An impossible choice

How am I supposed to decide this? How can I possibly stay without Mom and Dad? How can I leave without Teddy? Or Adam? This is too much. I don't even understand how it all works, why I'm here in the state that I'm in or how to get out of it if I wanted to. If I were to say, *I want to wake up*, would I wake up right now? I already tried snapping my heels to find Teddy and trying to beam myself to Hawaii, and that didn't work. This seems a whole lot more complicated.

But in spite of that, I believe it's true. I hear the nurse's words again. I am running the show. Everyone is waiting on me.

I decide. I know this now.

And this terrifies me more than anything else that has happened today.

ALSO BY GAYLE FORMAN

Sisters in Sanity

Where She Went

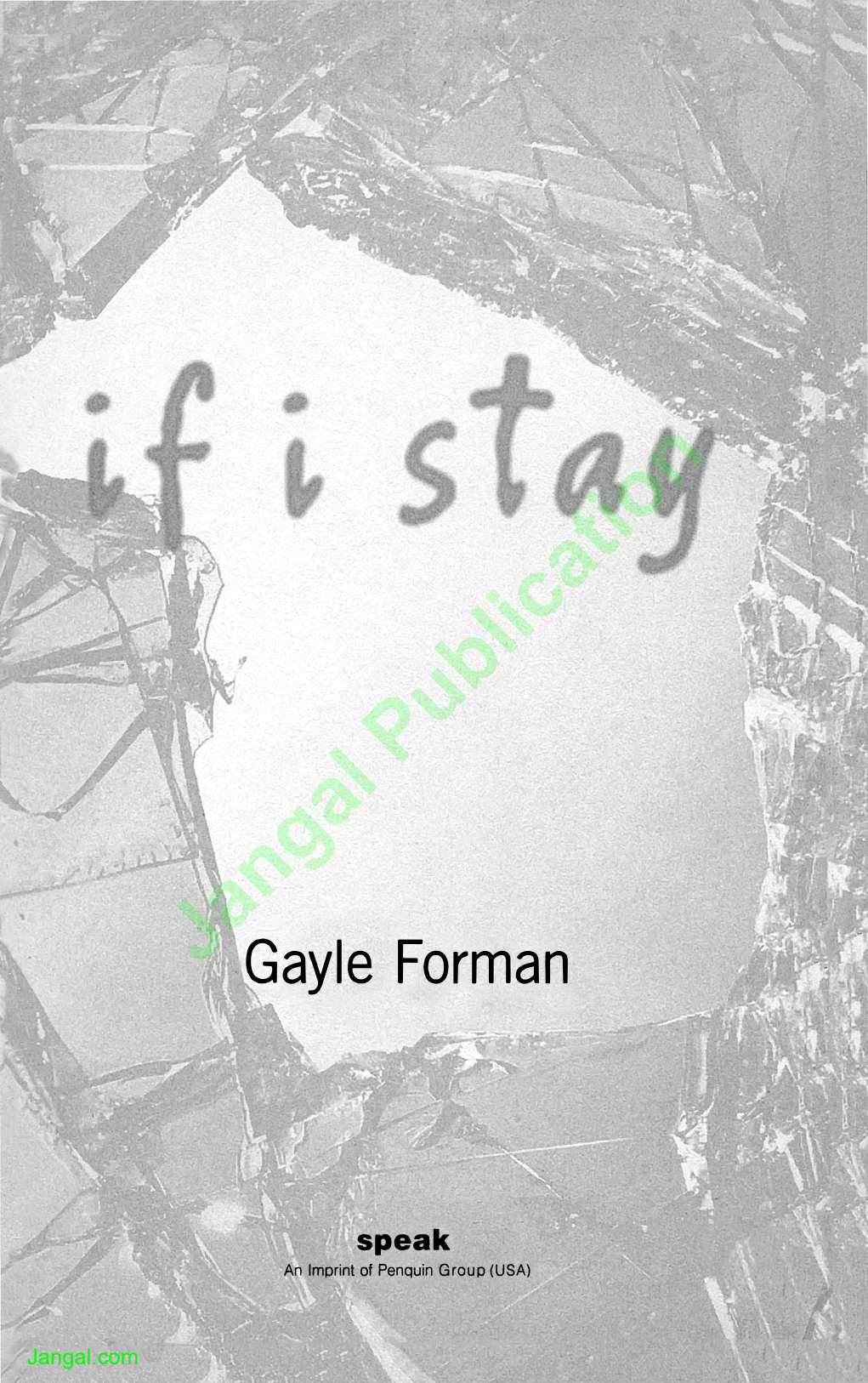
Just One Day

Just One Year

Just One Night
(e-special)

I Was Here
Coming January 2015

if i stay



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For Nick

Finally . . . Always

if i stay

7:09 A.M.

Everyone thinks it was because of the snow. And in a way, I suppose that's true.

I wake up this morning to a thin blanket of white covering our front lawn. It isn't even an inch, but in this part of Oregon a slight dusting brings everything to a standstill as the one snowplow in the county gets busy clearing the roads. It is wet water that drops from the sky—and drops and drops and drops—not the frozen kind.

It is enough snow to cancel school. My little brother, Teddy, lets out a war whoop when Mom's

AM radio announces the closures. "Snow day!" he bellows. "Dad, let's go make a snowman."

My dad smiles and taps on his pipe. He started smoking one recently as part of this whole 1950s, *Father Knows Best* retro kick he is on. He also wears bow ties. I am never quite clear on whether all this is sartorial or sardonic—Dad's way of announcing that he used to be a punker but is now a middle-school English teacher, or if becoming a teacher has actually turned my dad into this genuine throwback. But I like the smell of the pipe tobacco. It is sweet and smoky, and reminds me of winters and woodstoves.

"You can make a valiant try," Dad tells Teddy. "But it's hardly sticking to the roads. Maybe you should consider a snow amoeba."

I can tell Dad is happy. Barely an inch of snow means that all the schools in the county are closed, including my high school and the middle school where Dad works, so it's an unexpected day off for him, too. My mother, who works for a travel agent in town, clicks off the radio and pours herself a second cup of coffee. "Well, if you lot are playing hooky today, no way I'm going to work. It's simply not right." She picks up the telephone to call in. When she's done, she looks at us. "Should I make breakfast?"

Dad and I guffaw at the same time. Mom makes cereal and toast. Dad's the cook in the family.

Pretending not to hear us, she reaches into the cabinet for a box of Bisquick. "Please. How hard can it be? Who wants pancakes?"

"I do! I do!" Teddy yells. "Can we have chocolate chips in them?"

"I don't see why not," Mom replies.

"Woo hoo!" Teddy yelps, waving his arms in the air.

"You have far too much energy for this early in the morning," I tease. I turn to Mom. "Maybe you shouldn't let Teddy drink so much coffee."

"I've switched him to decaf," Mom volleys back. "He's just naturally exuberant."

"As long as you're not switching *me* to decaf," I say.

"That would be child abuse," Dad says.

Mom hands me a steaming mug and the newspaper.

"There's a nice picture of your young man in there," she says.

"Really? A picture?"

"Yep. It's about the most we've seen of him since summer," Mom says, giving me a sidelong glance with her eyebrow arched, her version of a soul-searching stare.

"I know," I say, and then without meaning to, I sigh. Adam's band, Shooting Star, is on an upward spiral, which is a great thing—mostly.

"Ah, fame, wasted on the youth," Dad says, but he's smiling. I know he's excited for Adam. Proud even.

I leaf through the newspaper to the calendar section. There's a small blurb about Shooting Star, with an even smaller picture of the four of them, next to a big article about Bikini and a huge picture of the band's lead singer: punk-rock diva Brooke Vega. The bit about them basically says that local band Shooting Star is opening for Bikini on the Portland leg of Bikini's national tour. It doesn't mention the even-bigger-to-me news that last night Shooting Star headlined at a club in Seattle and, according to the text Adam sent me at midnight, sold out the place.

"Are you going tonight?" Dad asks.

"I was planning to. It depends if they shut down the whole state on account of the snow."

"It *is* approaching a blizzard," Dad says, pointing to a single snowflake floating its way to the earth.

"I'm also supposed to rehearse with some pianist from the college that Professor Christie dug up." Professor Christie, a retired music teacher at the

university who I've been working with for the last few years, is always looking for victims for me to play with. "Keep you sharp so you can show all those Juilliard snobs how it's really done," she says.

I haven't gotten into Juilliard yet, but my audition went really well. The Bach suite and the Shostakovich had both flown out of me like never before, like my fingers were just an extension of the strings and bow. When I'd finished playing, panting, my legs shaking from pressing together so hard, one judge had clapped a little, which I guess doesn't happen very often. As I'd shuffled out, that same judge had told me that it had been a long time since the school had "seen an Oregon country girl." Professor Christie had taken that to mean a guaranteed acceptance. I wasn't so sure that was true. And I wasn't 100 percent sure that I wanted it to be true. Just like with Shooting Star's meteoric rise, my admission to Juilliard—if it happens—will create certain complications, or, more accurately, would compound the complications that have already cropped up in the last few months.

"I need more coffee. Anyone else?" Mom asks, hovering over me with the ancient percolator.

I sniff the coffee, the rich, black, oily French roast we all prefer. The smell alone perks me up.

"I'm pondering going back to bed," I say. "My cello's at school, so I can't even practice."

"Not practice? For twenty-four hours? Be still, my broken heart," Mom says. Though she has acquired a taste for classical music over the years—"it's like learning to appreciate a stinky cheese"—she's been a not-always-delighted captive audience for many of my marathon rehearsals.

I hear a crash and a boom coming from upstairs. Teddy is pounding on his drum kit. It used to belong to Dad. Back when he'd played drums in a big-in-our-town, unknown-anywhere-else band, back when he'd worked at a record store.

Dad grins at Teddy's noise, and seeing that, I feel a familiar pang. I know it's silly but I have always wondered if Dad is disappointed that I didn't become a rock chick. I'd meant to. Then, in third grade, I'd wandered over to the cello in music class—it looked almost human to me. It looked like if you played it, it would tell you secrets, so I started playing. It's been almost ten years now and I haven't stopped.

"So much for going back to sleep," Mom yells over Teddy's noise.

"What do you know, the snow's already melting."

Dad says, puffing on his pipe. I go to the back door and peek outside. A patch of sunlight has broken through the clouds, and I can hear the hiss of the ice melting. I close the door and go back to the table.

"I think the county overreacted," I say.

"Maybe. But they can't un-cancel school. Horse is already out of the barn, and I already called in for the day off," Mom says.

"Indeed. But we might take advantage of this unexpected boon and go somewhere," Dad says. "Take a drive. Visit Henry and Willow." Henry and Willow are some of Mom and Dad's old music friends who'd also had a kid and decided to start behaving like grown-ups. They live in a big old farmhouse. Henry does Web stuff from the barn they converted into a home office and Willow works at a nearby hospital. They have a baby girl. That's the real reason Mom and Dad want to go out there. Teddy having just turned eight and me being seventeen means that we are long past giving off that sour-milk smell that makes adults melt.

"We can stop at BookBarn on the way back," Mom says, as if to entice me. BookBarn is a giant, dusty old used-book store. In the back they keep a stash of twenty-five-cent classical records that nobody ever

seems to buy except me. I keep a pile of them hidden under my bed. A collection of classical records is not the kind of thing you advertise.

I've shown them to Adam, but that was only after we'd already been together for five months. I'd expected him to laugh. He's such the cool guy with his pegged jeans and black low-tops, his effortlessly beat-up punk-rock tees and his subtle tattoos. He is so not the kind of guy to end up with someone like me. Which was why when I'd first spotted him watching me at the music studios at school two years ago, I'd been convinced he was making fun of me and I'd hidden from him. Anyhow, he hadn't laughed. It turned out he had a dusty collection of punk-rock records under his bed.

"We can also stop by Gran and Gramps for an early dinner," Dad says, already reaching for the phone. "We'll have you back in plenty of time to get to Portland," he adds as he dials.

"I'm in," I say. It isn't the lure of BookBarn, or the fact that Adam is on tour, or that my best friend, Kim, is busy doing yearbook stuff. It isn't even that my cello is at school or that I could stay home and watch TV or sleep. I'd actually rather go off with my family. This is another thing you don't advertise about yourself, but Adam gets that, too.

"Teddy," Dad calls. "Get dressed. We're going on an adventure."

Teddy finishes off his drum solo with a crash of cymbals. A moment later he's bounding into the kitchen fully dressed, as if he'd pulled on his clothes while careening down the steep wooden staircase of our drafty Victorian house. "School's out for summer . . ." he sings.

"Alice Cooper?" Dad asks. "Have we no standards? At least sing the Ramones."

"School's out forever," Teddy sings over Dad's protests.

"Ever the optimist," I say.

Mom laughs. She puts a plate of slightly charred pancakes down on the kitchen table. "Eat up, family."

8:17 A.M.

We pile into the car, a rusting Buick that was already old when Gran gave it to us after Teddy was born. Mom and Dad offer to let me drive, but I say no. Dad slips behind the wheel. He likes to drive now. He'd stubbornly refused to get a license for years, insisting on riding his bike everywhere. Back when he played music, his ban on driving meant

that his bandmates were the ones stuck behind the wheel on tours. They used to roll their eyes at him. Mom had done more than that. She'd pestered, cajoled, and sometimes yelled at Dad to get a license, but he'd insisted that he preferred pedal power. "Well, then you better get to work on building a bike that can hold a family of three and keep us dry when it rains," she'd demanded. To which Dad always had laughed and said that he'd get on that.

But when Mom had gotten pregnant with Teddy, she'd put her foot down. Enough, she said. Dad seemed to understand that something had changed. He'd stopped arguing and had gotten a driver's license. He'd also gone back to school to get his teaching certificate. I guess it was okay to be in arrested development with one kid. But with two, time to grow up. Time to start wearing a bow tie.

He has one on this morning, along with a flecked sport coat and vintage wingtips. "Dressed for the snow, I see," I say.

"I'm like the post office," Dad replies, scraping the snow off the car with one of Teddy's plastic dinosaurs that are scattered on the lawn. "Neither sleet nor rain nor a half inch of snow will compel me to dress like a lumberjack."