

SISTER'S KEEPER

A NOVEL

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PROLOGUE

No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his sense ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.

—CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, Vom Kriege In my first memory, I am three years old and I am trying to kill my sister. Sometimes the recollection is so clear I can remember the itch of the pillowcase under my hand, the sharp point of her nose pressing into my palm. She didn't stand a chance against me, of course, but it still didn't work. My father walked by, tucking in the house for the night, and saved her. He led me back to my own bed. "That," he told me, "never happened."

As we got older, I didn't seem to exist, except in relation to her. I would watch her sleep across the room from me, one long shadow linking our beds, and I would count the ways. Poison, sprinkled on her cereat. A wicked undertow off the beach. Lightning striking:

In the end, though, I did not kill my sister. She did it all on her own.

Or at least this is what I tell myself.

â.

MONDAY

Brother, I am fire
Surging under ocean floor.
I shall never meet you, brother—
Not for years, anyhow;
Maybe thousands of years, brother.
Then I will warm you,
Hold you close, wrap you in circles,
Use you and change you—
Maybe thousands of years, brother.

-CARL SANDBURG, "Kin"

WHEN I WAS LITTLE, the great mystery to me wasn't how babies were made, but why. The mechanics I understood—my older brother Jesse had filled me in—although at the time I was sure he'd heard half of it wrong. Other kids my age were busy looking up the words penis and vagina in the classroom dictionary when the teacher had her back turned, but I paid attention to different details. Like why some mothers only had one child, while other families seemed to multiply before your eyes. Or how the new girl in school, Sedona, told anyone who'd listen that she was named for the place where her parents were vacationing when they made her ("Good thing they weren't staying in Jersey City," my father used to say).

Now that I am thirteen, these distinctions are only more complicated: the eighth-grader who dropped out of school because she got into trouble; a neighbor who got herself pregnant in the hopes it would keep her husband from filing for divorce. I'm telling you, if aliens landed on Earth today and took a good hard look at why babies get born, they'd conclude that most people have children by accident, or because they

drink too much on a certain night, or because birth control isn't one hundred percent, or for a thousand other reasons that really aren't very flattering.

On the other hand, I was born for a very specific purpose. I wasn't the result of a cheap bottle of wine or a full moon or the heat of the moment. I was born because a scientist managed to hook up my mother's eggs and my father's sperm to create a specific combination of precious genetic material. In fact, when Jesse told me how babies get made and I, the great disbeliever, decided to ask my parents the truth, I got more than I bargained for. They sat me down and told me all the usual stuff, of course—but they also explained that they chose little embryonic me, specifically, because I could save my sister, Kate. "We loved you even more," my mother made sure to say, "because we knew what exactly we were getting."

It made me wonder, though, what would have happened if Kate had been healthy. Chances are, I'd still be floating up in Heaven or wherever, waiting to be attached to a body to spend some time on Earth. Certainly I would not be part of this family. See, unlike the rest of the free world, I didn't get here by accident. And if your parents have you for a reason, then that reason better exist. Because once it's gone, so are you.

Pawnshops may be full of junk, but they're also a breeding ground for stories, if you ask me, not that you did. What happened to make a person trade in the Never Before Worn Diamond Solitaire? Who needed money so badly they'd sell a teddy bear missing an eye? As I walk up to the counter, I wonder if someone will look at the locket I'm about to give up, and ask these same questions.

The man at the cash register has a nose the shape of a turnip, and eyes sunk so deep I can't imagine how he sees well enough to go about his business. "Need something?" he asks.

It's all I can do to not turn around and walk out the door, pretend I've come in by mistake. The only thing that keeps me steady is knowing I am not the first person to stand in front of this counter holding the one item in the world I never thought I'd part with.

"I have something to sell," I tell him.

"Am I supposed to guess what it is?"

"Oh." Swallowing, I pull the locket out of the pocket of my jeans. The heart falls on the glass counter in a pool of its own chain. "It's fourteen-karat gold," I pitch. "Hardly ever worn." This is a lie; until this morning, I haven't taken it off in seven years. My father gave it to me when I was six after the bone marrow harvest, because he said anyone who was giving her sister such a major present deserved one of her own. Seeing it there, on the counter, my neck feels shivery and naked.

The owner puts a loupe up to his eye, which makes it seem almost normal size. "I'll give you twenty."

"Dollars?"

"No, pesos. What did you think?"

"It's worth five times that!" I'm guessing.

The owner shrugs. "I'm not the one who needs the money."

I pick up the locket, resigned to sealing the deal, and the strangest thing happens—my hand, it just clamps shut like the Jaws of Life. My face goes red with the effort to peel apart my fingers. It takes what seems like an hour for that locket to spill into the owner's outstretched palm. His eyes

stay on my face, softer now. "Tell them you lost it," he offers, advice tossed in for free.

If Mr. Webster had decided to put the word *freak* in his dictionary, *Anna Fitzgerald* would be the best definition he could give. It's more than just the way I look: refugee-skinny with absolutely no chest to speak of, hair the color of dirt, connect-the-dot freckles on my cheeks that, let me tell you, do not fade with lemon juice or sunscreen or even, sadly, sandpaper. No, God was obviously in some kind of mood on my birthday, because he added to this fabulous physical combination the bigger picture—the household into which I was born.

My parents tried to make things normal, but that's a relative term. The truth is, I was never really a kid. To be honest, neither were Kate and Jesse. I guess maybe my brother had his moment in the sun for the four years he was alive before Kate got diagnosed, but ever since then, we've been too busy looking over our shoulders to run headlong into growing up. You know how most little kids think they're like cartoon characters—if an anvil drops on their heads they can peel themselves off the sidewalk and keep going? Well, I never once believed that. How could I, when we practically set a place for Death at the dinner table?

Kate has acute promyelocytic leukemia. Actually, that's not quite true—right now she doesn't have it, but it's hibernating under her skin like a bear, until it decides to roar again. She was diagnosed when she was two; she's sixteen now. Molecular relapse and granulocyte and portacath—these words are part of my vocabulary, even though I'll never find them on any SAT. I'm an allogeneic donor—a perfect sibling match. When Kate needs leukocytes or stem

cells or bone marrow to fool her body into thinking it's healthy, I'm the one who provides them. Nearly every time Kate's hospitalized, I wind up there, too.

None of which means anything, except that you shouldn't believe what you hear about me, least of all that which I tell you myself.

As I am coming up the stairs, my mother comes out of her room wearing another ball gown. "Ah," she says, turning her back to me. "Just the girl I wanted to see."

I zip it up and watch her twirl. My mother could be beautiful, if she were parachuted into someone else's life. She has long dark hair and the fine collarbones of a princess, but the corners of her mouth turn down, like she's swallowed bitter news. She doesn't have much free time, since a calendar is something that can change drastically if my sister develops a bruise or a nosebleed, but what she does have she spends at Bluefly.com, ordering ridiculously fancy evening dresses for places she is never going to go. "What do you think?" she asks.

The gown is all the colors of a sunset, and made out of material that swishes when she moves. It's strapless, what a star might wear sashaying down a red carpet—totally not the dress code for a suburban house in Upper Darby, RI. My mother twists her hair into a knot and holds it in place. On her bed are three other dresses—one slinky and black, one bugle-beaded, one that seems impossibly small. "You look . . ."

Tired. The word bubbles right under my lips.

My mother goes perfectly still, and I wonder if I've said it without meaning to. She holds up a hand, shushing me, her ear cocked to the open doorway. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Kate."

"I didn't hear anything."

But she doesn't take my word for it, because when it comes to Kate she doesn't take anybody's word for it. She marches upstairs and opens up our bedroom door to find my sister hysterical on her bed, and just like that the world collapses again. My father, a closet astronomer, has tried to explain black holes to me, how they are so heavy they absorb everything, even light, right into their center. Moments like this are the same kind of vacuum; no matter what you cling to, you wind up being sucked in.

"Kate!" My mother sinks down to the floor, that stupid skirt a cloud around her. "Kate, honey, what hurts?"

Kate hugs a pillow to her stomach, and tears keep streaming down her face. Her pale hair is stuck to her face in damp streaks; her breathing's too tight. I stand frozen in the doorway of my own room, waiting for instructions: *Call Daddy. Call 911. Call Dr. Chance.* My mother goes so far as to shake a better explanation out of Kate. "It's Preston," she sobs. "He's leaving Serena for good."

That's when we notice the TV. On the screen, a blond hottie gives a longing look to a woman crying almost as hard as my sister, and then he slams the door. "But what hurts?" my mother asks, certain there has to be more to it than this.

"Oh my God," Kate says, sniffling. "Do you have any idea how much Serena and Preston have been through? Do you?"

That fist inside me relaxes, now that I know it's all right. Normal, in our house, is like a blanket too short for a bed—sometimes it covers you just fine, and other times it leaves you cold and shaking; and worst of all, you never know

which of the two it's going to be. I sit down on the end of Kate's bed. Although I'm only thirteen, I'm taller than her and every now and then people mistakenly assume I'm the older sister. At different times this summer she has been crazy for Callahan, Wyatt, and Liam, the male leads on this soap. Now, I guess, it's all about Preston. "There was the kidnapping scare," I volunteer. I actually followed that story line; Kate made me tape the show during her dialysis sessions.

"And the time she almost married his twin by mistake," Kate adds.

"Don't forget when he died in the boat accident. For two months, anyway." My mother joins the conversation, and I remember that she used to watch this soap, too, sitting with Kate in the hospital.

For the first time, Kate seems to notice my mother's outfit. "What are you wearing?"

"Oh. Something I'm sending back." She stands up in front of me so that I can undo her zipper. This mail-order compulsion, for any other mother, would be a wake-up call for therapy; for my mom, it would probably be considered a healthy break. I wonder if it's putting on someone else's skin for a while that she likes so much, or if it's the option of being able to send back a circumstance that just doesn't suit you. She looks at Kate, hard. "You're sure nothing hurts?"

After my mother leaves, Kate sinks a little. That's the only way to describe it—how fast color drains from her face, how she disappears against the pillows. As she gets sicker, she fades a little more, until I am afraid one day I will wake up and not be able to see her at all. "Move," Kate orders. "You're blocking the picture."

So I go to sit on my own bed. "It's only the coming attractions."

"Well, if I die tonight I want to know what I'm missing."

I fluff my pillows up under my head. Kate, as usual, has swapped so that she has all the funchy ones that don't feel like rocks under your neck. She's supposed to deserve this, because she's three years older than me or because she's sick or because the moon is in Aquarius—there's always a reason. I squint at the television, wishing I could flip through the stations, knowing I don't have a prayer. "Preston looks like he's made out of plastic."

"Then why did I hear you whispering his name last night into your pillow?"

"Shut up," I say.

"You shut up." Then Kate smiles at me. "He probably is gay, though. Quite a waste, considering the Fitzgerald sisters are—" Wincing, she breaks off mid-sentence, and I roll toward her.

"Kate?"

She rubs her lower back. "It's nothing." It's her kidneys. "Want me to get Mom?"

"Not yet." She reaches between our beds, which are just far apart enough for us to touch each other if we both try. I hold out my hand, too. When we were little we'd make this bridge and try to see how many Barbies we could get to balance on it.

Lately, I have been having nightmares, where I'm cut into so many pieces that there isn't enough of me to be put back together.

My father says that a fire will burn itself out, unless you open a window and give it fuel. I suppose that's what I'm doing, when you get right down to it; but then again, my dad also says that when flames are licking at your heels