

VANISHING GIRLS

Also by
LAUREN OLIVER

Before I Fall
Liesl & Po
Panic
The Spindlers

THE DELIRIUM SERIES

Delirium

Delirium Stories: Hana, Annabel, and Raven

Pandemonium

Requiem

FOR ADULTS

Rooms

VANISHING GIRLS

**LAUREN
OLIVER**

HARPER

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Vanishing Girls

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First Edition

*To the real John Parker, for the support and inspiration—
and to sisters everywhere, including my own*

The funny thing about almost-dying is that afterward everyone expects you to jump on the happy train and take time to chase butterflies through grassy fields or see rainbows in puddles of oil on the highway. *It's a miracle*, they'll say with an expectant look, as if you've been given a big old gift and you better not disappoint Grandma by pulling a face when you unwrap the box and find a lumpy, misshapen sweater.

That's what life is, pretty much: full of holes and tangles and ways to get stuck. Uncomfortable and itchy. A present you never asked for, never wanted, never *chose*. A present you're supposed to be excited to wear, day after day, even when you'd rather stay in bed and do nothing.

The truth is this: it doesn't take any skill to almost-die, or to almost-live, either.



B E F O R E

M A R C H 27

Nick

“Want to play?”

These are the three words I’ve heard most often in my life. *Want to play?* As four-year-old Dara bursts through the screen door, arms extended, flying into the green of our front yard without waiting for me to answer. *Want to play?* As six-year-old Dara slips into my bed in the middle of the night, her eyes wide and touched with moonlight, her damp hair smelling like strawberry shampoo. *Want to play?* Eight-year-old Dara chiming the bell on her bike; ten-year-old Dara fanning cards across the damp pool deck; twelve-year-old Dara spinning an empty soda bottle by the neck.

Sixteen-year-old Dara doesn’t wait for me to answer, either. “Scoot over,” she says, bumping her best friend Ariana’s thigh with her knee. “My sister wants to play.”

“There’s no room,” Ariana says, squealing when Dara leans into her. “Sorry, Nick.” They’re crammed with a half-dozen other people into an unused stall in Ariana’s parents’ barn, which smells like sawdust and, faintly, manure. There’s a bottle of vodka, half-empty, on the hard-packed ground, as well as a few six-packs of beer and a small pile of miscellaneous items of clothing: a scarf, two mismatched mittens, a puffy jacket, and Dara’s tight pink sweatshirt with *Queen B*tch* emblazoned across the back in rhinestones. It all looks like some bizarre ritual sacrifice laid out to the gods of strip poker.

“Don’t worry,” I say quickly. “I don’t need to play. I just came to say hi, anyway.”

Dara makes a face. “You just got here.”

Ariana smacks her cards faceup on the ground. “Three of a kind, kings.” She cracks a beer open, and foam bubbles up around her knuckles. “Matt, take off your shirt.”

Matt is a skinny kid with a slightly-too-big-nose look and the filmy expression of someone who is already on his way to being very drunk. Since he’s already in his T-shirt—black, with a mysterious graphic of a one-eyed beaver on the front—I can only assume the puffy jacket belongs to him. “I’m cold,” he whines.

“It’s either your shirt or your pants. You choose.”

Matt sighs and begins wriggling out of his T-shirt, showing off a thin back, constellated with acne.

“Where’s Parker?” I ask, trying to sound casual, then hating myself for having to try. But ever since Dara started . . . *whatever*

she's doing with him, it has become impossible to talk about my former best friend without feeling like a Christmas tree ornament has landed in the back of my throat.

Dara freezes in the act of redistributing the cards. But only for a second. She tosses a final card in Ariana's direction and sweeps up a hand. "No idea."

"I texted him," I say. "He told me he was coming."

"Yeah, well, maybe he *left*." Dara's dark eyes flick to mine, and the message is clear. *Let it go*. I guess they must be fighting again. Or maybe they're not fighting, and that's the problem. Maybe he refuses to play along.

"Dara's got a *new* boyfriend," Ariana says in a singsong, and Dara elbows her. "Well, you do, don't you? A *secret* boyfriend."

"Shut up," Dara says sharply. I can't tell whether she's really mad or only pretending to be.

Ari fake-pouts. "Do I know him? Just tell me if I *know* him."

"No way," Dara says. "No hints." She tosses down her cards and stands up, dusting off the back of her jeans. She's wearing fur-trimmed wedge boots and a metallic shirt I've never seen before, which looks like it has been poured over her body and then left to harden. Her hair—recently dyed black, and blown out perfectly straight—looks like oil poured over her shoulders. As usual, I feel like the Scarecrow next to Dorothy. I'm wearing a bulky jacket Mom bought me four years ago for a ski trip to Vermont, and my hair, the unremarkable brown of mouse poop, is pulled back in its trademark ponytail.

“I’m getting a drink,” Dara says, even though she’s been having beer. “Anyone want?”

“Bring back some mixers,” Ariana says.

Dara gives no indication that she’s heard. She grabs me by the wrist and pulls me out of the horse stall and into the barn, where Ariana—or her mom?—has set up a few folding tables covered with bowls of chips and pretzels, guacamole, packaged cookies. There’s a cigarette butt stubbed out in a container of guacamole, and cans of beer floating around in an enormous punch bowl full of half-melted ice, like ships trying to navigate the Arctic.

It seems as if most of Dara’s grade has come out tonight, and about half of mine—even if seniors don’t usually deign to crash a junior party, *second semester* seniors never miss any opportunity to celebrate. Christmas lights are strung between the horse stalls, only three of which contain actual horses: Misty, Luciana, and Mr. Ed. I wonder if any of the horses are bothered by the thudding bass from the music, or by the fact that every five seconds a drunk junior is shoving his hand across the gate, trying to get the horse to nibble Cheetos from his hand.

The other stalls, the ones that aren’t piled with old saddles and muck rakes and rusted farm equipment that has somehow landed and then expired here—even though the only thing Ariana’s mom farms is money from her three ex-husbands—are filled with kids playing drinking games or grinding on each other, or, in the case of Jake Harris and Aubrey O’Brien, full-on making out. The tack room, I’ve been informed, has been unofficially

claimed by the stoners.

The big sliding barn doors are open to the night, and frigid air blows in from outside. Down the hill, someone is trying to get a bonfire started in the riding rink, but there's a light rain tonight, and the wood won't catch.

At least Aaron isn't here. I'm not sure I could have handled seeing him tonight—not after what happened last weekend. It would have been better if he'd been mad—if he'd freaked out and yelled, or started rumors around school that I have chlamydia or something. Then I could hate him. Then it would make *sense*.

But since the breakup he's been unfailingly, epically polite, like he's the greeter at a Gap. Like he's *really* hoping I'll buy something but doesn't want to seem pushy.

"I still think we're good together," he'd said out of the blue, even as he was giving me back my sweatshirt (cleaned, of course, and folded) and a variety of miscellaneous crap I'd left in his car: pens and a phone charger and a weird snow globe I'd seen for sale at CVS. School had served pasta marinara for lunch, and there was a tiny bit of Day-Glo sauce at the corner of his mouth. "Maybe you'll change your mind."

"Maybe," I'd said. And I really hoped, more than anything in the world, that I would.

Dara grabs a bottle of Southern Comfort and splashes three inches into a plastic cup, topping it off with Coca-Cola. I bite the inside of my lip, as if I can chew back the words I really want

to say: This must be at *least* her third drink; she's already in the doghouse with Mom and Dad; she's supposed to be staying out of trouble. She landed us both in *therapy*, for God's sake.

Instead I say, "So. A new boyfriend, huh?" I try and keep my voice light.

One corner of Dara's mouth crooks into a smile. "You know Ariana. She exaggerates." She mixes another drink and presses it into my hand, jamming our plastic cups together. "Cheers," she says, and takes a big swig, emptying half her drink.

The drink smells suspiciously like cough syrup. I set it down next to a platter of cold pigs in blankets, which look like shriveled thumbs wrapped up in gauze. "So there's no mystery man?"

Dara lifts a shoulder. "What can I say?" She's wearing gold eye shadow tonight, and a dusting of it coats her cheeks; she looks like someone who has accidentally trespassed through fairyland. "I'm irresistible."

"What about Parker?" I say. "More trouble in paradise?"

Instantly I regret the question. Dara's smile vanishes. "Why?" she says, her eyes dull now, hard. "Want to say 'I told you so' again?"

"Forget it." I turn away, feeling suddenly exhausted. "Good night, Dara."

"Wait." She grabs my wrist. Just like that, the moment of tension is gone, and she smiles again. "Stay, okay? *Stay*, Ninpin," she repeats, when I hesitate.

When Dara gets like this, turns sweet and pleading, like her

old self, like the sister who used to climb onto my chest and beg me, wide-eyed, to wake up, wake up, she's almost impossible to resist. Almost. "I have to get up at seven," I say, even as she's leading me outside, into the fizz and pop of the rain. "I promised Mom I'd help straighten up before Aunt Jackie gets here."

For the first month or so after Dad announced he was leaving, Mom acted like absolutely nothing was different. But recently she's been *forgetting*: to turn on the dishwasher, to set her alarm, to iron her work blouses, to vacuum. It's like every time he removes another item from the house—his favorite chair, the chess set he inherited from his father, the golf clubs he never uses—it takes a portion of her brain with it.

"Why?" Dara rolls her eyes. "She'll just bring cleansing crystals with her to do the work. Please," she adds. She has to raise her voice to be heard over the music; someone has just turned up the volume. "You *never* come out."

"That's not true," I say. "It's just that you're *always* out." The words sound harsher than I'd intended. But Dara only laughs.

"Let's not fight tonight, okay?" she says, and leans in to give me a kiss on the cheek. Her lips are candy-sticky. "Let's be happy."

A group of guys—juniors, I'm guessing—huddled together in the half-dark of the barn start hooting and clapping. "All right!" one of them shouts, raising a beer. "Lesbian action!"

"Shut up, dick!" Dara says. But she's laughing. "She's my *sister*."

“That’s definitely my cue,” I say.

But Dara isn’t listening. Her face is flushed, her eyes bright with alcohol. “She’s my sister,” she announces again, to no one and also to everyone, since Dara is the kind of person other people watch, want, follow. *“And my best friend.”*

More hooting; a scattering of applause. Another guy yells, “Get it on!”

Dara throws an arm around my shoulder, leans up to whisper in my ear, her breath sweet-smelling, sharp with booze. “Best friends for life,” she says, and I’m no longer sure whether she’s hugging me or hanging on me. “Right, Nick? Nothing—*nothing*—can change that.”

A F T E R

http://www.theShorelineBlotter.com/march28_accidentsandreports

At 11:55 p.m., Norwalk police responded to a crash on Route 101, just south of the Shady Palms Motel. The driver, Nicole Warren, 17, was taken to Eastern Memorial with minor injuries. The passenger, Dara Warren, 16, who was not wearing her seat belt, was rushed by ambulance to the ICU and is, at the time of this posting, still in critical condition. We're all praying for you, Dara.

Sooo sad. Hope she pulls through!

posted by: mamabear27 at 6:04 a.m.

i live right down the road heard the crash from a half mile away!!!

posted by: qTpie27 at 8:04 a.m.

These kids think they're indestructible. Who doesn't wear a seat belt???

She has no one to blame but herself.

posted by: markhhammond at 8:05 a.m.

Have some compassion, dude! We all do stupid things.

posted by: trickmatrix at 8:07 a.m.

Some people stupider than others.

posted by: markhhammond at 8:08 a.m.



Dara,

I'm so sorry. Please wake up.
I want to make it up to you.

Parker

It was a busy night for the Main Heights PD. Between midnight and 1:00 a.m. on Wednesday, three local teens perpetrated a rash of minor thefts in the area south of Route 23. Police first responded to a call from the 7-Eleven on Richmond Place, where Mark Haas, 17, Daniel Ripp, 16, and Jacob Ripp, 19, had threatened and harassed a local clerk before making off with two six-packs of beer, four cartons of eggs, three packages of Twinkies, and three Slim Jims. Police pursued the three teens to Sutter Street, where they had destroyed a half-dozen mailboxes and egged the home of Mr. Walter Middleton, a math teacher at the teens' high school (who had, this reporter learned, earlier in the year threatened to fail Haas for suspected cheating). The police at last caught and arrested the teens in Carren Park, but not before the three boys had stolen a backpack, two pairs of jeans, and a pair of sneakers from next to the public pool. The clothes, police reported, belonged to two teenage skinny-dippers, both of whom were brought into the Main Heights police station . . . hopefully, after recovering their clothing.

Dannnnnnny . . . ur a legend.

posted by: grandtheftotto at 12:01 p.m.

Get a life.

posted by: momofthree at 12:35 p.m.

The irony is that these boys will probably be working in the 7-Eleven before too long. Somehow I don't see these three boys as brain surgeons.

posted by: hal.m.woodward at 2:56 p.m.

Skinny-dipping? Weren't they freezing?? :P

posted by: prettymaddie at 7:22 p.m.

How come the article doesn't give us the names of the "two teenage skinny-dippers"? Trespassing is a criminal offense, isn't it?

posted by: vigilantescience01 at 9:01 p.m.

Thanks for posting. It is, but neither teen was charged.

posted by: admin at 9:15 p.m.

Mr. Middleton sux.

posted by: hellicat15 at 11:01 p.m.

J U L Y I 5

Nick

“Skinny-dipping, Nicole?”

There are many words in the English language that you never want to hear your father say. *Enema. Orgasm. Disappointed.*

Skinny-dipping ranks high on the list, especially when you’ve just been dragged out of the police station at three in the morning wearing police-issue pants and a sweatshirt that likely belonged to some homeless person or suspected serial killer, because your clothing, bag, ID, and cash were stolen from the side of a public pool.

“It was a joke,” I say, which is stupid; there’s nothing funny about getting arrested, almost ass-naked, in the middle of the night when you’re supposed to be asleep.

The headlights divide the highway into patches of light and dark. I’m glad, at least, that I can’t see my dad’s face.

“What were you *thinking*? I would never have expected this. Not from you. And that boy, Mike—”

“Mark.”

“Whatever his name was. How old is he?”

I stay quiet on that. *Twenty* is the answer, but I know better than to say it. Dad’s just looking for someone to blame. Let him think that I was forced into it, that some bad-influence guy made me hop the fence at Carren Park and strip down to my underwear, made me take a big belly flop into a deep end so cold it shocked the breath right out of my body so I came up laughing, gulping air, thinking of Dara, thinking she should have been with me, that she would understand.

I imagine a huge boulder rising up out of the dark, an accordion-wall of solid stone, and have to shut my eyes and reopen them. Nothing but highway, long and smooth, and the twin funnels of the headlights.

“Listen, Nick,” Dad says. “Your mom and I are worried about you.”

“I didn’t think you and Mom were talking,” I say, rolling down the window a few inches, both because the air-conditioning is barely sputtering out cold air and because the rush of the wind helps drown out Dad’s voice.

He ignores that. “I’m serious. Ever since the accident—”

“Please,” I say quickly, before he can finish. “Don’t.”

Dad sighs and rubs his eyes under his glasses. He smells a little bit like the menthol strips he puts on his nose at night to keep

A F T E R

him from snoring, and he's still wearing the baggy pajama pants he's had forever, the ones with reindeers on them. And just for a second, I feel really, truly terrible.

Then I remember Dad's new girlfriend and Mom's silent, taut look, like a dummy with her strings pulled way too tight.

"You're going to have to talk about it, Nick," Dad says. This time his voice is quiet, concerned. "If not with me, then with Dr. Lichme. Or Aunt Jackie. Or *someone*."

"No," I say, unrolling the window all the way, so the wind is thunderous and whips away the sound of my voice. "I don't."

J A N U A R Y 7

Dara's Diary Entry

Dr. Lick Me—I'm sorry, Lichine—says I should spend five minutes a day writing about my feelings.

So here I go:

I hate Parker.

I feel better already!

It's been five days since THE KISS and today in school he didn't even breathe in my direction. Like he was worried I would contaminate his oxygen circle or something.

Mom and Dad are on the shit list this week, too. Dad because he's acting all serious and somber about the divorce, when inside you know he's just turning backflips and cartwheels. I mean, if he doesn't want to leave, he doesn't have to, right? And Mom because she doesn't even stand up for herself, and didn't cry once about Paw-Paw, either, not even at the funeral. She just keeps

going through the motions and heading to SoulCycle and researching goddamn quinoa recipes as if she can keep the whole world together just by getting enough fiber. Like she's some weird animatronic robot wearing yoga pants and a Vassar sweatshirt.

Nick is like that too. It drives me crazy. She didn't used to be, I don't think. Maybe I just don't remember. But ever since she started high school, she's always doling out advice like she's forty-five and not exactly eleven months and three days older than I am.

I remember last month, when Mom and Dad sat down to tell us about the divorce, she didn't even blink. "Okay," she said.

Oh-fucking-Kay. Really?

Paw-Paw's dead and Mom and Dad hate each other and Nick looks at me like I'm an alien half the time.

Listen, Dr. Lick Me, here's all I have to say: It's not okay.

Nothing is.

J U L Y I 7

Nick

Somerville and Main Heights are only twelve miles apart, but they might as well be in different countries. Main Heights is all new: new construction, new storefronts, new clutter, newly divorced dads and their newly bought condos, a small cluster of sheetrock and plywood and fresh paint, like a stage set built too quickly to be realistic. Dad's condo looks out over a parking lot and a line of skinny elm trees that divides the housing complex from the highway. The floors are carpeted and the air conditioner never makes a sound, just silently churns out frigid, recycled air, so it feels like living inside a refrigerator.

I like Main Heights, though. I like my all-white room, and the smell of new asphalt, and all the flimsy buildings clinging to the sky. Main Heights is a place where people go when they want to forget.

But two days after the skinny-dipping incident, I'm heading home to Somerville.

"It'll be good for you to get a change of scenery," Dad says, for the twelfth time, which is stupid because it's the exact thing he said when I moved out to Main Heights. "And it'll be good for your mother to have you home. She'll be happy."

At least he doesn't lie and say that Dara will be happy, too.

Too fast, we're entering Somerville. Just like that, from one side of the underpass to the other, everything looks old. Enormous trees line the road, weeping willows fingering the earth, tall oaks casting the whole car in flickering shadow; through the curtain of swaying green, enormous houses ranging from turn-of-the-century to colonial to who-the-hell-knows-how-long-ago are visible. Somerville used to be the seat of a booming mill and cotton factory, the largest town in the whole state. Now half the town has been granted landmark status. We have a Founders' Day and a Mill Festival and a Pilgrims' Parade. There's something backward about living in a place so obsessed with the past; it's like everyone's given up on the idea of a future.

As soon as we turn onto West Haven Court, my chest goes tight. This, too, is the problem with Somerville: too many memories and associations. Everything that happens has happened a thousand times before. For a second, an impression surfaces of a thousand other car rides, a thousand other trips home in Dad's big Suburban with the rust-colored coffee stain on the passenger

seat—a composite memory of family trips and special dinners and group errands.

Funny how things can stay the same forever and then change so quickly.

Dad's Suburban is now for sale. He's looking to trade it in for a smaller model, like he traded his big house and four-person family for a downsized condo and a perky, pint-size blonde named Cheryl. And we'll never drive up to number 37 as a family again.

Dara's car is in the driveway, boxed in between the garage and Mom's: the pair of fuzzy dice I bought her at a Walmart still hanging from the rearview, so dirty I can make out handprints near the gas tank. It makes me feel a little better that she hasn't thrown them away. I wonder if she's started driving again yet.

I wonder if she'll be home, sitting in the kitchen alcove, wearing a too-big T-shirt and barely-there shorts, picking her toenails like she always does when she wants to drive me crazy. Whether she'll look up when I come in, blow the bangs out of her eyes, and say, "Hey, Ninpin," as if nothing has happened, as if she hasn't spent the past three months avoiding me completely.

Only once we're parked does Dad seem sorry for off-loading me.

"You gonna be okay?" he asks.

"What do you think?" I say.

He stops me from getting out of the car. "This will be good for you," he repeats. "For both of you. Even Dr. Lichme said—"

"Dr. Lichme's a hack," I say, and climb out of the car before

he can argue. After the accident, Mom and Dad insisted I ramp up my sessions with Dr. Lichme to once a week, like they were worried I'd crashed the car deliberately or maybe that the concussion had permanently screwed up my brain. But they finally stopped insisting I go after I spent a full four sessions at \$250 an hour sitting in complete and total silence. I have no idea whether Dara's still going.

I rap once on the trunk before Dad pops it. He doesn't even bother getting out of the car to give me a hug, not that I want one—just rolls down his window and lifts his arm to wave, like I'm a passenger on a ship about to set sail.

"I love you," he says. "I'll call you tonight."

"Sure. Me too." I sling my duffel over one shoulder and start traipsing toward the front door. The grass is overgrown and clings wetly to my ankles. The front door needs painting and the whole house looks deflated, like something integral inside has collapsed.

A few years ago my mom became convinced that the kitchen was slanted. She would line up frozen peas and show Dara and me how they rolled from one end of the counter to the other. Dad thought she was crazy. They got in a big fight about it, especially since he kept stepping on peas whenever he went barefoot to the kitchen for water at night.

It turned out Mom was right. Finally she had someone take a look at the foundation. Because of the way the ground had settled, it turned out our house leaned a half inch to the left—not

enough to see, but enough to feel.

But today the house looks more lopsided than ever.

Mom hasn't yet bothered to switch out the storm door for the screen. I have to lean on the handle before it will open. The hallway is dark and smells faintly sour. Several FedEx boxes are stacked underneath the hall table, and there's a pair of rubber gardening boots I don't recognize, soles caked with mud, abandoned in the middle of the floor. Perkins, our sixteen-year-old tabby, lets out a plaintive meow and trots down the hall, twining himself around my ankles. At least *someone* is happy to see me.

"Hello?" I call out, embarrassed that I suddenly feel so awkward and disoriented, as if I'm a stranger.

"In here, Nick!" Mom's voice sounds faint through the walls, as if it's trapped there.

I dump my bags in the hall, careful to avoid the mud splatter, and make my way toward the kitchen, the whole time imagining Dara: Dara on the phone, Dara with knees up in the windowsill, Dara with new streaks of color in her hair. Dara's eyes, clear as pool water, and the small upturned knob of her nose, the kind of nose people pay for. Dara waiting for me, ready to forgive.

But in the kitchen, I find Mom alone. So. Either Dara's not home, or she has decided not to grace me with her presence.

"Nick." Mom seems startled when she sees me, though of course she heard me come in and has been expecting me all morning. "You're too thin," she says when she hugs me. Then: "I'm very disappointed in you."

“Yeah.” I take a seat at the table, which is piled high with old newspapers. There are two mugs, both half-filled with coffee now showing a milk-white sheen, and a plate with a piece of half-eaten toast on it. “Dad said.”

“Really, Nick. Skinny-dipping?” She’s trying to pull the disapproving-parent act, but she isn’t as convincing as Dad was, as if she’s an actress and already the lines are boring her. “We’re all dealing with enough as it is. I don’t want to have to worry about you, too.”

There she is, shimmering between us like a mirage: Dara in short-shorts and high heels, lashes thick with mascara, leaving dust on her cheeks; Dara laughing, always laughing, telling us not to worry, she’ll be safe, she never drinks, even as her breath smells like vanilla vodka; Dara the beautiful one, the popular one, the problem child everyone loves—my baby sister.

“So don’t,” I say bluntly.

Mom sighs and takes a seat across from me. She looks like she’s aged a hundred years since the accident. Her skin is chalky and dry, and the bags under her eyes are a bruise-y yellow color. The roots are showing at her scalp. For a second I have the worst, most vicious thought: *No wonder Dad left.*

But I know that isn’t fair. He left even before things got shitty. I’ve tried to understand it a million times, but still, I can’t. Afterward, sure. When Dara got metal pins in her kneecaps and swore she would never speak to me again, and when Mom went silent for weeks and started taking sleeping pills every night and

waking up too groggy to go to work and the hospital bills kept coming, kept coming, like autumn leaves after a storm.

But why weren't we good enough before?

"Sorry about the mess." Mom gestures to encompass the table and the window seat, cluttered with mail, and the countertop, also heaped with mail and groceries half unpacked from a bag and then abandoned. "There's always so much to do. Ever since I started work again . . ."

"That's okay." I hate hearing my mom apologize. After the accident, all she did was say *I'm sorry*. I woke up in the hospital and she was holding me, rocking me like a baby, repeating it over and over. Like she had anything to do with it. Hearing her apologize for something that wasn't her fault made me feel even worse.

I was the one driving the car.

Mom clears her throat. "Have you thought about what you'll do this summer, now that you're home?"

"What do you mean?" I reach over and take a bite of the toast. Stale. I spit it out into a balled-up napkin, and Mom doesn't even lecture me. "I still have shifts at the Palladium. I'll just have to borrow Dara's car and—"

"Absolutely not. No way you're going back to the Palladium." Mom turns, suddenly, into her old self: the principal-for-one-of-the-worst-public-high-schools in Shoreline County, the mom who broke up physical fights between the senior boys and made absentee parents get it together, or at least do a better job of

pretending. “And you’re not driving, either.”

Anger itches its way up through my skin. “You’re not serious.” At the start of the summer, I landed a job behind the concessions kiosk at the Palladium, the movie theater at Bethel Mall just outside of Main Heights: the world’s easiest, stupidest job. Most days the whole mall is empty except for moms in spandex pushing baby strollers, and even when they come to the Palladium they never order anything but Diet Coke. All I have to do is show up and I get \$10.50 an hour.

“I’m dead serious.” Mom folds her hands on the table, her knuckles gripped so tightly I can see every bone. “Your father and I think you need a little more structure this summer,” she says. Amazing that my parents can only find time to stop hating each other to team up against me. “Something to keep you busy.”

Busy. Like *stimulated*, that word is parent-speak for: supervised at all times and bored out of your mind.

“I’m busy at the Palladium,” I say, which is a complete lie. “You mix butter into popcorn, Nicki,” Mom says. A crease appears between her eyebrows, as if someone has just pressed a thumb to her skin.

Not always, I nearly say.

She stands up, cinching her bathrobe a little tighter. Mom runs summer-school sessions Monday through Thursday. I guess since it’s Friday she didn’t bother getting dressed, even though it’s after 2:00 p.m. “I’ve spoken to Mr. Wilcox,” she says.

“No.” The itch has become a full-blown panic. Greg Wilcox is a creepy old guy who used to teach math at Mom’s school, until he chucked academia for a job managing the world’s oldest, most pathetic amusement park, Fantasy Land. Since the name makes it sound like a strip club, everyone calls it FanLand. “Don’t even say it.”

Apparently she isn’t listening. “Greg said he’s short-staffed this summer, especially after—” She breaks off, making a face as if she’s sucking on a lemon, meaning she almost said something she shouldn’t have. “Well, he could use an extra pair of hands. It’ll be physical, it’ll get you outside, and it will be good for you.”

I’m getting pretty sick of my parents forcing me to do things while pretending it’s for my benefit.

“This isn’t fair,” I say. I almost add, *You never make Dara do anything*, but I refuse to mention her, just like I refuse to ask where she is. If she’s going to pretend I don’t exist, I can do the same for her.

“I don’t have to be fair,” she says. “I’m your mom. Besides, Dr. Lichme thinks—”

“I don’t care what Dr. Lichme thinks.” I shove away from the table so hard the chair screeches on the linoleum. The air in the house is thick with heat and moisture: no central air. This is what my summer will be like: instead of lying in Dad’s spare bedroom with the AC cranked up and all the lights off, I’ll be sharing a house with a sister who hates me and slaving away at an ancient

amusement park solely attended by freaks and old people.

"Now you're starting to sound like her, too." Mom looks totally exhausted. "One is enough, don't you think?"

It's typical of Dara that she can become not only the topic of but also a force in the conversation even when she isn't in the room. For as long as I can remember, people have been comparing me to Dara instead of the other way around. *She's not as pretty as her younger sister . . . shyer than her younger sister . . . not as popular as her younger sister . . .*

The only thing I was ever better at than Dara was being ordinary. And field hockey—like running a ball down a field is a great basis for a personality.

"I'm nothing like her," I say. I leave the kitchen before Mom can respond, almost tripping on the stupid gardening boots in the hall before taking the stairs two at a time. Everywhere are signs of the unfamiliar, little details missing and others added, like several plastic gnome-shaped night-lights outside Mom's room and nothing but a bare patch of carpet in the office where Dad's favorite, ugly-ass leather chair used to sit, plus more and more cardboard boxes full of junk, as if another family is slowly moving in or we're slowly moving out.

My room, at least, is untouched: all the books organized spine-out and the powder-blue coverlet nicely folded and my stuffed animals from when I was a baby, Benny and Stuart, propped up on my pillows. On my bedside table, I spot the framed picture of Dara and me from Halloween when I was a freshman; in it, we're

both dressed like scary clowns, and in our face paint, grinning, we look nearly identical. I cross the room quickly and turn the picture facedown. Then, thinking better of it, I slide the photograph into a drawer.

I don't know which is worse: that I'm home and so much is different, or that I'm home and so much feels the same.

Overhead, I hear a pattern of creaks. Dara, moving around her attic bedroom. So she *is* home. Suddenly I'm so angry I could hit something. This is all Dara's fault. Dara's the one who decided to stop speaking to me. It's Dara's fault I've been walking around feeling like I've got a bowling ball in my chest, like at any second it might drop straight through my stomach and spill my guts on the floor. It's her fault I can't sleep, I can't eat, and when I do I just feel nauseous.

Once upon a time, we would have laughed together about Dad's girlfriend, and Dara would have made up a mean code name so we could refer to her without her knowing. Once upon a time, she might have come to work with me at FanLand just to keep me company, just so I wouldn't have to deal with scrubbing out old-person smell and little-kid vomit from the ancient rides all by myself, and we would have competed over who could spot the most fanny packs in an hour or drink the most Coke without barfing.

Once upon a time, she would have made it fun.

Before I've fully decided what I'm going to say to her, I head back into the hall and up the attic stairs. The air is even hotter

up here. Mom and Dad moved Dara from the ground-floor bedroom to the attic in the middle of freshman year, thinking it would be harder for her to sneak out at night. Instead she started climbing out the window and using the old rose trellis as her own personal ladder.

Dara's bedroom door is closed. One time after we had a fight she painted **KEEP OUT** in big red letters right on the door. Mom and Dad made her cover it over, but in certain lights you can still make out the words shimmering under the layering of Eggshell #12.

I decide against knocking. Instead I fling open the door like cops do on TV shows, as if I'm expecting her to jump out at me.

Her room is a wreck, as always. The sheets are pulled halfway off the bed. The floor is piled with jeans, shoes, sequined shirts, and halter tops, as well as a covering, fine as leaves, of the kind of thing that accumulates at the bottom of a purse: gum wrappers, Tic Tacs, spare change, pen caps, broken cigarettes.

The air still smells, faintly, like cinnamon: Dara's favorite scent.

But she's gone. The window is open and a breeze distorts the curtains, making ripple patterns, faces that appear and disappear. I cross the room, doing my best to avoid stepping on anything breakable, and lean out the window. As always, instinctively, my eyes go first to the oak tree, where Parker used to hang a red flag when he wanted us to come play and we were supposed to be doing homework or sleeping instead. Then Dara and I would

sneak down the rose trellis together, trying desperately not to giggle, and run, holding hands, to meet him at our secret spot.

There is no red flag now, of course. But the trellis is swaying slightly, and several petals, recently detached, twirl on the wind toward the ground. I can make out the faint imprints of footsteps in the mud. Looking up, I think I see a flash of skin, a bright spot of color, a flicker of dark hair moving through the woods that crowd up against the back of our house.

“Dara!” I call out. Then: “Dara!”

But she doesn’t turn around.

J U L Y I 7

Dara

I haven't climbed down the rose trellis since the accident, and I'm worried my wrist won't hold. It got pulverized in the crash; for a month, I couldn't even hold a fork. I have to drop the last few feet, and my ankles let me know it. Still, I've made it down in one piece. I guess all that PT is good for something.

No way do I want to see Nick. Not after what she said.

I'm nothing like her.

Perfect Nicki. The Good Child.

I'm nothing like her.

As if we didn't spend practically our whole lives sneaking into each other's rooms to sleep in the same bed, whisper about our crushes, watch moon patterns on the ceiling and try to pick out different shapes. As if we didn't once cut our fingers and let them bleed together so we'd be bonded forever, so we'd be made not

just of the same genes but of each other. As if we didn't always swear that we'd live together even after college, the Two Musketeers, the Dynamic Duo, Light and Dark, two sides of the same cookie.

But now Perfect Nick has started to show some cracks.

The woods run up against another yard, neatly mowed, and a house staring at me through the trees. Turning left will bring me past the Duponts' house to Parker's, and the hidden break in the fence that Nick, Parker, and I engineered when we were kids so we'd be able to sneak back and forth more easily. I turn right instead and get spat out at the end of Old Hickory Lane, across the street from the bandstand in Upper Reaches Park. There's a four-person band onstage, of a combined age of about one thousand, dressed in old-fashioned straw hats and candy-striped jackets, playing an unfamiliar song. For a moment, standing in the middle of the road, watching them, I feel completely lost—as if I've stumbled into someone else's body, into someone else's life.

There was one good thing about the accident—and in case you're wondering, it wasn't the broken kneecaps or shattered pelvis, the shattered wrist and fractured tibia and dislocated jaw and scars where my head went through the passenger window, or getting to lie around in a hospital bed for four weeks and sip milkshakes through a straw.

The good thing was: I got to cut school for two and a half months.

It's not that I mind going to school. At least, I didn't *used* to mind it. The classes suck, sure, but the rest of it—seeing friends, skipping out between classes to sneak cigarettes behind the science lab, flirting with the seniors so they'll buy you lunch off campus—is just fine.

School is only hard when you care about doing well. And when you're the stupid one in the family, no one *expects* you to do well.

But I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't want to watch everyone feel bad for me while I limped across the cafeteria, when I couldn't sit down without wincing, like an old man. I didn't want to give anyone an excuse to pity me, or pretend to pity me while feeling secretly satisfied that I'm not pretty anymore.

A car blares its horn, and I move quickly out of the road, stumbling a little on the grass, but grateful for the sense of strength returning: this is practically the first time I've left the house in months.

Instead of passing, the car slows, and time slows, and I feel a hard fist of dread squeeze in my chest. A beat-up white Volvo, its bumper attached to the undercarriage with thick ropes of duct tape.

Parker.

“Holy shit.”

That's what he says when he sees me. Not *Oh my God, Dara. It's so good to see you.* Not *I'm so sorry. I've been thinking of you every day.*

Not I was afraid to call, so that's why I didn't.

Just: *Holy shit.*

“Pretty much,” I say, since it’s the only response I can think of. At that moment, the band decides to stop playing. Funny how silence can be the loudest sound of all.

“I’m . . . wow.” He shifts in the car but makes no move to get out and hug me. His dark hair has grown long and hangs practically to his jaw now. He’s tan—he must be working outside, maybe mowing lawns again, like he did last summer. His eyes are still the same in-between color, not quite blue or green but something closer to gray, like the fifteen minutes just before the sun rises. And looking at him still makes me want to puke and cry and kiss him all at once. “I really didn’t expect to see you.”

“I live around the corner, in case you forgot,” I say. My voice sounds harder, angrier, than I’d meant it to, and I’m grateful when the band strikes up again.

“I thought you were gone,” he says. He keeps both hands on the steering wheel, squeezing tightly, like he does when he’s trying not to fidget. Parker always used to joke he was like a shark—if he ever stopped moving, he would die.

“Not gone,” I say. “Just not seeing anyone.”

“Yeah.” He’s watching me so intensely I have to turn away, squinting into the sun. This way, he can’t see the scars, still angry and raw-red, flattened across my cheek and temple. “I figured—I figured you didn’t want to see me. After what happened . . .”

“You figured right,” I say quickly, because otherwise I might

say what I really feel, which is: *not true*.

He flinches and looks away, returning his attention to the road. Another car passes, and has to pull out into the oncoming traffic to avoid Parker's car. He doesn't seem to notice, even when the passenger, an old man, rolls down his window and yells something rude. The sun is warm and sweat moves down my neck. I remember, then, lying between Parker and Nick last summer in Upper Reaches Park on the day after school ended, while Parker read out loud all the weirdest news he could find from around the country—interspecies relationships; bizarre deaths; unexplained agricultural patterns that could only, Parker insisted, be caused by aliens—inhaling the smell of charcoal and new grass and thinking, *I could stay here forever*. What the hell changed?

Nick. My parents. The accident.

Everything.

I suddenly feel like crying. Instead I wrap my arms around my waist and squeeze.

“Listen.” He rakes a hand through his hair, which immediately swings back into place. “You need a ride somewhere or something?”

“No.” I don't want to tell him that I have nowhere to go. I'm not heading anywhere except *away*. I can't even go back for my car keys or I risk seeing Nick, who no doubt is finding reasons to complain about the fact that I wasn't there to cheerlead her arrival.

He makes a face like he's accidentally swallowed his gum. "It's good to see you," he says. But he doesn't look at me. "Really good. I've been thinking about you . . . all the time, basically."

"I'm doing just fine," I say.

Good thing lying comes naturally to me.

East Norwalk PD are reporting the possible abduction of nine-year-old Madeline Snow from a car outside Big Scoop Ice Cream & Candy off Route 101 in East Norwalk on the evening of Sunday, July 19, sometime between 10:00 p.m. and 10:45 p.m. Her family has released the accompanying picture of Madeline and asked that anyone with any knowledge of her whereabouts get in contact immediately with Chief Lieutenant Frank Hernandez at 1-200-555-2160, ext. 3.

Please join me in praying that Madeline makes it home safe—and soon—to her family.

This article is surprisingly undetailed. Was she with her parents when she was “abducted”? Statistically, it’s usually the parents’ fault when a child disappears.

posted by: alikelystory at 9:45 a.m.

Thanks for your comment, @alikelystory. The police haven’t released any further details, but I’ll be sure to update as soon as they do.

posted by: admin at 10:04 a.m.

@alikelystory “It’s usually the parents’ fault when a child disappears.”

Where do you get this so-called “statistic”?

posted by: booradleyfor prez at 11:42 a.m.

Poor Madeline. The whole congregation at St. Jude is praying for you.

posted by: mamabear27 at 1:37 p.m.

Hey all, for up-to-the-minute info, go to www.FindMadeline.tumblr.com.

It looks like they just got the site up and running.

posted by: weinberger33 at 2:25 p.m.

see additional 161 comments.

J U L Y 20
Nick

My new job starts on Monday, bright and early.

Mom's still sleeping when I leave the house at seven. Dara, too. In the two days since I've been home, Dara's done a near-perfect job of avoiding me. I have no idea what she does up in her room all day—sleeps, most likely, and of course Mom never bugs her about it; Dara's off-limits since the accident, as if she's a glass figurine that might break if we handle it—and every morning I see broken rosebuds in the garden, evidence that she's been shimmying up and down the trellis again.

I know her only by the trace evidence: iPod left blaring through the speakers in her room, footsteps overhead, the things she leaves behind. Toothpaste crusted on our shared bathroom sink, because she always uses too much and never bothers to put the cap on. A bag of chips, half-eaten, discarded on the kitchen

table. Thick wedge heels lying on the stairs; the faint smell of pot that filters down from the attic at night. This way I form an impression of her, of her life, of what she's doing, the way we used to rush downstairs on Christmas morning and know Santa Claus had come because the cookies we'd left had been eaten and the milk consumed. Or the way an anthropologist does, constructing whole civilizations out of the scraps of pottery they left behind.

It's already hot, even though the sun has just edged over the horizon and the sky is still stained a deep blue. The crickets are going crazy, threshing the air into layers of sound. I peel the banana I pulled from the kitchen before realizing it's rotten. I chuck it into the woods.

On the bus, which is mostly empty, I take the last seat. Someone has carved the initials *DRW* into the window, big. Dara's initials. I briefly imagine her sitting where I'm sitting, bored, taking a penknife to the glass while on her way to God knows where.

The number 22 goes from Somerville all the way down the coast, and curves along Heron Bay and its clutter of cheap motels and faux-timber resorts, past a long blur of diners and T-shirt shops and ice cream parlors, into East Norwalk, a place thick with bars and shitty lingerie stores and XXX-video stores and strip clubs. FanLand is right off Route 101, only a mile or so away from the crash site: a no-name place of low-lying marshland and twisted shrubbery and studded outcroppings of rock,

carried down to the beach by some long-ago glacier, still getting sawed slowly into sand by the motion of the waves.

I don't know what we were doing there. I don't remember why we crashed, or how. My memory is looped over a single moment, like a thread snagged on something sharp: the moment my hands were off the wheel and the headlights lit up a wall of rock. Dad suggested not too long ago that I visit the site of the crash, said that I might find it "healing."

I wonder if my license plate is still there, lying mangled in the sun-bleached grass, if there's glass still glittering between the rocks.

By the time we reach FanLand—which shares a parking lot with Boom-a-Rang, the state's Largest Firecracker Emporium, according to the sign—the only other person on the bus is an ancient man with a face the color of a tobacco stain. He disembarks with me but doesn't even glance up, just heads slowly across the lot toward Boom-a-Rang, head down, as if he's moving against a hard wind.

Already I'm sweating through my T-shirt. Across the street, the gas station parking lot is full of cop cars. One of the sirens is turning soundlessly, sweeping the walls and pumps with intermittent red light. I wonder whether there was a robbery; this area has gotten worse over the years.

FanLand has a mascot, a pirate named Pete who's featured on billboards and placards all over the park, warning people not to litter and about the height minimum for various rides. The

first thing I see when I enter the park through the gate, which is unlocked, is Mr. Wilcox, scraping gum off a twelve-foot-tall Pirate Pete grinning a welcome down to park visitors. A big, glossy sign is tacked to Pirate Pete's shoulder, concealing the parrot I know should be there. It reads CELEBRATING 75 YEARS!!

“Nick!” When he sees me, he puts an arm above his head to wave, as if I’m four hundred feet away from him instead of fourteen. “*Great* to see you. Great to see you. Welcome to FanLand!” He pulls me into a crushing hug before I can resist. He smells like Dove soap and, weirdly, car oil.

Two things about Mr. Wilcox: he always says things twice, and he obviously missed a few educational seminars on sexual harassment. Not that he’s a creep. He’s just big into hugs.

“Hi, Mr. Wilcox,” I say, my voice muffled by his shoulder blade, which is roughly the size of a ham hock. Finally I manage to extract myself, though he keeps a hand on my back.

“Please,” he says, beaming. “Here at FanLand, I’m just Greg. You’ll call me Greg, won’t you? Come on, come on. Let’s get you suited up. I was thrilled when your mom told me you were back in town and looking for work, just absolutely thrilled.”

He pilots me toward a small yellow building half-concealed behind a wall of fake potted palms, and in through a door he unlocks with one of the keys he has strung to a massive key ring on his belt. The whole time, he never stops talking, or smiling.

“Here we are, the keys to the castle. This is the front office—nothing too fancy, you’ll see, but it does the job quite nicely. If



I'm not out and about, I'll usually be in here, and we've got some first aid kits, too, if anybody loses a finger. Kidding, kidding. But we do have first aid kits." He gestures to the saggy shelves above a desk cluttered with receipts, rolls of ride tickets, and various scrawled drawings that look to be from children thanking "Pirate Pete" for such a great day. "Don't touch the Coke in the fridge, or Donna—she's my secretary, you'll meet her soon enough—will have your head, but you're welcome to any of the waters, and if you want to BYO lunch and keep it cold, go right ahead." He slaps the refrigerator to emphasize the point. "Same thing with valuables—phone, wallet, love letters—kidding, kidding!—we can lock 'em up right here at the start of your shift and they'll be safe as anything. *Here* you are. Throw this on"—this, as he tosses me a scratchy red T-shirt emblazoned with an image of Pirate Pete's grinning face, which I can tell is going to sit right over my left boob—"and we'll get you started. Welcome to the team! Bathrooms are just past the photo booth on the left."

I leave my bag in the office with Mr. Wilcox and head to the bathrooms, which are indicated by means of a wooden parrot sign. I haven't been to FanLand since I was maybe eight or nine and much of it feels unfamiliar, though I'm sure it hasn't changed, and I have a brief flash of memory as soon as I enter the bathroom stall of standing with Dara in our wet bathing suits, water pooling on the concrete, shivering and giggling after a long day in the sun, our fingers sticky with cotton candy, running ahead

of our parents, holding hands, while our flip-flops slapped on the puddled pavement.

Just for a second, I feel a moment of grief so intense it hollows me out: I want my family back. I want my Dara back.

I quickly swap out my T-shirt for the official uniform, which is about three sizes too big, and return to the office, where Mr. Wilcox is waiting for me.

“Nick!” he booms, as if he’s seeing me for the first time. “Looking good, looking good.”

He wraps an arm around my shoulder and pilots me down one of the paths that wind through the park, past fake shipwrecks and more plastic palm trees, plus rides with names like Splish ‘n’ Splash or the Plank. I see a few other employees, quickly visible in their vivid red, sweeping leaves from the boardwalk or changing filter traps or calling out instructions to one another, and I have the weird sense of walking backstage just before a play and seeing all the actors in half makeup.

Then Mr. Wilcox is pumping an arm high in the sky and calling out to another girl, roughly my height, wearing all red. “Tenneson! Over here! Tenneson! New meat for ya!” He lets out a booming laugh. The girl begins jogging toward us, and Wilcox fires out another explanation: “Tenneson’s my right-hand man. But a girl, of course! This is her fourth summer with us at FanLand. Anything you need, you ask her. Anything she can’t answer, you don’t need to know!” With another laugh he releases me and retreats, waving again.

The girl looks maybe half-Asian and has long black hair, worn in multiple braids, and a tattoo of a snail just below her left ear. She looks like someone Dara would know, except that she's smiling and she has the bright eyes of someone who *really* likes mornings. Her front teeth overlap a little, which makes me like her.

"Hey," she says. "Welcome to FanLand."

"I've heard that a few hundred times already," I say.

She laughs. "Yeah, Greg's a little . . . enthusiastic about the new recruits. About everything, actually. I'm Alice."

"Nicole," I say. We shake hands, even though she can't be much older than I am. Twenty, tops. She gestures for me to follow her, and we turn right toward the Cove, the "dry" half of the park, where all the big rides, plus the game booths and food vendors, are. "Most people call me Nick."

Her face changes, an almost imperceptible switch, as if a curtain has come down behind her eyes. "You're—you're Dara's sister."

I nod. She turns away, making a face as if she's sucking on something sour. "I'm sorry about the accident," she blurts out at last.

My whole body goes hot, like it always does when someone brings up the accident, as if I've just walked into a room where people have been whispering about me. "You heard, huh?"

To Alice's credit, she looks sorry to have mentioned it. "My cousin goes to Somerville. Plus, since John Parker . . ."

Hearing Parker's name—his *full* name—makes something glitch in my chest. I haven't thought of Parker in months. Or maybe I've been trying not to think about him for months. And nobody calls him by his full name. He and his older brother have been Big Parker and Little Parker for as long as I can remember. Even his mom calls her sons the Parkers.

John Parker makes him sound like a stranger.

"Since John Parker what?" I prompt.

She doesn't answer, and doesn't have to, because at that moment I see him: shirtless, straddling an open toolbox and fiddling with something beneath the undercarriage of the Banana Boat, a ride that, true to its name, looks like a giant airborne banana with multicolored sides.

Maybe he hears his name or senses it or maybe it's just coincidence, but at that moment he looks up and sees me. I lift a hand to wave but freeze when I see his expression—horrified, practically, as if I'm a ghost or a monster.

Then I realize: he probably blames me too.

Alice is still talking. ". . . put you on crew with Parker this morning. I have a shit ton of work to do for the anniversary party. He can show you the ropes, no problem, and I'm around if you need anything."

Now Parker and I are separated by no more than ten feet. Finally he ducks under the steel support beams, sweeping up his T-shirt at the same time and using it to quickly wipe his face. He seems to have grown another two inches since I last saw him in

March, so he towers over me.

“What are you doing here?” he says. With his shirt off I can see the half-moon shape on his shoulder blade, a smooth white scar, where he and Dara burned themselves with lighters freshman year while they were drunk on Southern Comfort. I was supposed to do it, too, but chickened out at the last second.

Stupidly I tug at my T-shirt. “Working,” I say. “My mom forced me into it.”

“Wilcox got to your mom, too, huh?” he says. He’s still not smiling. “And I’m supposed to play tour guide?”

“I guess so.” My whole body feels itchy. Sweat moves between my breasts, down to my waistband. For years, Parker was my best friend. We spent hours watching bad B horror movies on his couch, experimenting with ways to mix chocolate and popcorn together, or rented foreign films and disabled the subtitles so we could make up the plots ourselves. We texted in pre-calc when we were bored, until Parker got busted and had his phone taken away for a week. We hopped his older brother’s scooter and piled on: me, Parker, and Dara, and had to abandon it and run for the woods when a cop spotted us.

Then, last December, something changed. Dara had just broken up with her latest boyfriend, Josh or Jake or Mark or Mike—I could never keep them straight, they cycled in and out of her life so fast. And suddenly she would crash movie night with Parker, wearing short-shorts and a tissue-thin shirt that showed the black lacy cups of her bra. Or I would see them riding the

scooter together in the freezing cold, her arms wrapped around his chest, her head tilted back, laughing. Or I would walk into the room and he would jerk quickly backward, flashing me a guilty look, while she kept a long, tan leg draped across his lap.

Suddenly I was the third wheel.

“Look.” My throat feels like it’s coated in sand. “I know you might be mad at me—”

“Mad at you?” he interjects, before I can say more. “I figured you were mad at me.”

I feel very exposed in the high glare, as if the sun is a big telescope and I’m the bug on the slide. “Why would I be?”

His eyes shift away from mine. “After what happened with Dara . . .” Her name sounds different in his mouth, special and strange, like something made of glass. I’m half tempted to ask whether he and Dara are still hooking up, but then he would know we aren’t speaking. Besides, it’s none of my business.

“Let’s just start over,” I say. “How about that?”

Finally he smiles: a slow process, beginning in his eyes, lightening them. Parker’s eyes are gray, but the warmest gray in the world. Like the gray of a flannel blanket washed a hundred times. “Sure,” he says. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“So are you going to play tour guide or what?” I reach out to punch his arm, and he laughs, pretending I’ve hurt him.

“After you,” he says, with a flourish.

Parker takes me on a tour of the park, pointing out all the places, both official and unofficial, I’ll need to know: Wading

Lake, informally known as the Piss Pool, where all the toddlers splash around in their diapers; the DeathTrap, a roller coaster that might, Parker tells me, someday live up to its name, since he's pretty sure it hasn't been inspected since the early nineties; the small, fenced-in area behind one of the snack bars (which for some reason at FanLand have been renamed "pavilions"), which contains the maintenance hut, where the employees go to smoke or hook up in between shifts. He shows me how to measure the chlorine in the Piss Pool—"always add a little extra; if it starts burning off your eyelashes, you'll know you've gone too far"—and how to operate the hand crank on the bumper boats.

By eleven o'clock, the park is crowded with families and camp groups, and the "regulars": usually old people, wearing sun visors and fanny packs, who totter between the rides announcing to no one in particular every way in which the park has changed. Parker knows a bunch of them by name and greets everyone with a smile.

At lunchtime, he introduces me to Princess—actual name Shirley, though Parker cautions me never to call her that—an ancient blond woman who runs one of the four snack bars—excuse me, *pavilions*—and clearly has a major crush on Parker. She gives him a free bag of chips and me a long scowl.

"Is she that nice to everyone?" I say, when Parker and I take our hot dogs and sodas outside, to eat under the shadow of the Ferris wheel.

"You don't get a name like Princess without working for it," he

says, and then smiles. Every time Parker smiles, his nose wrinkles. He used to say it didn't like to be left out of the fun. "She'll warm up eventually. She's been here almost since the beginning, you know."

"The very beginning?"

He turns his attention to a miniature relish pack, trying to work the green goop out of the plastic with a thumbnail. "July 29, 1940. Opening day. Shirley joined up in the fifties."

July 29. Dara's birthday. This year, FanLand will turn seventy-five on the day she turns seventeen. If Parker makes the connection, he doesn't say so. And I'm not about to point it out.

"Still eating alien slime, I see?" I say instead, jerking my chin toward the relish.

He pretends to be offended. "*Le* slime. It's not alien. It's French."

The afternoon is a blur of rounds: scooping up litter, changing trash bags, dealing with a five-year-old kid who has somehow gotten separated from his camp group and stands, bawling, underneath a crooked sign pointing the way to the Haunted Ship. Someone throws up on the Tornado, and Parker informs me it's my job, as the new girl, to clean it—but then does all the work himself.

There's fun stuff, too: riding the Albatross to see whether the gears feel sticky; washing down the carousel with an industrial hose so powerful I can barely keep it in my hands; downtime between jobs when I talk with Parker about the other kids who

work at FanLand and who hates who and who's hooking up or breaking up or getting back together.

I finally find out why FanLand is so short-staffed this summer.

"So there's this guy Donovan." Parker starts into the story while we're taking a break between shifts, sitting in the shade of an enormous potted palm. He keeps swatting at the flies. Parker's hands are constantly in motion. He's like a catcher telegraphing mysterious signs to an invisible teammate: hand to nose, tug on ear, tuck the hair. Except the signs aren't mysterious to me. I know what all of them mean, whether he's happy or sad or stressed or anxious. Whether he's hungry, or had too much sugar, or too little sleep.

"First name or last?" I interrupt.

"Interesting question. Not sure. Everyone just calls him Donovan. Anyway, he'd been working at FanLand forever. Way longer than Mr. Wilcox. Knows the whole place inside and out, everyone loves him, really great with the kids—"

"Wait—was he here longer than Princess?"

"Nobody's been here longer than Princess. Now stop interrupting. So he was a good guy, okay? At least, that's what everyone thought." Parker pauses dramatically, deliberately making me wait.

"So what happened?" I say.

"The cops busted down his door a few weeks ago." He raises one eyebrow. His eyebrows are very thick and practically black, like he has vampire blood somewhere far back in his ancestry.

“Turns out he’s some kind of pedo. He had, like, a hundred pictures of high school girls on his computer. It was some crazy sting operation. They’d been tracking him for months.”

“No way. And no one had any idea?”

Parker shook his head. “Not a clue. I only met him once or twice, but he seemed normal. Like someone who should be busy coaching soccer and complaining about mortgage rates.”

“Creepy,” I say. Years ago, I remember learning about the mark of Cain in Sunday school and thinking that it wasn’t such a bad idea. How convenient if you could see what was wrong with people right away, if they wore their sicknesses and crimes on their skin like tattoos.

“Very creepy,” he agrees.

We don’t talk about the accident, or Dara, or about the past at all. And suddenly it’s three o’clock and the first shift of my new job is over, and it didn’t totally suck.

Parker walks me back to the office, where Mr. Wilcox and a pretty, dark-skinned woman I assume is Donna, the woman who hoards all the Cokes, are arguing about additional security for the anniversary party, in the good-natured, easy tones of people who have spent years arguing without ever essentially disagreeing. Mr. Wilcox breaks off long enough to give me another hearty slap on the back.

“Nick? You enjoy your first day? Of course you did! Best place in the world. See you tomorrow, bright and early!”

I retrieve my backpack. When I reemerge into the sunshine,

Parker is waiting for me. He has changed shirts, and his red uniform is balled up under one arm. He smells like soap and new leather.

“I’m glad we get to work together,” I blurt as we walk into the parking lot, still crowded with cars and coach buses. FanLand is open until 10:00 p.m., and Parker has told me that the night crowd is totally different: younger, rowdier, more unpredictable. Once, he told me, he caught two people having sex on the Ferris wheel; another time he found a girl snorting coke off a sink in one of the men’s toilets. “I’m not sure I could handle Wilcox all by myself,” I add quickly, because Parker is looking at me strangely.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m glad, too.” He tosses his keys a few inches and catches them in his palm. “So you want a ride home? I think the Chariot’s missed you.”

Seeing his car, so familiar, so *him*, I have a quick flash of memory, like an explosion in my brain: the windshield fogged up, patterned with rain and body heat; Parker’s guilty face; and Dara’s eyes, cold and hard, gloating, like the eyes of a stranger.

“That’s all right,” I say quickly.

“You sure?” He pops open the driver’s-side door.

“I have Dara’s car,” I say quickly. The words come out before I can think about them.

“You do?” Parker seems surprised. I’m grateful the lot is crowded, so my lie isn’t immediately obvious. “All right, then. Well . . . I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I say, willing away another image of that night, of the way it felt to know, deep down, that everything had changed; that nothing would ever be the same between the three of us again. “See you.”

I’ve already started to turn away—lingering, now, so that Parker won’t see that I’m headed toward the bus stop, when he calls me back.

“Look,” he says, all in a rush. “There’s a party at the Drink tonight. You should come. It’ll be super low-key,” he goes on. “Like twenty people, max. But bring whoever you want.” He says the last part in a funny voice, half-strangled. I wonder whether it’s a hint, and he’s asking me to bring Dara along. Then I hate myself for having to wonder it. Before they hooked up, there was never any weirdness between us.

One more thing that Dara ruined because she felt like it, because she had an itch, an urge, a whim. *He’s so fuckable*, I remember her saying one morning, out of the blue, when we’d all gone across the street to Upper Reaches Park to watch his Ultimate Frisbee game. *Did you ever notice that he’s undeniably fuckable?* As we were watching him run across the ball field, chasing the bright red disk of the Frisbee, arm outstretched—the same *boy-body-arm* I’d known my whole life was transformed, in an instant, by Dara’s words.

And I remember looking at her and thinking that she, too, looked like a stranger, with her hair (blond and purple, then) and the thick dusting of charcoal eye shadow on her lids, lips red and

exaggerated with pencil, legs stretched out for miles underneath her short-shorts. How could my Dara, Little Egg, Nosebutton, who used to wrap her arms around my shoulders and stand on my toes so we could pretend to be one person as we staggered around the living room, have turned into someone who used the word *fuckable*, someone I barely knew, someone I feared, even?

“It’ll be just like old times,” Parker says, and I feel a hard ache in my chest, a desperate desire for something lost long ago.

Everyone knows you can’t go back.

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll let you know,” I say, which I won’t.

I watch him get into his car and drive off, waving, smiling big behind the glare, and pretend to be fumbling for keys in my bag. Then I walk across the parking lot to wait for the bus.

B E F O R E

F E B R U A R Y 9

Nick

“Ow.” I open my eyes, blinking furiously. Dara’s face, from this angle, is as big as the moon, if the moon were painted in crazy colors: coal-black eye shadow, silver liner, a big red mouth like a smear of hot lava. “You keep poking me.”

“You keep moving. Close your eyes.” She grabs my chin and blows, gently, on my eyelids. Her breath smells like vanilla Stoli. “There. You’re done. See?” I stand up from the toilet, where she’s installed me, and join her at the mirror. “Now we look like twins,” she says happily, putting her head on my shoulder.

“Hardly,” I say. “I look like a drag queen.” Already I’m sorry I agreed to let Dara do my makeup. Normally I use ChapStick and mascara—and that’s only for special occasions. Now I feel like a kid who went crazy at a carnival face-painting booth.

The funny thing is that Dara and I *do* look alike, mostly—and

yet, everywhere she's delicate and well-made and pretty, I'm lumpy and plain. Our hair is the same indeterminate brown, although hers is currently dyed black (*Cleopatra* black, she calls it) and has previously been platinum, auburn, and even, briefly, purple. We have the same hazel eyes spaced a little too far apart. We have the same nose, although mine is a teensy bit crooked, from where Parker accidentally clobbered me with a softball in third grade. I'm actually taller than Dara is, though you'd never know it—currently, she has on a pair of crazy wedge platform boots with a translucent dress that barely clears her underwear, plus black-and-white-striped tights that on anyone else would look idiotic. Meanwhile, I'm wearing what I always wear to the Founders' Day Ball: a tank top and skinny jeans, plus comfortable ankle boots.

That's the thing about Dara and me: we're both similar and worlds apart. Like the sun and the moon, or a starfish and a star: related, sure, but at the same time totally and completely different. And Dara's always the one doing the shining.

"You look beautiful," Dara says, straightening up. On the sink, her phone starts vibrating and does a half turn next to the toothbrush cup before falling silent again. "Doesn't she, Ari?"

"Beautiful," says Ariana, without looking up. Ariana has long, wavy blond hair and a facial-cleanser-and-Swiss-Alps kind of complexion, which makes her tongue ring, nose ring, and the tiny stud above her left eyebrow always seem out of place. She's perched on the edge of the bathtub, stirring her

warm vodka orange juice with a pinkie. She takes a sip and gags expressively.

“Too strong?” Dara asks, faking innocence. Her phone starts going again. She quickly silences it.

“No, it’s great,” Ariana says sarcastically. But she takes another sip. “I was looking for an excuse to burn away my tonsils. Who needs ‘em?”

“You’re welcome,” Dara says, reaching for the cup. She takes a big swig and passes it to me.

“No, thanks,” I say. “I’ll keep my tonsils.”

“Come on.” Dara hooks an arm around my shoulder. In her heels, she’s even taller than my five-seven. “It’s Founders’ Day.”

Ariana stands up to take the cup back. She has to pick her way across a bathroom floor littered with bras and underwear, dresses and tank tops—all discarded outfit selections. “Founders’ Day,” she repeats, in her best impression of our principal’s voice. Mr. O’Henry not only chaperones the dance, which takes place every year in the gym, he participates in the lame historical reenactment of the Battle of Monument Hill, after which the original British settlers determined all the area west of the Saskawatchee a part of the British Empire. I think it’s a little politically insensitive to basically mime the massacre of a bunch of Cherokee Indians every year, but whatever. “The most important day of the year, and a seminal moment in our proud history,” Ariana finishes, hefting her cup in the air.

“Hear, hear,” Dara says, and mimes drinking from a glass,

keeping her pinkie high.

“They really should have called it Royal Fuck-Up Day,” Ari says in her normal voice.

“Doesn’t have the same ring to it,” I say, and Dara giggles.

Three hundred years ago, colonial explorers looking for the Hudson River believed they’d found it and settled instead on the banks of the Saskawatchee, chartering the town for England and inadvertently forming what would later become Somerville, about five hundred miles southwest of their initial destination. At some point, they must have realized their mistake, but I guess by then they were too settled to do anything about it.

There’s a metaphor in that somewhere—like all of life is about ending up somewhere you didn’t expect, and learning to just be happy with it.

“Aaron’s going to freak when he sees you,” Dara says. She has the uncanny ability to do that: to pluck a thought out of my head and finish it, like she’s unspooling some tangled invisible sweater. “One look, and he’s going to forget all about the promise club.”

Ariana snorts.

“For the last time,” I say, “Aaron’s not *in* the promise club.” Ever since Aaron was cast as Jesus in our Christmas pageant—in *first grade*—Dara has been convinced that he’s a religious freak and a sworn virgin until marriage, an idea confirmed, in her mind, by the fact that we’ve been together for two months and haven’t gotten much past second base.

I guess it hasn’t occurred to her that the problem might be with me.

Thinking of him now—his long dark hair, the way he always smells, mysteriously, a bit like toasted almonds, even after his basketball games—makes something squeeze up in my stomach, half pleasure, half pain. I love Aaron. I do.

I just don't love him enough.

Dara's phone starts vibrating again. This time she snatches it up, sighs, and drops it into a small sequined bag, patterned all over with tiny skulls.

"Is that the guy who—?" Ariana starts to ask, and Dara shushes her quickly.

"What?" I turn to Dara, suddenly suspicious. "What's the big secret?"

"Nothing," she says, giving Ariana a stern look, as if daring her to argue. Then she turns back to me, all smiles, so beautiful, the kind of girl you want to believe, the kind of girl you want to follow. The kind of girl you want to fall in love with. "Come on," she says, taking my hand and squeezing it so hard my fingers ache. "Parker's waiting."

Downstairs, Dara bullies me into finishing the last few sips of Ariana's lukewarm drink, which is full of pulp, but at least it lights up my chest, helps me get into the mood.

Then Dara pops open a metal pill case and fishes out something small and round and white. Instantly my good feeling fades.

"Want?" she says, turning to me.

"What *is* that?" I say, even as Ariana holds out a palm for one.

Dara rolls her eyes. "Breath mint, dummy," she says, and

sticks her tongue out at me, showing off the mint, slowly dissolving. “And trust me, you need one.”

“Yeah, right,” I say, but hold out my hand, the good feeling returning. Dara, Parker, and I have always gone to Founders’ Day together, even in middle school, when instead of a dance the school puts on a weird variety show, and for the past few years Ariana has been tagging along. So what if Parker and Dara *are* something now? So what if I won’t get shotgun? So what if I haven’t talked to Parker, really talked, since he and Dara started hooking up? So what if my best friend seems to have completely and totally forgotten that I exist?

Details.

We have to take the long way, because neither Ariana nor Dara can make it through the woods in their heels and Ariana wants to smoke a cigarette anyway. It’s freakishly warm, and all the ice is running off the trees into the gutters, soft snow *whoomping* down from roofs, the air layered with that rich smell, the pulpy promise of spring, even though it’s a false promise: we’re supposed to get more snow next week. But for now, I’m wearing only a light jacket, and Dara’s walking beside me, mostly sober, laughing, and we’re heading to Parker’s house: just like old times.

Every block brings back memories. That old maple where Parker and I once competed to see who could climb higher, until he crashed through the high, flimsy branches and broke his arm—for a whole summer he couldn’t swim, and I wore a cast of paper towels and masking tape out of solidarity; Old Hickory

Lane, Parker's street, our favorite spot to trick-or-treat, because Mrs. Hanrahan could never distinguish between the kids on the block and kept forking over Snickers bars even when we rang three, four, five times in a row; the stretch of woods where we convinced Dara that fairies lived who would steal her away to a horrible underworld if she didn't do what we said; concentric circles of growth, spreading outward, like the rings of a tree marking off time.

Or maybe we're passing from the outer rings *in*, back to the start, the root and the heart, because as we get closer to Parker's house the memories get thicker and come faster, of summer nights and snowball fights and our whole lives layered together, until we're standing on his porch and Parker opens the door with warm light spilling out behind him and we're here; we've arrived at the center.

Parker's actually bothered to put on a button-down, although I can see a T-shirt peeking out from the open collar, and he's still wearing jeans and his blue Surf Siders, covered over with faded ink marks and doodles. *Nick is the greatest SMELLIEST greatest!!* is written beneath the left sole in Sharpie.

"My best girls," Parker says, opening his arms wide, and just for a second, when our eyes meet, I forget and start to move toward him.

"Hotness," Dara says, moving past me, and then I remember.

So I take a quick step backward, turning away, letting her get to him first.

A F T E R

J U L Y 20
Dara

Are you going to party @ the Drink? Parker told me about it.

The note is wedged under my door when I get out of the shower, written on Nick's cream-white stationery. (Nick is the only person under the age of a hundred who actually *uses* stationery, and her handwriting is so neat it looks like each letter is a minuscule piece of architecture. My handwriting looks like Perkins ingested some letters and then puked them onto a page.)

I stoop down, wincing as pain snakes up my spine, and scoop up the note before crumpling it and overhanding it toward the trash can in the corner. The note hits the rim and rebounds into a pile of dirty T-shirts.

I pull on a pair of cotton shorts and a tank top and take my computer onto the bed, clicking quickly away from Facebook as soon as it pops up, catching a brief glimpse of all the messages,

unliked, unanswered, posted on my wall.

We miss you!

Thinking of you!!

We love you so much!!!

I haven't posted since the accident. Why would I? What could I possibly say?

I'm bored to tears alone on a Saturday night.

I'm hopelessly scarred for life.

I'm finally able to bend my knees like a normal person!

I click over to YouTube but keep imagining Parker's face, the way he squints against the light reflected in the windshield, his nails, trim and neat, the way a guy's should be. His eyebrows, thick and dark, drawn together. Everyone else in Parker's family is totally Norwegian-looking, blond and fair and smiley, like they should be out hauling catches of herring on the open ocean, which somehow makes Parker's dark hair and olive skin even cuter, like it was a mistake.

Suddenly I can't stand the idea of another night at home, watching stupid videos or queuing up TV shows. I get the old itch, a heat between my shoulder blades, like my skin might suddenly sprout wings to carry me away.

I need out. I need to prove that I'm not afraid of seeing him, or my old friends, or anyone. I'm not afraid of Nick, either, and the way she makes me feel now: as if I'm broken. Every time I hear her blasting music downstairs—indie pop, shiny happy music, since Nick doesn't get depressed—or shouting

for Mom to help her find her favorite jeans; every time I come into the bathroom and find it still humid from her shower, still smelling like Neutrogena; every time I see her running shoes on the stairs or find her field hockey T-shirt tangled up with my laundry, she may as well be hammering a stake into the ground. TOWN: NORMAL. POPULATION: 1.

Maybe she always made me feel that way, but it's only since the accident that I've been able to admit it.

I pull on my best skinny jeans, surprised by their fit. Weirdly, even though I've barely left the house, I must have lost weight. But with a studded tank top and my favorite slouchy boots, I look all right, especially from a distance.

When I head downstairs to the bathroom, I see Nick's door is still closed. I press my ear to the door but hear nothing. Maybe she's already left for the party. I briefly imagine her standing next to Parker, laughing, maybe competing to see who can throw their beer cans farther.

Then my brain spits out a whole series of memories, flip-book-style, from our lives together: struggling on my tricycle to keep up with Parker and Nick, both on shiny new two-wheelers; watching from the pool deck while they took turns cannonballing into the deep end when I was too small to join them; hearing them burst into laughter because of an inside joke I didn't understand.

Sometimes I think I didn't even fall in love with Parker. Sometimes I think it was really all about Nick, and proving I could

finally be her equal.

Downstairs, Mom is standing in the kitchen, talking on the phone, probably to Aunt Jackie, the only person she ever calls. The TV is on behind her, barely audible, and I get a jolt when the camera pans to a familiar stretch of highway not far from the place Nick drove us into a solid face of rock. The place is crawling with cops, as it must have been after the accident; the whole scene is lit up with floodlights and sirens, like a nighttime movie set. Words scroll across the bottom of the screen: *Cops Launch Massive Search for Missing Nine-Year-Old . . .*

“Yeah, of course. We expected a period of adjustment, but—” Mom breaks off when she sees me, points to the Stouffer’s lasagna box on the kitchen table and then to the microwave, mouthing *Dinner?* In the quiet, I can make out the newscaster’s voice: “Police are searching for witnesses or clues in the disappearance of Madeline Snow, who vanished Sunday night. . . .” I shake my head and my mom turns away, her voice muffled as she passes out of view. “But I’m hanging in there. It’s starting to feel a little more like a house again.”

I punch the TV off and grab Nick’s favorite field hockey hoodie from the peg near the front door. Though it’s likely still in the mid-eighties, with the hood up my scars will be mostly concealed. Besides, it gives me a thrill to wear Nick’s clothes unasked, as if I can shrug on a new identity. The sweatshirt still smells like Nick—not like perfume, since Nick never wears any, but like coconut shampoo and the general, indefinable odor of

cleanliness, outdoors, and competency at sports.

I pull the hood up and cinch it under my chin, stepping onto the grass and enjoying the slick feel of the moisture around my ankles, seeping through my jeans. I feel like a burglar, or someone on a secret mission. My car is blocked in, and I don't want to ask Mom to move the Subaru, which would then involve a lot of questions and concerned, quizzical looks. I'm not even sure she would say yes—she put a moratorium on driving after the accident.

I drag my ancient bike out from the garage—I haven't ridden in forever, except once two summers ago, as a joke, after Ariana and I dropped mushrooms and Nick found us flopping on the grass like fish, gasping with laughter. I'm a little unsteady at first, but soon enough, I get the rhythm back. My knees are bugging me, but no worse than usual. Besides, the Drink is only a few miles away.

The Drink is actually a nickname for the Saskawatchee River. Sometime in the previous decade, back when a rush of Realtors and speculators descended on Shoreline County like an army of money-crazed locusts, chewing their way through our land, a development group decided to raze the woods and build a clutter of sleek waterfront stores on its banks: coffee houses, art galleries, and high-rent restaurants, smack-dab in the middle of Somerville.

Construction was approved and materials shipped before the residents freaked. Apparently, for a town built on history, the

threat of new buildings and new parking lots and new cars bearing in tides of new people was too much. Somerville managed to have the entire area west of the river declared a piece of national park land. I'm surprised the town board hasn't mandated we start wearing hoop skirts yet.

Someone was supposed to have cleaned up the mounds of gravel and the piles of concrete. But no one bothered. There's even an abandoned hard hat, meticulously and mysteriously preserved by the people who hang out there.

I can hear the party almost as soon as I turn off Lower Forge and bump off the road and into the woods, keeping to the path that has been carved through the undergrowth because of a constant Friday-night procession of kids, coolers, bikes, and, occasionally, Chris Handler's ATV. In the woods, the air is cooler, and leaves slap wetly against my thighs and calves as I jerk along the uneven ground, holding tight to the handlebars to avoid being bucked off. As soon as I see lights through the woods—people moving around, using their phones as flashlights—I dismount, wheeling my bike out into the open and leaning it next to several others on the grass.

The party's pretty big: forty or fifty people, most of them in shadow, milling around on the slope leading down to the river or perched on broken pieces of concrete. No one notices me yet, and for a second I get this moment of panic, a feeling like being a little kid again on the first day of school and watching the stream of kids through the double doors. I haven't felt like

an outsider in a long time.

I don't know why you always have to be the center of attention, Nick said to me once, not long before the accident. I'd been wriggling into a pair of leather pants I'd bought and then concealed from our parents by hiding them underneath the sweaters folded at the back of my closet.

Well, I don't know why you're so scared of being noticed, I responded. It's like Nick gets power from being totally, inoffensively correct: nice jeans, tight but not too tight, white T-shirt, translucent but not transparent, just enough makeup so it looks like she isn't wearing any. I bet if Somerville *did* start mandating hoop skirts, she'd be the first to sign up and grab one. She'd probably add in a pair of ruffled pantaloons for good measure.

I don't see Nick, or Parker, either. But when the crowd shifts, I spot a keg and a bunch of red Solo cups stacked in the ice.

I feel better, much more myself, once I've poured myself a beer, even though it's mostly foam. The first few sips dull some of my anxiety, and it's dark enough that I even take off my hood, shaking out my hair. I see Davis Christensen and Ben Morton standing, pinkie fingers linked, on the other side of a small knot of people. Both of them notice me at the same time, and Mark's mouth forms an O of surprise. Davis whispers something to him before lifting her cup and extending two fingers in a kind of wave.

I slug back the beer, turn to the keg, and refill. When I look up again, Ariana has materialized, just appeared out of the crowd

like something spit up on a tide. She's cut her hair short. In her black shorts, wedge sneakers, and heavy eyeliner, she looks like a deranged pixie. I feel a sudden squeeze of pain. My best friend.

My *former* best friend.

"Wow." Ariana stares at me as if I'm a new species of animal that hasn't yet been categorized. "Wow. I didn't expect to see you here. I didn't expect to see you *out*."

"Sharon's had me on lockdown," is all I say, because I don't feel like getting into it. It's an old joke of ours that my mom is a jailer, and I'm expecting Ariana to laugh. But instead she just nods really fast, as if I've said something interesting.

"How is your mom?" she asks.

I shrug. "The same," I say. "She started working again."

"Good." Ariana is still nodding. She looks a little like a puppet whose strings are being tugged. "That's really good."

I take another sip of my beer. I'm past the foam now, into the flat bitter burn. Now I see that my presence has caused a disturbance, a ripple effect as the news travels from one group to the next. Various people swivel in my direction. Once, I might have welcomed the attention, even enjoyed it. But now I feel itchy, evaluated, the way I do during standardized tests. Maybe this is the effect of wearing Nick's sweatshirt—maybe some of her self-consciousness is seeping into my skin.

"Look." Ariana takes a step closer and talks low and really fast. She's breathing hard, too, as if the words are a physical effort. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry. I should have been there

for you. After the accident, I should have reached out or done something, but I couldn't—I mean, I didn't know what to do—"

"Don't worry about it," I say, taking a step backward and nearly stumbling on a bit of cement half-embedded in the grass. Ariana's eyes are wide and pleading, like a little kid's, and I feel suddenly disgusted. "There's nothing you could have done."

Ariana exhales, visibly relieved. "If you need anything—"

"I'm fine," I say quickly. "We're fine." Already, I regret coming. Even though I can't make out individual faces, I can feel the weight of people staring. I tug on my hood, making sure my scars are concealed.

Then the crowd shifts again, and I see Parker, hopping over concrete rubble, coming toward me with a big smile. I'm seized by the sudden desire to run; at the same time, I forget how to move. He's wearing a faded T-shirt, but I still recognize the logo of the old campgrounds where our families vacationed together for a few summers. At least Ariana has vanished.

"Hey," Parker says. He hops off an old ledge into the grass in front of me. "I didn't expect to see you."

It would have helped if you'd invited me, I almost say. But that would mean admitting I care. It might even make it seem as if I'm jealous he invited Nick. For the same reason, I won't, I *refuse*, to ask whether she's here.

"I wanted to get out of the house," I say instead. I shove my free hand into the front pocket of Nick's sweatshirt, gripping my beer with the other. Being around Parker makes me hyperaware

of my body, as if I've been taken apart and put together just a little bit wrong—which I guess I have. "So. FanLand, huh?"

He grins, which annoys me. He's too easy, too smiling, too different from the Parker who pulled over to talk to me yesterday, awkward and stiff-backed, the Parker who didn't even climb out to give me a hug. I don't want him to think we'll be buddy-buddy again, just because I showed up at the Drink.

"Yeah, FanLand's all right," he says. His teeth flash white. He's standing so close I can smell him, could lean forward six inches and place my cheek against the soft fabric of his T-shirt. "Even if they're a little heavy on pep."

"Pep?" I say.

"You know. Smells like teen spirit. Drinking-the-Kool-Aid kind of stuff." Parker raises a fist. "Go, FanLand!"

It's a good thing Parker was always such a nerd. Otherwise he would have been stupid popular. I look away.

"One time my sister nearly drowned trying to surf a kickboard in the wave pool." I don't say I was the one who dared Nick to surf the kickboard, after she dared me to go down the Slip 'N Slide backward.

"That sounds like her," Parker says, laughing.

I look away, taking another sip of beer. Standing this close to him, and looking at the familiar shape of his face—his nose, slightly crooked and still lined faintly with a scar, from where he ran smack into another guy's elbow during a game of Ultimate; the planes of his cheeks, and his eyelashes, which are almost as

long as a girl's—makes my stomach hurt.

"Look." Parker touches my elbow and I shift away, because if I don't shift away I'll only lean into him. "I'm really glad you came. We've never really talked, you know, about what happened."

You broke my heart. I fell for you, and you broke my heart. Period, done, end of story.

I can feel my heart opening and closing in my chest, like a fist trying to get a grip around something. It was the bike ride. I'm still weak. "Not tonight, okay?" I force a smile. I don't want to hear Parker apologize for not loving me back. That will be worse, even, than the fact that he doesn't. "I'm just here to have a good time."

Parker's smile falters. "Yeah, okay," he says. "I get it." He touches his cup briefly to mine. "Then how about a refill?"

Across the circle, I see Aaron Lee, a guy Nick was with for a while before the accident: nice guy, decent body, hopeless nerd. His eyes light up and he waves, arm up, as if hailing a taxi. He must think I brought Nick with me.

"I'm good," I say. The beer isn't having its usual effect. Instead of feeling warm and loose and careless, I just feel queasy. I dump the rest of my beer onto the ground. Parker takes a quick step backward to avoid getting splashed. "I'm actually not feeling so hot. I might head home."

Now his smile is all-the-way gone. He tugs on his left ear. Parker-speak for *not happy*. "You just got here."

“Yeah, and I’m just leaving.” More and more people are swiveling in my direction, sneaking quick, curious looks before turning away again. My scars are burning, as if a flashlight has been shone on them. I imagine them glowing, too, so that everyone can see. “Is that okay with you, or do I need a hall pass?”

I know I’m being mean, but I can’t help it. Parker ditched me. He’s been avoiding me ever since the accident. He can’t parade back into my life and expect me to throw confetti at his feet.

“Wait.” For a moment, Parker’s fingers, ice-cold from touching the beer, graze the inside of my wrist.

Then I pull away, turning clumsily in the uneven grass, dodging areas lumpy with deteriorating stone, pushing through a crowd that parts for me easily, too easily. As if *I’m* contagious.

Colin Dacey’s trying to get a fire going in the pit, a blackened depression lined with gravel and nubs of stone. So far, he’s succeeded mostly in sending huge, stinking geysers of smoke toward the sky. Stupid. It’s already too hot, and cops are always patrolling in summertime. Girls back away from the fire, shrieking with laughter, fanning away the smoke. One of them, a sophomore whose name I can’t remember, comes down hard on my toe.

“I’m sooo sorry,” she says. Her breath smells like amaretto. And then Ariana, barely sidestepping me, smiling huge and fake and overly nice, like she’s a salesperson trying to douse me with perfume, says, “You’re leaving *already?*”

I don’t stop. And when I feel a hand close down on my arm, I

spin around, shaking off the grip, and say, “What? What the hell do you want?”

Aaron Lee takes a quick step backward. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—sorry.”

My anger immediately sizzles down to nothing. I’ve always felt vaguely sympathetic toward Aaron, even though we’ve barely spoken. I know what it’s like to trot after Nick, to worship her from three steps behind. I’ve been doing it since I was born.

“That’s all right,” I say. “I was just leaving.”

“How’ve you been?” Aaron says, as if he hasn’t heard me. He’s nervous; that’s obvious. He’s holding his arms rigidly by his sides, like he’s waiting for me to order him on a march. Aaron is six-four, the tallest Chinese guy in school—the tallest Chinese guy I’ve ever met, actually—and in that moment he really *looks* it. Gangly and awkward, too, like he’s forgotten what his arms are for. Even before I can answer, he says, “You look good. I mean, you always looked good, but considering—”

Just then, someone screams.

“Cops!”

All at once, people are running, yelling, laughing, scattering down the hill and into the trees even as beams of light come cutting across the grass. The chant rises up on the night, swelling the way the crickets did when evening fell.

“Cops! Cops! Cops!”

Someone rockets into me, knocking me off my feet; Hailey Brooks, barefoot and laughing, disappears into the woods, her

blond hair streaming behind her like a banner. I try to protect my wrist when I fall and wind up crashing down on my elbow instead. A cop has Colin Dacey bent over double, arms behind his back, crime show-style. Everyone is screaming and the cops are shouting and there's a blur of bodies everywhere, silhouetted against the smoke and the sweep of flashlights. Suddenly there's a moon-big glow directly in my eyes, dazzling.

"All right," the cop—a woman—says. "Up you go."

I roll away to my feet just as she gets a hand around the back of my sweatshirt, dropping her flashlight in the process.

"Gotcha." But she's breathing hard, and I know that even on damaged legs I'll be able to outrun her.

"Sorry," I say, half to her, half to Nick, because this sweatshirt is her favorite. Then I unzip and wriggle my arms free, one after the other, as the cop stumbles backward with a short cry of surprise and I run, limping, bare-armed, into the heavy wet darkness of the trees.