

The Wide Smiles of Girls
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Chapter One

Arrival, Langdon Island

Before Ruth died, before there was a fall or a push or a jump from the old bridge, she lived on Langdon Island and loved Hale Brock. Before she loved Hale, she lived in a large beach house with her two sisters who were wicked like those sisters in fairy tales and mocked Ruth's choice of wide-brimmed hats and dramatic long skirts. Ruth felt as if she had been born in the wrong century, and like a lot of people who believed that, sighed and read old journals and talked about what life could or should have been if they lived one hundred years ago.

Hale and Ruth were married and lived on Langdon, which is a sleepy South Carolina island near Charleston that was starting to attract developers who like to take sleepy islands and wake them up. I moved to Langdon when my sister moved there but wasn't too keen on loving me anymore, and there was an accident and a lost love, and way more things to tell than I cared to tell. I tended to be a little close-mouthed, a term that made me think of someone going around with their lips pursed and looking prunish and uncomfortable. I hoped I didn't look like that. If I was close-mouthed, it's only because I liked to see what other people were going to say first. I wanted them to make the first move, to tip their hand a bit before I dove in with a thought or an idea. It's who I was.

March, my little sister, on the other hand, was open-mouthed, open hearted, and lived life pretty wide open. She was the best and the brightest and

you never forgot March. I thought of March sometimes as being the same age as me, like we were twins, because I can't remember life without her. Even though I was two years older and felt every bit the big sister, March seemed to be ageless or timeless. Or at least she did at one point.

I met Hale when I was twenty-six and life was changing, changed, and different. He was grieving his wife, the lovely and talented Ruth. She was a costume designer for the theatre which meant she had fabulous clothes, daring dresses and saucy hats. Around Hale's neat beach bungalow he had placed black and white framed pictures of his lost wife. I saw Ruth dancing, I saw her laughing. I saw her tousled-headed in bed and I saw her dipping down to kiss Hale's brow. She was a beautiful woman, with dark arched eyebrows and soft-looking lips. Her back was straight and she had long legs. Often, when I was over at Hale's cooking up a pot of pasta or shucking summer corn, I got the feeling Ruth still visited the bungalow. It wasn't a scary, ghostly feeling. It was more like a warm blanket. I've never asked Hale if he feels this. Mostly, I just tried to listen to him when he talked of her.

Hale knew all about me and March, and I thought I knew all about him and Ruth. But how much do you really know about someone who is gone? I knew March and I knew Hale, but Ruth would always be a black and white photograph. Someone else's memory. I could feel as if I knew her and her penchant for coconut-flavored lip gloss or her love of ice cold watermelon plucked from the cooler at the Shop All, but these were memories told to me. Often, in those first few weeks of getting to know Hale, I thought I glimpsed his wife in the rundown

corner grocery store up on our end of the island. There, there she was, her dark hair smoothed back in a turquoise silk scarf. There, there she was dipping her hands into the piles of apples and oranges. I would stop and stare at the women I thought were Ruth. I would take a step toward them, my heart pounding. If I found her, maybe she was never lost and I could return her to Hale. But then the woman with the scarf or the apples would look up and catch my eye, and I knew that it was not her. It was not the woman I thought I knew in the photographs.

I liked walking on the beach at sunset. I'm not a morning person, and for me, sunrise beach walks were few and far between. So, between the time the sun headed for the warm Atlantic and the last moments it dipped beneath the shelf of day and night, I would stroll along the beach. We lived up at the north end of the island in a neighborhood shabby and perfectly isolated. As I trod over wet sand and spy fiddler crabs darting to and fro, I could see the tall condos farther down the beach. The crowds were bigger, there were more beach umbrellas closing up for the day, more people streaming out of the condo developments to catch the purple-pink sunset. Up where I was, I could catch the eye of maybe two, three people. Some of them are neighbors. They have taken to me, an interloper, someone from Upstate South Carolina.

What I tried not to look at while I walked is the old bridge, now coming down in sections where the highway department was dismantling it in what had to be the slowest road project in history. The old concrete bridge, like its newer, flashier replacement, spanned the bay between Langdon Island and the mainland. It was grayed and stained, a testament to another era when cars came

over to the island one lane at a time. Back when the old bridge was built, the cars were slower and who really needed to go to Langdon anyway? It was the place of some poor people, a few waterfront communities of ramshackle beach houses on stilts, and a tiny strip of commercial interests. A bait shop. An unused outpost for the county sheriff who was rumored to have never stepped foot on the island at all. Nope, Langdon was no one's idea of a beach paradise and the bridge was an old-fashioned concrete welcome mat, not seen until a person really needed to get across the bay. I found myself on that bridge, or the one that replaced it, one day, the day I first came to Langdon to see my sister March.

My dented sedan cheerfully pulled along a small, rented trailer full of clothes, a futon and books, while I piloted down Highway Nine. Langdon Island was a new home for March and me, and I wondered what the streets would look like, how the sand might sweep over the sidewalks, what we would find there.

I had left Atlanta and its tangle of interstates and commuters six hours ago. I could still feel the heat of the city and the thumping traffic, pressing against my head if I closed my eyes briefly. I saw, and almost felt, the office I left in the glass building downtown. The air in my office was always too cool. I pictured my empty apartment. Within days, a new tenant would fill it up with her things. My brightly-colored rugs and framed posters were in the trailer behind me instead of where they belonged.

Within a few miles of Langdon, I glanced at the map. The highway ran alongside the bay, eventually crossing the water and running straight into town

on the island. The highway then terminated after faithfully carrying cars for hundreds of miles. On my map, the words "Road Construction" were stamped over the highway. I wondered if we would be delayed. But then I reminded myself I had no one waiting for me in Langdon. No one, unless you counted my sister. And it would be wrong to do that, because she wasn't waiting for me.

I ran my mind over our friendship, our sisterhood. Was there a way to go back? Maybe if I started at the beginning. Maybe if I stepped back to when we were young and life was more of a lark, at least for March. She always knew how to get a rise out of me and Mom and Dad. But for all of her missteps and passion, I knew of her sweet and open heart. I knew of her fierce loyalty and love for me. When did it slip away and become something I did not recognize? My heart beat a little faster thinking of my sister on the island ahead. Once, she ran to me to solve her problems. I could not fix her life now. I could not make her whole again.

Orange signs, barrels and cones let me know that the road construction lay ahead. The bay appeared, beautiful, gray and ringed with tan grasses and sticky mudflats. A few miles away, the town on the island waited. I slowed to the construction zone speed postings. Other cars and trucks slowed, too, as I made my way onto the slick, gray concrete bridge spanning the bay.

I am not a fan of crossing over water in a vehicle. I always think that some idiot is going to tap my car from behind causing me to careen over the side and die a watery death. How will I get out? I anxiously started across the water.

The source of the road construction was pretty obvious, even to a casual observer like me. I was riding on the new, wide bridge. An old, brownish concrete

bridge sat off to my right, lower and swarthier than the current bridge just crossed. Its buckled concrete spans had weeds growing up through cracks. The highway powers were clearly dismantling this old bridge; every quarter of a mile or so, there were huge gaps that had been removed from the highway, revealing churning bay waters below. It was both scary and interesting at the same time. The highway was useless, I thought. Then I reconsidered because I saw the signs for the first time.

Someone had opted to use the old bridge as an art gallery. Or as a signpost to despair, to love. I sigh when I remember what I thought of the signs. I figured they were the work of a desperate, pimply high schooler. Maybe a tech school dropout who lost his first love. Or a young husband longing for his wayward wife.

I laugh now, thinking of my ignorance about Hale's signs, but really I should have cried. Because when I saw the signs, carefully bolted to the side of each decaying section of decaying bridge, I was watching a man become unraveled, tube by tube of paint. Piece by piece of plywood. And when the bridge was through, when the old bridge petered out at the foamy shores of the island, that man would have told us all he knew.

Each sign, painted purple, painted red.

Miss your lips Ruth.