an eager *whirl-click-whirl*. The headphones crackle.

*"Audio description artifact number one: The 1930 Hermitage Census. Recorded by Jake Underwood. Recorded October 5th, 1991."*