

## Excerpt, THE GOODBYE YEAR by Kaira Rouda



### CHAPTER ONE

*Wednesday, September 10*

MELANIE

Melanie Bronson needed to sit down.<sup>[SEP]</sup> Beads of sweat soaked her forehead, no doubt ruining the blowout she'd just sat through at the salon. She smelled the toxic scent of wet hair spray, reconstituting into a noxious chemical that would run down her face. Her unruly dark hair was best left to the experts, especially on humid nights like these, but once her tamed mane was exposed to moisture, all bets were off. She wore sensible black pumps, a black sheath dress that she loved for its lack of a waistline, and her favorite pearl choker. She looked very much the part of a proud mom of a high school senior, she thought. It didn't matter what she wore, though, she'd always be an outsider here. It was as if her hair knew she didn't fit in and behaved accordingly.

She reached her son Dane's locker and noticed the lock flipped upside down. She touched the shiny cold surface of the

back of the lock, wondering how he even opened the thing to get inside his locker. She shook her head, rubbing under her eyes, trying to keep the tears that were beginning to flow from ruining her mascara. *Poor Dane*, she thought. Someone must be bullying him again. This was not a good sign. She had Googled empty-nest syndrome and knew it was her job, this, their final year together, to be certain he could handle the real world. This lock was just another example of how he wasn't ready, why she wasn't ready.

Suddenly, a boy—or really, she had to admit, looking at his facial hair and sculpted jaw, a man—ran past her wearing a maroon Crystal Beach High School sweatshirt and sweatpants. His dark eyes darted in her direction, taking her in, before running past her and disappearing around the corner. She saw his last name printed in block letters on the back of his sweatshirt: WINSTON. She shook her head. It was wrong. All of this. Him, the running, the stupid locker, the fact that she'd soon be a parent without a purpose. Would she even have a reason to get out of bed once Dane left for college? she wondered. Every- thing was moving too fast.

“Hey, slow down!” she yelled into the now empty hallway.

She should know every kid here, she thought. But Melanie had never seen the boy WINSTON before. She wondered if he was new, wondered if Dane knew him. Of course, that would just be another conversation they hadn’t had recently. If Melanie and Dane talked at all these days, it invariably wound up in a fight. Dane saying he was a loser and a disappointment, Melanie trying to make him believe she didn’t think so.

As she brushed another tear away, she reached into her purse for her pink frost lipstick, a 1980s holdover that she

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couldn’t shake. Lips freshly aglow, she touched Dane’s lock one last time, squared her shoulders, and walked in the direction the man-child had just jogged, toward the heart of the school.

She felt as if the ground shifted beneath her feet again as she reached the showcase of the school, the beautiful palm tree- dotted, green grass-dappled quad. As she searched for some- where to sit down, Melanie looked around to see if what she was experiencing could be explained by an earthquake. But no one was ducking and covering. And there was nowhere to sit down. All she could see were white concrete planters filled with palm trees punctuating the broad swath of grass that constituted the daytime gathering spot for the teenagers who typically filled this place. The picnic tables had been removed because it was Parents’ Night. As a trickle of sweat rolled between her shoulder blades, Melanie took a deep, cleansing breath. The quad was almost empty, a few other parental stragglers attempting to find their way through the maze of buildings that formed the high school campus.

Most of the other parents in the quad, heads bent together studying the school map in the dimming light, were couples. They were in this together. “I’ll kill Keith if I survive this,” she muttered. This morning, she’d begged her husband to come with her, knowing her last Parents’ Night would, in all likeli- hood, cause a panic attack. “Honey, you know that school and everybody in it like the back of your hand. You’ll be fine,” Keith had said, patting her on the shoulder before leaving for work. But she knew he was wrong.

Another wave of dizziness swooped over Melanie. She lurched over to the closest planter, perching as daintily as possible on the edge, knowing her black linen sheath dress would still pick up some nasty high school gunk. She shouldn’t have chugged the glass of chardonnay at home, she knew, but she had told herself it would calm her nerves. Keith couldn’t miss his dinner event (business, of course),

so she had been forced to tackle Parents' Night solo. That was not something she was fond of, especially not with this child, her final parental product. To say Dane was a slacker was being kind. *Oh, Dane.*

"Hello, Mrs. Bronson," said a perky redhead, waving from across the quad as she hurried over. Even in the descending fog, Melanie knew it was omnipresent Annie, ready to help at all events where adults in general and parents in particular could see her shine. Annie had been assigned to escort Dane around on his first day at school, arriving as they had just before Thanksgiving, his ninth-grade year. Things had gone downhill for him since then. But not for Annie, who was already admitted to the Ivy League school of her choice based on her volleyball and academic prowess even though it was only September. Melanie still didn't understand how that was possible as she pinched her palm and reminded herself she had Seth. He was her overachiever. Her reason for school pride. She was batting fifty percent, even as Annie's parents were three for three at the Ivies. *Who does that, really? Freaks,* Melanie thought as she painted on a smile.

"Are you lost?" Annie asked, big brown eyes blinking with genuine concern, or perhaps pity. Melanie deserved both, she realized.

"Oh, no, dear, just waiting for second period. Dane has a free first," Melanie said, a bit too brightly. *If only the quad would stop swaying,* she thought, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Lucky. My mom won't let me have a free period, even . . ." Annie said, not finishing the sentence.

"Even though you're already admitted somewhere fabulous, aren't you?" Melanie asked, dreading the answer, as it would force her own son's inferiority out into the open, like a boulder landing in the space between them.

"Well, I still need to keep my grades up, but yes, I committed to Harvard," Annie said, shoving her hands in her jeans' back pockets as Melanie felt the thud. "I can't wait to start living my own life."

Melanie braced herself on the planter, both hands on the now dew-covered cold white plaster. "That's wonderful, dear. Your parents must be so proud." Blessedly, the bell rang, and classroom doors burst open as overachieving parents filled the quad, scampering to their next classroom and providing Melanie with the opportunity to escape. "I've got to go. See you later!"

Pushing off the planter, Melanie headed down a ramp in the direction of the athletic field, smiling at the memory of Seth's senior year. He'd been captain of the football team, on the homecoming court, ASB president, and a National Merit

Scholar. He'd been everything you could be in high school, even though he'd arrived here his junior year. He was continuing that success in college. Dane tried hard to be the opposite, Melanie thought as she walked slowly into the silk-screening classroom.

Of course Dane's first class of the day was one established to prepare him and others of his ilk for menial labor. Melanie squinted her eyes at the glare from the fluorescent lights, dropped her head, and entered the room, hoping no one would recognize her from her PTA involvement two years earlier when she had been able to shine in the reflected brilliance of Seth's achievements.

She'd never been inside any of the work-study classrooms, though she'd been on committees that approved supplies for these types of kids. The fluorescent lights inside the large classroom seemed to flatten out all of the features of the parents as they each picked a stool and climbed aboard. The room smelled like overheated computers, a vague car-tire smell. The teacher, a man with a ponytail down his back of all things, smiled and nodded from his perch at the head of the long table. Melanie felt certain things could not get any worse until perfect Dr. Jud Nelson and his perfect wife, Sarah, strolled in, sucking up the attention in the room as if their entrance had been preceded by an announcer.

Melanie knew why, of course. All the men wanted to be him; most all the women of her age in town had a crush on him. Dr. Nelson, the leading plastic surgeon in town, was gorgeous, with a strong cleft chin, perfect teeth and a broad, white-toothed smile, and thick dark hair. His twinkling blue eyes made the women in town swoon even while he was tucking and plumping their bodies. He also had invented some technology that was now used in surgeries internationally, a patent worth billions. Even so, he continued to work at his practice when he wasn't lecturing abroad.

Dr. Nelson had "refreshed" more women's faces in Crystal Beach than anyone, including at least a dozen of Melanie's friends. She'd considered going to see him herself, just for a consultation of course, but had always lost her nerve. Primarily, she realized, because she didn't want his wife, the town's Queen Bee, to know, nor did she want her look. She'd never be able to go back home to Ohio if she looked anything like Sarah Nelson, a look perfected by *Real Housewives* on both coasts. There was a reason there wasn't a *Real Housewives* of Ohio, Melanie knew.

But here, in Crystal Beach, Sarah Nelson was the definition of perfection. With her long, blonde hair—rumored to be enhanced by extensions but no one dared ask—overly plumped lips, sculpted body with round globe breasts, and expressionless face, and her frequent trips to LA for shopping, Sarah was both untouchably perfect and somehow ethereal, revered by all the women in town. Melanie was completely intimidated by her and had been since she'd arrived in

Crystal Beach, only to find herself living just down the street in Diamond Bay, their exclusive gated community.

To make matters worse, the Nelsons were the parents of a perfect daughter, Ashley, a senior like Dane, who no doubt had never set foot in shop class and probably already had signed with an Ivy League school. Melanie felt the trickle of sweat between her shoulder blades turning into a small river.

From the front of the classroom, Sarah shot Melanie a look that was her version of a smile, an open-mouthed sort of movement that she would need to employ to eat, if she did that. The sides of her mouth did tilt up a bit with the gesture and Melanie gave her a wave. The families were social friends, members of the same country club, neighbors, and, for the past four years, thrown together during various kid-related events and PTA meetings. Whenever she was around Sarah, Melanie felt bland and doughy. Whenever she was around Sarah, she wanted to schedule an appointment with Sarah's husband just to find out if he could transform her into a better version of herself, one that would be accepted here and back home. Sometimes she wondered if maybe he could make her feel more comfortable with herself.

But, right now she was simply annoyed. How had the Nelsons discovered her here, in shop class? She didn't know why, but Jud and Sarah Nelson's very presence in this room was causing a piercing headache just above Melanie's right eye. Her eyes rolled involuntarily as he pulled out a stool two down from hers and settled Sarah into it and then sat down next to her, giving her a peck on the cheek in the process.

"Mel, you look lovely this evening," he said into her ear, while settling in and waving hi to all of his fans and minions gathered around the shop table. She knew she should feel honored by his seat selection, and his overt display of their personal closeness, but she wasn't. She couldn't put a finger on what it was about him, but something just didn't add up. Melanie was about to ask him if Ashley was in the class—*maybe she had a secret love of silk screening?*—just to make small talk, when the hippie teacher cleared his throat. It didn't matter, she supposed, but a wave of relief washed over her that the Nelsons' perfect kid was in a screen-printing class with Dane. Maybe her son and Ashley sat next to each other, worked on projects together, she thought. Melanie sat up a little taller on her stool and smoothed her black sheath dress. She closed her right eye, and that eased the headache. At least she'd stopped sweating for the moment.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. Parent involvement is what makes Crystal Beach High School one of the best in the state of California, am I right?" the hippie teacher said by way of introduction. She wondered if he was high. He could be high. *Maybe that's what I need to do*, she thought. She needed to be stoned to

make it through the night. “Thanks to the big donation from Dr. Nelson, Mrs. Nelson, and the Nelson Medical Group, our kids have a brand new screen-printing machine. Can I get a round of applause for Dr. Nelson here?”

As Melanie joined in the clapping, her face began to turn red. Ashley Nelson wasn’t in this class for dummies, she realized. The Nelsons were simply here to soak up kudos for helping the kids who would never amount to anything.

Kids like Dane, her tall, dark, and handsome hipster son.

Her youngest son wouldn’t speak to her in complete sentences any longer. Their relationship had turned toxic and she didn’t know why. All she wanted was the best for him during their last year together, but, as far as she could tell, all he wanted was to hide out in his bedroom playing video games and ignoring homework. He would not be venturing off to an Ivy League college. Dane might not even make it to community college. He might work in a print shop. This room could be his future. *How will I ever show my face around town?* Melanie wondered, pulling at her pearl necklace to keep it from choking her.

Suddenly the room started to spin. As she looked at the sea of fluorescent parent faces, the scene began to flash black and white and her ears filled with the sound of rushing water, as if someone had opened a fire hose. The last thing she remembered was turning, stricken, to grab Jud’s shoulder before everything went blank.