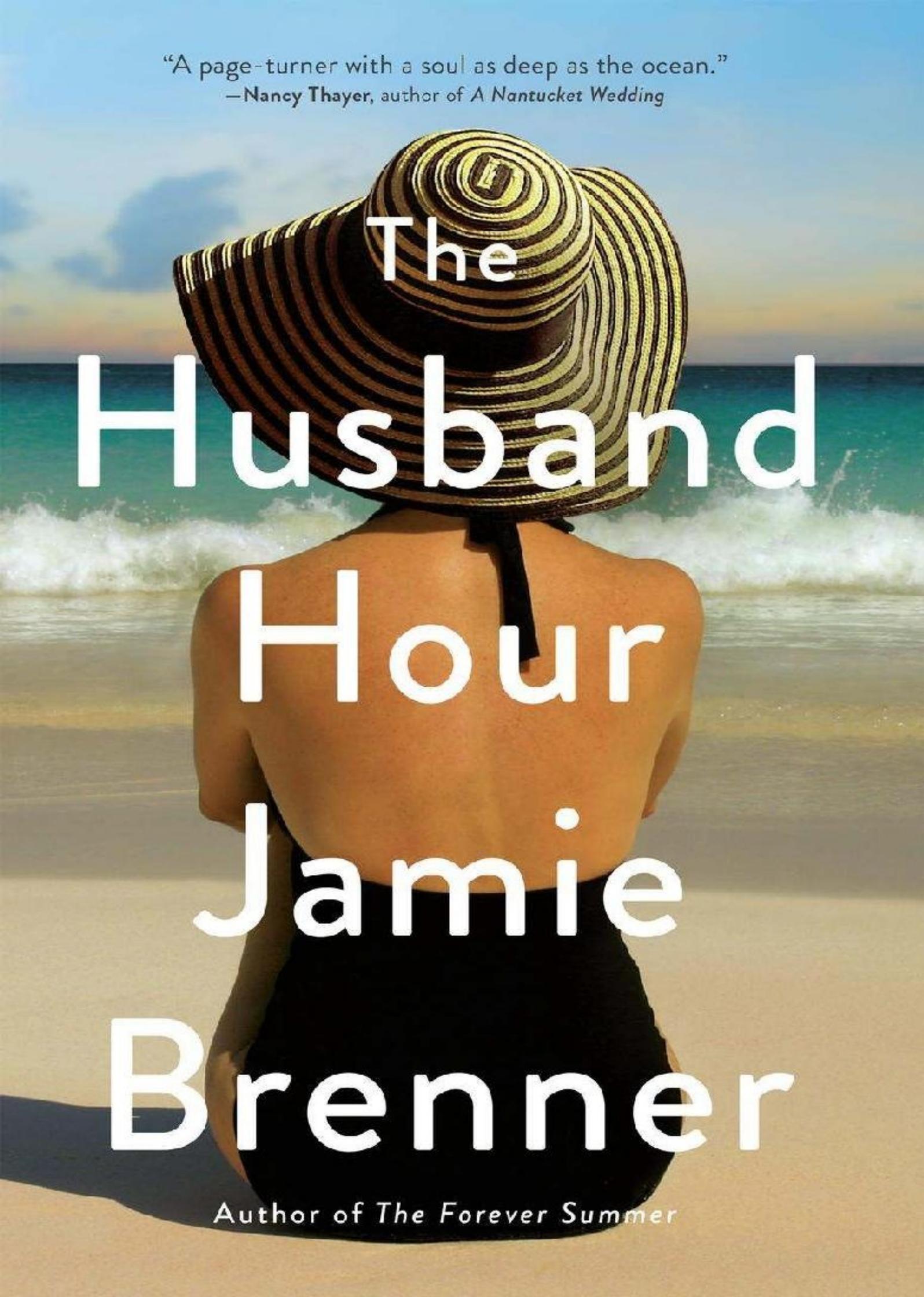


"A page-turner with a soul as deep as the ocean."

—Nancy Thayer, author of *A Nantucket Wedding*



The
Husband
Hour
Jamie
Brenner

Author of *The Forever Summer*

The
Husband
Hour

Jamie
Brenner



Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

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Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

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First Edition: April 2018

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ISBN 978-0-316-39492-5

E3-20180222-DA-PC

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*This book is dedicated to all the brave men and women who serve
this country and to the families who support them.*

Chapter One

The warm winters still surprised her, every day a gift. But that particular morning, the heat was a problem. She didn't want to wear a short-sleeved dress.

It seemed the entire city of Los Angeles had turned out, like it was the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards. The Staples Center arena was filled to capacity, with hundreds more left standing outside. Lauren looked out at a sea of silver-and-black hockey jerseys, military uniforms, and American flags, all the colors blurring together like a spinning pinwheel.

She had spent dozens of days and nights in that arena cheering on her husband playing ice hockey for the LA Kings. But today, she wasn't part of the crowd. She was separate, up front and on display, sitting by the podium dressed in black and hiding behind dark glasses.

Surrounded by thousands of people, Lauren felt completely alone.

An hour into her husband's memorial service, she was dizzy with nerves and exhaustion. Grief was an odd thing. It made you numb but exquisitely sensitive at the same time. She had to admire the emotion's versatility; it now owned her completely.

She scanned the front row of the stands to find her parents. It was strange; for the first time in years she truly wanted her mother, and yet there was nothing her mother could say or do to make her feel better. She had almost told her parents not to come, and she certainly didn't want to see her sister.

"This nonsense has gone on long enough," her mother had said over the phone. "You just lost your husband. You need your family around you. Of course your sister will be there."

But she wasn't.

Now, under the glare of television lights set up for ESPN's live broadcast of the memorial service, her parents looked lost. Lauren tried to catch her mother's eye, but she was focused on the jumbotron showing the president's tribute to Rory: "Our fallen soldier, a true American hero." Her mother's expression seemed to say, *How did we get here?*

Lauren hoped she didn't have the same expression on her face. Not when the world was watching. Not when photos of her would appear everywhere. Would they see what she was thinking? That this felt like theater, a circus, a show that had nothing to do with her husband? That she was just playing her part, a role she hadn't auditioned for and didn't want?

Grieving widow. Just twenty-four years old. Such a tragedy. Such a loss.

And then the part of the show when a man she'd never met before handed her a folded American flag. She reached for it mechanically and placed it in her lap. She knew these ceremonies, the symbolism of the flag, were meant to give her comfort.

But going through the motions just made her feel like a fake. It was useless; her world would never again have meaning.

Sitting there, she tried to deflect the waves of sympathy, thinking, *This is my fault. If you only knew; this is my fault.*

Just when she thought the moment couldn't get any worse, it did. She started to cry, under the scrutiny of millions of eyes on her, the flash of cameras capturing every sob. It was unbearable to have something so private—losing her husband—play out so publicly.

Just get through today, she told herself. After today, all the attention would fade. The world would move on. And she could disappear.

As a war correspondent, Matt Brio had landed in some uncomfortable and even dangerous situations all around the globe: Tsunami-ravaged Thailand. Baghdad. Syria. For a few crazy years, he had worked in unimaginable conditions. He should have been prepared for anything, and yet landing in sunny LA after flying in from freezing New York somehow still managed to throw him off his game.

Drenched in sweat outside the Staples Center, thinking he would happily trade his Canon XF100 for a bottle of water, he willed himself to focus and panned the video-camera lens across the throngs of people outside. About a yard away from him, a grown man wearing an LA Kings number 89 jersey held his young son's hand and sobbed. Matt wanted to get the man on camera and ask, "What did Rory Kincaid mean to you?" but he didn't have time. The real story was inside.

The question was, could Matt actually *get* inside? He wouldn't know until he tried flashing his long-expired press pass, a relic from his days working in journalism.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he ignored it. No doubt it was someone from two time zones away wondering why the hell he'd canceled the scheduled shoot for the documentary he was in the middle of directing. But if there was one thing Matt had learned, it was that it was better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, and that went for both missing the shoot today and for crashing the memorial service.

Matt made his way to security and handed his press pass to the guard. If he'd thought the whole thing through better, he might have been able to wrangle a legitimate pass from an old colleague. But nothing about this day had been thought through. The flight to LA, the decision to show up at the service, all impulses. His entire career had started with an impulse, so why stop now?

But this wasn't a career move. What drew him to the stadium on that hot and inconvenient day, the magnetic pull that he could no more ignore than he could stop breathing, was personal.

The guard waved him inside, either missing the expiration date on his pass or simply not caring. The service was half over, anyway. Matt followed a second security guy's direction to the gate and escalator that would lead to the press box.

Matt jostled for a spot in the crowded pen, nodding to a few journalists he knew and then looking up at the video of the president eulogizing the hockey star turned soldier. Beside him, a woman wearing a CNN badge began to cry at the words "American hero." *Seriously?* Matt thought. Okay, it was a tragedy. But was it more of a tragedy because Rory Kincaid had been a famous athlete? There were thousands of

guys deployed overseas at that very moment.

The jumbotron screen went dark, and a three-star general stepped up to the microphone.

Matt was more interested in the woman seated just a few feet away from him, Rory Kincaid's young widow. He adjusted his camera, watching her through the lens. Her dark hair was pulled into a low ponytail, her face obscured by large black sunglasses. She was the epitome of fragile grief, and for a second Matt felt a pang. He shook it away.

Matt understood grief. He understood loss. But *his* hero had died without fanfare, just a footnote in history. One of tens of thousands; no one cared about that story.

So Matt supposed the Rory Kincaid story would have to do.

Chapter Two

Beth Adelman tried to keep up a cheerful patter of conversation during the hour-and-a-half drive from Philadelphia to the Jersey Shore. Her daughter was having none of it. A month since Lauren had lost her husband, and she was only getting more withdrawn.

Lauren slumped in the passenger seat, staring out the window. Late January; the sky was gray and the trees bare. Beth turned on the defroster and glanced over at Lauren.

It was hard not to think of all the summer Saturday mornings when she and her husband and the girls had made this same drive. She would wake her daughters at the crack of dawn, and Lauren and Stephanie would climb into the backseat wearing bathing suits under their shorts and T-shirts. Still yawning, with butter-slick bagels in their hands, the girls squabbled. In those days, arguments over foot space and other backseat boundaries began before they even pulled onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike. If a foot or stray beach-bag strap strayed over the line to someone else's side while the car was still in the driveway, yelling would ensue, and Howard, cramming their suitcases into the trunk, would call out, "I'm going to stick one of you in here!" Joyful noise.

Such a contrast to the current ride.

Beth knew she was looking at the past through rose-colored glasses, but even the eternal bickering between the girls was something she would gladly take in exchange for the current silence.

She turned off the Atlantic City Expressway, and Lauren lowered her window. Beth heard the call of seagulls, and she tried to convince herself that everything was going to be fine. That Lauren wasn't making a mistake.

Beth didn't usually think of the beach house that her parents had left her as secluded, but geographically it was out there. Absecon Island was a barrier island on the Jersey Shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Beth was afraid that it was the remoteness that attracted Lauren to the house, not just the comfort of family memories.

There was no traffic on Ventnor Avenue. In the winter, the Jersey Shore felt deserted. Beth was certain Lauren was underestimating how isolated she would feel all alone in that big house in the half-empty town under gray skies and with the chill of the wind off a cold ocean. But in the weeks since Rory had been killed in Iraq, there was just no talking to her. It was a tragedy, a god-awful tragedy. Of course it was. But her daughter had shut down, and for the life of her, Beth had no idea what to do about it.

"Lauren, look—there's Lucy!" Beth said, pointing to the six-story elephant, a tourist attraction that had fascinated Lauren as a child. "You girls used to get so excited whenever we passed her. Remember?"

Lauren glanced to her left but said nothing.

Minutes later, Beth turned off Atlantic Avenue and onto a short cul-de-sac. The house her parents had left to her was a beachfront four-bedroom Colonial Revival, gray and white but somehow stuck with the name the Green Gable. In the old days, it wasn't until hours after their arrival that the girls set foot inside. As soon as the car turned into the driveway, they pulled off their flip-flops and ran to the sand like they were "shot from a cannon," as her father said every single weekend. It was still early, and the beach was empty enough for them to make an easy beeline to the ocean, Stephanie calling out, "Last one to the water is a rotten egg!"

"It's not a race!" Lauren yelled, and yet she always dashed to keep up with her sister, her feet sinking into deep pockets of sand as she ran, stumbling but moving forward.

Beth sighed. Why couldn't life always be that simple?

Now, the Green Gable was exactly as it had always been, except the wind- and sand-battered wood sign was more faded, the moss-green words almost indistinguishable from the gray background. Beth turned off the car and closed her eyes. How she wished her own mother were still around to tell her how to deal with this. But she was gone, leaving a beautiful house that was small consolation.

Lauren just sat there, zombielike.

"Come on, Lauren. Grab one of the bags."

The house smelled musty and close. Beth cracked some windows despite the frigid wind. When she'd left in August, she hadn't expected to return until spring. She couldn't have imagined that a few months later, her handsome, vibrant son-in-law would be dead, leaving her younger daughter a widow, and that the Green Gable would beckon to Lauren with some false promise of peace.

"I'll make a run to Casel's for groceries," Beth said, heading for the kitchen to take stock of what, if anything, she had left behind.

"No, Mom. Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

Lauren lugged the heaviest suitcase up the stairs. Beth abandoned the kitchen and followed her, surprised to see her turn into her old childhood bedroom.

"Why not the master bedroom? It has the better view."

"That still feels like Gran's room."

"Don't be silly, Lauren. If you're going to be here for a few weeks, you might as well—"

"Not a few weeks, Mom. I'm staying here indefinitely."

The bedroom was white and sea-foam green with a queen-size bed framed in antique cast iron. A bone-colored French pot cupboard served as her nightstand. There was a pen on it, and a framed photo of Lauren and her older sister. Stephanie had one arm draped around Lauren's shoulders as they stood at the edge of the ocean, both of them sunburned, sandy, with long wet hair.

Beth sighed heavily. "Lauren, I love you, hon, but I'm really thinking this isn't the best idea. I understand you don't want to stay in LA but at least come home to Philly so we can be there for you. You need a support system."

Lauren turned her back to her, opened her suitcase. "I need to be alone."

Beth walked to the window, looking out at the overcast sky. "I don't know what you expect me to do. Just leave you here? Just turn around and get back on the highway?"

“Yeah. And Mom, remember, if anyone contacts you about me, you don’t know where I am.”

“Who’s going to contact me?”

“I don’t know, Mom. A reporter? Just don’t say anything. Promise?”

“Of course. No reporters—got it. But you’re doing the wrong thing, isolating yourself out here.”

No response. Beth was overwhelmed with one of the worst feelings a mother could experience in the face of her child’s pain: powerlessness.

Four Years Later

Chapter Three

Lauren's feet pounded the boardwalk in the final stretch of her morning run. With the ocean to her right, the beachfront homes of Longport to her left, she looked straight ahead. She ran without headphones so she could hear the ocean and the seagulls. Most days, they were the only sounds along her solitary twelve-mile run from Longport to Atlantic City and back.

Today felt different. It wasn't just the changing early-morning light, though that was part of it. In the winter, she did her entire run in darkness. Lately, halfway through, the sun was up. Today, by the time she passed Ventnor, at around the ten-mile mark, it was bright enough that the path was dotted with cyclists. Mothers were pushing strollers. There was no use denying it; winter had turned to spring, and summer was right around the corner. The invasion was coming.

Longport in the winter was a recluse's paradise. Some people called it a ghost town; Lauren had become quite comfortable in the company of ghosts. While most of the year-round residents gritted their teeth through the winter, waiting for beach season, Lauren felt the complete opposite. The *summer* was her time to grin and bear it, to endure. The bright long days, the crowds, the string of patriotic holidays.

Don't think about it, she told herself. You still have time.

Thwap-thwap—the beat of her sneakers against the wooden boards. The steady pounding of her heart. A familiar rush of energy, almost a giddiness, carried her down the wooden steps to the cul-de-sac in front of her house.

She jogged slowly in a circle, sweat cooling against her neck, then, dizzy, she bent over, hands on her knees, her head down. She looked up at the sound of tires on gravel, a car turning onto her block. Her stomach sank.

What were her parents doing here?

Her parents were devoted summer weekenders. Starting Memorial Day weekend and going through Labor Day, they showed up Thursday afternoon and left Sunday night. It was a shock to her system after months of solitude, but she adjusted to it by the middle of the summer and sometimes felt almost sad to see them drift back into their Philadelphia routine. She never visited them in Philadelphia at the old stone house where she'd grown up. She never left the island. This was a real issue only once a year, when her sister had a birthday party for her son, Ethan. Lauren felt guilty for being an absentee aunt.

"Honey! I thought you agreed to cut down on the running. You're getting way too thin," her mother said, slamming the car door and rushing over to her.

"I'll get the bags," her father said.

"I'm fine, Mom. What are you guys doing here?"

Her mother looked at her strangely. "It's Memorial Day weekend, hon."

Was it? Lauren could have sworn that was next weekend.

She glanced at her sports watch. She had to shower and get to work. The Thursday before Memorial Day, the breakfast crowd would be lining up at the restaurant door.

“We’re getting an early start,” her mother said, looking tense.

“Any particular reason why?”

“Oh, just lots to do. I want to get the house ready, clean out the guest bedrooms...”

Lauren looked at her sharply. “The guest bedrooms? Why?”

“Your sister is coming.”

Matt Brio climbed the three flights of stairs to the editing suite in Williamsburg, carrying doughnuts. He was unhappy to find himself out of breath by the second floor. *That’s what you get for editing a film 24/7*, he told himself. And he didn’t see that changing any time in the near future.

On a Thursday at noon, his suite mates were all plugged into their headsets and staring at their computer screens. Matt made a cup of coffee at the community Keurig machine and booted up his machine. Fuck coffee—he needed a drink.

He set the box of doughnuts next to his computer. He figured if he was asking someone for a six-figure check, the least he could do was provide refreshments.

“I’m going to be in Brooklyn anyway, so it’s a good time to stop by,” Craig Mason had said, just like that. As if Matt hadn’t been asking him to look at his reel for six months.

The Rory Kincaid project had been a rough road. Matt sometimes wondered if he had bad karma due to how he’d handled things at the beginning. When it became his passion project, he dropped out of a film he had committed to directing. As a result, he ruined his relationship with Andrew Dobson, the producer who had backed his first two films. Matt’s reputation took a hit, and he suspected that was why he had failed to get a solid financial investment for the Rory Kincaid story; it had nothing to do with the merit of the project. So Matt put his own money into making the movie. Four years later, the money was gone, and he needed a financial lifeline.

But it wasn’t enough just to finance a movie and get it made; you had to be able to market it. Next winter would be the five-year anniversary of Rory Kincaid’s death. It felt crucial to secure distribution by that milestone.

He put on his headphones and clicked open a video of seventeen-year-old Rory Kincaid scoring a hat-trick goal for his high-school team. As the puck slid into the net, Rory reacted with his signature gesture, lifting both hands into the air, then pulling his left arm sharply in, bent at the elbow, his fist tight: *score*. Next, footage of commentators on CNN: “We have breaking news that former NHL star Rory Kincaid, who walked away from a reported seven-figure contract with the LA Kings to enlist in the military, has been killed in the line of duty.” Matt clicked through to footage of the memorial service. He moved forward through the frames, pausing on the widow standing against a backdrop of American flags next to a blown-up portrait of Rory in his U.S. Rangers uniform. The guy was so ruggedly handsome, he was like the person central casting sent over when you asked for “hero.”

Officers in full military dress flanked the flag-draped coffin in a procession out of the Staples Center. Behind them, the grieving widow walked as if she were wading

through water.

A tap on his shoulder. Startled, he turned around. Craig Mason.

Craig Mason was a former Wall Street banker now in his mid-fifties and on his second career. “Second life” was how he had put it to Matt when they’d first met for drinks six months earlier.

“Hey, man,” Matt said, quickly closing the file and standing up. “Let me just find another chair.”

“Didn’t realize it was such tight real estate in here. Maybe we should have met at my office.”

“Not a problem,” Matt said, sliding a chair in front of his work space. Craig was busy looking at the two dozen index cards arranged on the corkboard above Matt’s desk that mapped out all the beats of the film *American Hero: The Rory Kincaid Story*.

Craig slid into the seat next to him.

“Doughnut?” Matt offered casually. As if he weren’t at the absolute end of the line.

Craig shook his head. “My new girlfriend is a Pilates instructor. The pressure is on. So, how much are we looking at?”

“Just the selects,” Matt said. “Some of the interviews, to give you a sense of where I’m at since we last spoke.”

“Sounds good,” Craig said.

Their first meeting, Craig had told Matt that he was at a stage of life where he wanted to do something “meaningful” with his hard-earned and considerable fortune. But Matt soon realized that even people with money to burn don’t want to burn it.

Still, there was glamour in feature films, and the promise of social progress with documentaries. For people like Craig Mason, that sometimes made films worth the gamble. He’d invested in two features and bought himself a ride to the award-season parties and red carpets. He’d put money into one documentary about clean water because that was his pet cause. But on that project, Craig had learned that documentaries don’t make money.

One of Matt’s buddies on the clean-water doc introduced Craig to Matt. But Craig was in no rush to fund a second documentary. During their initial meeting about *American Hero*, both of them drinking martinis at a gastro pub on the Upper East Side, Craig told Matt, “I’m just not feeling it on this one. I don’t see the urgency.”

American Hero was originally an examination of why some people answer the call to serve their country, and others don’t—viewed through the lens of the life of Rory Kincaid. But the film had morphed, changed, like a breathing entity. All Matt’s films felt alive to him, growing under his care and guidance. But none as much as this one.

He handed Craig headphones and they both plugged in so they wouldn’t disturb the other filmmakers in the room. Matt clicked on a file. He pressed Play, and an image of the entrance to Rory’s Pennsylvania high school, Lower Merion, filled the screen against the sound of the roar of a crowd. The camera closed in on the school’s motto carved in stone: ENTER TO LEARN, GO FORTH TO SERVE. Then a still photo of Rory, all blazing dark eyes, looking right at the camera. Then footage of the high-school coach. “How many thousands upon thousands of kids have walked through the doors of this school over the years, and how many have actually taken that motto to heart?” And then, video of Rory as a young teenager on the ice, racing toward the net. Voice-over, a woman: “Generations of Kincaids have served. World War Two. Korea. Vietnam. My

older son, Emerson, served in the First Gulf War.” This from a sit-down with Rory’s mother that he’d luckily gotten before she passed away. Then the film cut to her. “Rory had a gift. He could skate fast and get the puck in the net. It’s as simple as that.” She pulled out a photo album and flipped through pictures of Rory as a boy, several of him on the ice, a few of him running around with a Rottweiler. “He named him Polaris,” she said. “What kind of name is that for a dog from a six-year-old boy? But he loved the stars.”

Footage of Rory playing for the Kings. And then a press conference, Rory in a blue button-down shirt, his hair wet. “No game is perfect, no player is perfect,” Rory said. “We look at our athletes as heroes.” And then that wry smile, the one that always suggested that what he was saying was just the tip of the iceberg. “I have different heroes.”

Next, military footage. Soldiers in the Middle East. A clip of news anchors announcing that hockey star Rory Kincaid was walking away to enlist in the military. “A remarkable move from a remarkable young man,” one of them said. And then the secretary of defense, flanked by American flags, speaking at a press conference: “Corporal Kincaid sacrificed himself in the name of liberty and justice around the world.”

Game footage: Rory’s rookie season, the Kings against the Chicago Blackhawks. Rory takes a rough hit against the boards and goes down on the ice. Five games later, a stick against the jaw takes him down. October 2010, a fight with a Blackhawks defenseman. February 2011, a fight with Philadelphia Flyers’ Chris Pronger, and he’s out for weeks. Cut to his sports agent sitting behind a desk in his fancy Los Angeles office saying, “Rory’s career in the NHL was over.”

Craig leaned forward. “Where are you going with this?”

Matt paused the footage. “You want urgency? Fine. How about this: Rory Kincaid wasn’t a perfect example of selfless heroism. He didn’t walk away from the NHL—he limped away. Rory Kincaid was damaged goods. And it could have been prevented.”

Chapter Four

Lauren smiled at customers waiting to get into Nora's Café as she breezed past them to start her shift. She was early for work and still the line stretched to the end of the block.

Summer had unofficially arrived and, with it, the shoobies—people who came to the shore only during the summer. They got their name from their unfortunate habit of wearing shoes to walk to the beach when any local worth his or her salt could go barefoot for blocks.

She'd barely have time to run upstairs and change into her uniform, a navy skirt and a pale yellow polo shirt. The building had a second floor with an office, a storage area, and a changing room for the staff. Most of them barely used it, but because Lauren liked to run to and from work, it felt like her personal locker room. She kept her running clothes, sneakers, and a stash of Gatorade in one of the closets.

"Morning, Nora," she called to her boss, a sixty-something redhead manning the door and putting names on the wait list. Lauren didn't bother offering to take over the task; Nora liked greeting her customers, especially the first few weekends of the summer.

Lauren signed in on the same clipboard Nora had kept by the kitchen since she'd opened her doors in 2005. Everything was done manually. Lauren took the customers' orders on an old-fashioned ticket pad, each stub three deep: one for the kitchen, one for Lauren, one for clocking out at the end of the day. It wasn't that Nora couldn't afford to upgrade to a computer system, and she was certainly savvy enough to find one that would suit the restaurant. She simply went through life with the attitude of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But four and a half years ago, Nora had recognized that Lauren was broken. That first winter, Lauren would sit for hours in the café, morning after morning, nursing a coffee. Sometimes she had constructive thoughts, ideas about starting a foundation in Rory's memory. But most days, she just stared out the window.

Nora didn't pretend not to know who she was, but she also didn't watch her from a safe distance and whisper to the other employees. Both scenarios had happened endlessly in Lauren's final weeks in Los Angeles.

Nora had simply brought Lauren a plate of eggs and bacon and said, "On the house."

Lauren had looked at her suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because you've had a rough few months, and I know what that's like." Then she pointed to a painted sign above the table that read AIN'T NO PROBLEM BACON CAN'T CURE.

Lauren couldn't help but smile. Was the word *cure* a pun on cured meat, or was she

giving the sign too much credit? Either way, she thanked the woman. And it took a few weeks before Nora would accept any money from her for food. It took about a month for Nora to offer her a job.

Lauren glanced at the chalkboard to get a sense of the day's specials and realized it hadn't been updated. She called out to Nora for a rundown.

"Goldenberry pancakes, a hot quinoa bowl, a kale-goat cheese omelet," she said. "I only got half the goat cheese I ordered so be prepared to eighty-six it because of this rush."

Nora prided herself on an organic menu constructed around as many "super-foods" as possible.

Lauren jotted the specials on her ticket pad, grabbed a piece of chalk and updated the board, and then started taking table orders. She loved the chaotic rhythm of the restaurant. For hours at a stretch, she didn't have time to think. She barely had time to breathe. When she was really in a groove, it was almost like running.

Lauren was in the zone during the crush of lunch when Nora summoned her to the front counter.

"You have a visitor," she said in the same moment that Lauren saw the hard-to-miss blonde in cutoffs and mirrored aviator sunglasses.

Lauren fortified herself with a deep breath and marched over to the sister she hadn't seen since Labor Day weekend, which had been Stephanie's last visit to the shore.

"Hey," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't Mom tell you I was coming?"

"Yes, but I mean *here*. At the café." She glanced around. "I'm working."

"Yeah, I know, Lauren. You're always working or running or some shit and I need to talk to you away from Mom."

Lauren sighed. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know exactly. Mom has a bug up her butt about something. Did she say anything to you?"

Concerned, Lauren thought back over the most recent phone conversations she'd had with their mother but didn't see any red flags. "No. I can't think of anything. Let's just...see how things go this weekend. Where's Ethan?"

"At the house with Mom."

"And Brett?"

Lauren barely knew Stephanie's husband of a year and a half; he and Stephanie had eloped after dating for two months.

"He's not coming."

"Okay, well. I'll see you later." She turned around and eyed her tables.

"One more thing: I need to stay here for a few weeks. Maybe a month."

Lauren turned back to her. "At the shore?"

"Yeah. At the house."

No. This could not be happening. Summer weekends, she could tolerate. But weeks at a stretch?

"Stephanie, I know it's beach season and the house is technically a beach house but it's my *home*. If I lived in Philly, you wouldn't just show up and say, 'I'm moving in for the summer.'"

"At this point, I would. I'm getting divorced, and I have nowhere else to stay."

Divorced. Lauren couldn't even begin to act surprised.

"What about Mom and Dad's?"

Stephanie shook her head. "That's a no-go."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. It was actually Mom's idea that I stay here this summer."

What? "I can't deal with this right now, okay? Just—go. I'll see you back at the house."

Lauren made a beeline for the kitchen. She wanted to be consumed by the heat, the clanking of dishes, the controlled chaos. She wished the lunch hour would stretch on forever.

Summer hadn't even started, and it couldn't get any worse.

Matt knew he had Craig's attention. He fast-forwarded the reel to his latest interview and paused it.

"Last week I spoke to a former assistant coach with the Flyers who's at Villanova now."

Matt hit Play, and the Hatfield Ice Arena, home ice to the Villanova men's ice hockey team, filled the screen. The coach, John Tramm, sat on a bench, the empty rink in the background.

"I can't talk specifically to Kincaid's situation because I didn't know the guy," Tramm said.

"Of course. I'm just trying to establish the overall climate in the NHL," Matt said.

"The time period you're looking at—Kincaid's two seasons—were right before things began to change."

"What changed?"

"Starting in, maybe it was spring 2011, if a guy took a hit to the head, he'd be removed from the game and evaluated by a doctor."

Matt leaned forward. "Are you saying that prior to 2011, that's not how players were treated?"

"There was no hard-and-fast protocol for players who took a hit to the head. So they'd sit on the bench and the team trainer would evaluate them. And there is the expectation for the player to just shake it off. Hockey culture demands resilience. Guys feel pressure to prove their toughness, and, frankly, they know they can be replaced. Especially the rookies."

"I understand there's a class-action lawsuit by about a hundred retired players," Matt said.

Tramm nodded. "Yes. The lawsuit is in light of the new research about CTE."

Matt knew all about CTE, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disorder. Matt still couldn't believe that he'd found a head-injury angle on the Rory Kincaid story. At first, he'd doubted himself. He thought he was projecting. He'd been obsessed with head-injury consequences for over a decade, ever since his older brother came back from Afghanistan. Everyone knew it was a problem for wounded warriors. And people knew it was a problem for pro athletes. But in Rory Kincaid, he might have found an intersection, a perfect storm that had taken down America's golden boy.

"Now researchers are looking at the brains of deceased former players," Tramm