

I truly believe that in every girl's life, there is that one **golden summer**, when boys are finally looking at you and you're looking back. That was my inspiration for *The Summer I Turned Pretty*. That moment in time when everything is right on the verge of happening: late nights and **first love** and longing, and the **heartbreak** that inevitably follows.

Here's hoping you have your own **perfect summer**.

Enjoy!

jenny han



To all the important sister women in my life and most especially Claire





I say, “I can’t believe you’re really here.”

He sounds almost shy when he says, “Me neither.” And then he hesitates. “Are you still coming with me?”

I can’t believe he even has to ask. I would go anywhere. “Yes,” I tell him. It feels like nothing else exists outside of that word, this moment. There’s just us. Everything that happened this past summer, and every summer before it, has all led up to this. To now.



chapter one

We'd been driving for about seven thousand years. Or at least that's how it felt. My brother, Steven, drove slower than our Granna. I sat next to him in the passenger seat with my feet up on the dashboard. Meanwhile, my mother was passed out in the backseat. Even when she slept, she looked alert, like at any second she could wake up and direct traffic.

"Go faster," I urged Steven, poking him in the shoulder. "Let's pass that kid on the bike."

Steven shrugged me off. "Never touch the driver," he said. "And take your dirty feet off my dashboard."

I wiggled my toes back and forth. They looked pretty clean to me. "It's not your dashboard. It's gonna be my car soon, you know."

"If you ever get your license," he scoffed. "People like you shouldn't even be allowed to drive."

"Hey, look," I said, pointing out the window. "That guy in a wheelchair just lapped us!"

Steven ignored me, and so I started to fiddle with the radio. One of my favorite things about going to the beach was the radio stations. I was as familiar with them as I was with the ones back home, and listening to Q94 made me just really know inside that I was there, at the beach.

I found my favorite station, the one that played everything from pop to oldies to hip-hop. Tom Petty was singing "Free Fallin'." I sang right along with him. "She's a good girl, crazy 'bout Elvis. Loves horses and her boyfriend too."

Steven reached over to switch stations, and I slapped his hand away. "Belly, your voice makes me want to run this car into the ocean." He pretended to swerve right.

I sang even louder, which woke up my mother, and she started to sing too. We both had terrible voices, and Steven shook his head in his disgusted Steven way. He hated being outnumbered. It was what bothered him most about our parents being divorced, being the lone guy, without our dad to take his side.

We drove through town slowly, and even though I'd just teased Steven about it, I didn't really mind. I loved this drive, this moment. Seeing the town

again, Jimmy's Crab Shack, the Putt Putt, all the surf shops. It was like coming home after you'd been gone a long, long time. It held a million promises of summer and of what just might be.

As we got closer and closer to the house, I could feel that familiar flutter in my chest. We were almost there.

I rolled down the window and took it all in. The air tasted just the same, smelled just the same. The wind making my hair feel sticky, the salty sea breeze, all of it felt just right. Like it had been waiting for me to get there.

Steven elbowed me. "Are you thinking about Conrad?" he asked mockingly.

For once the answer was no. "No," I snapped.

My mother stuck her head in between our two seats. "Belly, do you still like Conrad? From the looks of things last summer, I thought there might be something between you and Jeremiah."

"WHAT? You and Jeremiah?" Steven looked sickened. "What happened with you and Jeremiah?"

"Nothing," I told them both. I could feel the flush rising up from my chest. I wished I had a tan already to cover it up. "Mom, just because two people are good friends, it doesn't mean there's anything going on. Please never bring that up again."

My mother leaned back into the backseat. "Done," she said. Her voice had that note of finality that I knew Steven wouldn't be able to break through.

Because he was Steven, he tried anyway. "What happened with you and Jeremiah? You can't say something like that and not explain."

"Get over it," I told him. Telling Steven anything would only give him ammunition to make fun of me. And anyway, there was nothing to tell. There had never been anything to tell, not really.

Conrad and Jeremiah were Beck's boys. Beck was Susannah Fisher, formerly Susannah Beck. My mother was the only one who called her Beck. They'd known each other since they were nine—blood sisters, they called each other. And they had the scars to prove it—identical marks on their wrists that looked like hearts.

Susannah told me that when I was born, she knew I was destined for one of her boys. She said it was fate. My mother, who didn't normally go in for that kind of thing, said it would be perfect, as long as I'd had at least a few loves before I settled down. Actually, she said "lovers," but that word made me cringe. Susannah put her hands on my cheeks and said, "Belly, you have my

unequivocal blessing. I'd hate to lose my boys to anyone else."

We'd been going to Susannah's beach house in Cousins Beach every summer since I was a baby, since before I was born even. For me, Cousins was less about the town and more about the house. The house was my world. We had our own stretch of beach, all to ourselves. The summer house was made up of lots of things. The wraparound porch we used to run around on, jugs of sun tea, the swimming pool at night—but the boys, the boys most of all.

I always wondered what the boys looked like in December. I tried to picture them in cranberry-colored scarves and turtleneck sweaters, rosy-cheeked and standing beside a Christmas tree, but the image always seemed false. I did not know the winter Jeremiah or the winter Conrad, and I was jealous of everyone who did. I got flip-flops and sunburned noses and swim trunks and sand. But what about those New England girls who had snowball fights with them in the woods? The ones who snuggled up to them while they waited for the car to heat up, the ones they gave their coats to when it was chilly outside. Well, Jeremiah, maybe. Not Conrad. Conrad would never; it wasn't his style. Either way, it didn't seem fair.

I'd sit next to the radiator in history class and wonder what they were doing, if they were warming their feet along the bottom of a radiator somewhere too. Counting the days until summer again. For me, it was almost like winter didn't count. Summer was what mattered. My whole life was measured in summers. Like I don't really begin living until June, until I'm at that beach, in that house.

Conrad was the older one, by a year and a half. He was dark, dark, dark. Completely unattainable, unavailable. He had a smirky kind of mouth, and I always found myself staring at it. Smirky mouths make you want to kiss them, to smooth them out and kiss the smirkiness away. Or maybe not away ... but you want to control it somehow. Make it yours. It was exactly what I wanted to do with Conrad. Make him mine.

Jeremiah, though—he was my friend. He was nice to me. He was the kind of boy who still hugged his mother, still wanted to hold her hand even when he was technically too old for it. He wasn't embarrassed either. Jeremiah Fisher was too busy having fun to ever be embarrassed.

I bet Jeremiah was more popular than Conrad at school. I bet the girls liked him better. I bet that if it weren't for football, Conrad wouldn't be some big deal. He would just be quiet, moody Conrad, not a football god. And I liked that. I liked that Conrad preferred to be alone, playing his guitar. Like he was above all the stupid high school stuff. I liked to think that if Conrad went to

my school, he wouldn't play football, he'd be on the lit mag, and he'd notice someone like me.

When we finally pulled up to the house, Jeremiah and Conrad were sitting out on the front porch. I leaned over Steven and honked the horn twice, which in our summer language meant, *Come help with the bags, stat.*

Conrad was eighteen now. He'd just had a birthday. He was taller than last summer, if you can believe it. His hair was cut short around his ears and was as dark as ever. Unlike Jeremiah's, whose hair had gotten longer, so he looked a little shaggy but in a good way—like a 1970s tennis player. When he was younger, it was curly yellow, almost platinum in the summer. Jeremiah hated his curls. For a while, Conrad had him convinced that crusts made your hair curly, so Jeremiah had stopped eating sandwich crusts, and Conrad would polish them off. As Jeremiah got older, though, his hair was less and less curly and more wavy. I missed his curls. Susannah called him her little angel, and he used to look like one, with his rosy cheeks and yellow curls. He still had the rosy cheeks.

Jeremiah made a megaphone with his hands and yelled, "Steve-o!"

I sat in the car and watched Steven amble up to them and hug the way guys do. The air smelled salty and wet, like it might rain seawater any second. I pretended to be tying the laces on my sneakers, but really I just wanted a moment to look at them, at the house for a little while, in private. The house was large and gray and white, and it looked like most every other house on the road, but better. It looked just the way I thought a beach house should look. It looked like home.

My mother got out of the car then too. "Hey, boys. Where's your mother?" she called out.

"Hey, Laurel. She's taking a nap," Jeremiah called back. Usually she came flying out of the house the second our car pulled up.

My mother walked over to them in about three strides, and she hugged them both, tightly. My mother's hug was as firm and solid as her handshake. She disappeared into the house with her sunglasses perched on the top of her head.

I got out of the car and slung my bag over my shoulder. They didn't even notice me walk up at first. But then they did. They really did. Conrad gave me a quick glance-over the way boys do at the mall. He had never looked at me like that before in my whole life. Not once. I could feel my flush from the car return. Jeremiah, on the other hand, did a double take. He looked at me like he didn't even recognize me. All of this happened in the span of about three

seconds, but it felt much, much longer.

Conrad hugged me first, but a faraway kind of hug, careful not to get too close. He'd just gotten a haircut, and the skin around the nape of his neck looked pink and new, like a baby's. He smelled like the ocean. He smelled like Conrad. "I liked you better with glasses," he said, his lips close to my ear.

That stung. I shoved him away and said, "Well, too bad. My contacts are here to stay."

He smiled at me, and that smile—he just gets in. His smile did it every time. "I think you got a few new ones," he said, tapping me on the nose. He knew how self-conscious I was about my freckles and he still teased me every time.

Then Jeremiah grabbed me next, and he almost lifted me into the air. "Belly Button's all growed up," he crowed.

I laughed. "Put me down," I told him. "You smell like BO."

Jeremiah laughed loudly. "Same old Belly," he said, but he was staring at me like he wasn't quite sure who I was. He cocked his head and said, "Something looks different about you, Belly."

I braced myself for the punch line. "What? I got contacts." I wasn't completely used to myself without glasses either. My best friend Taylor had been trying to convince me to get contacts since the sixth grade, and I'd finally listened.

He smiled. "It's not that. You just look different."

I went back to the car then, and the boys followed me. We unloaded the car quickly, and as soon as we were done, I picked up my suitcase and my book bag and headed straight for my old bedroom. My room was Susannah's from when she was a child. It had faded calico wallpaper and a white bedroom set. There was a music box I loved. When you opened it, there was a twirling ballerina that danced to the theme song from *Romeo and Juliet*, the old-timey version. I kept my jewelry in it. Everything about my room was old and faded, but I loved that about it. It felt like there might be secrets in the walls, in the four-poster bed, especially in that music box.

Seeing Conrad again, having him look at me that way, I felt like I needed a second to breathe. I grabbed the stuffed polar bear on my dresser and hugged him close to my chest—his name was Junior Mint, Junior for short. I sat down with Junior on my twin bed. My heart was beating so loudly I could hear it. Everything was the same but not. They had looked at me like I was a real girl, not just somebody's little sister.



chapter two

AGE 12

The first time I ever had my heart broken was at this house. I was twelve.

It was one of those really rare nights when the boys weren't all together—Steven and Jeremiah went on an overnight fishing trip with some boys they'd met at the arcade. Conrad said he didn't feel like going, and of course I wasn't invited, so it was just me and him.

Well, not together, but in the same house.

I was reading a romance novel in my room with my feet on the wall when Conrad walked by. He stopped and said, "Belly, what are you doing tonight?"

I folded the cover of my book over quickly. "Nothing," I said. I tried to keep my voice even, not too excited or eager. I had left my door open on purpose, hoping he'd stop by.

"Want to go to the boardwalk with me?" he asked. He sounded casual, almost too casual.

This was the moment I had been waiting for. This was it. I was finally old enough. Some part of me knew it too, it was ready. I glanced over at him, just as casual as he'd been. "Maybe. I have been craving a caramel apple."

"I'll buy one for you," he offered. "Just hurry up and put some clothes on and we'll go. Our moms are going to the movies; they'll drop us off on the way."

I sat up and said, "Okay."

As soon as Conrad left, I closed my door and ran over to my mirror. I took my hair out of its braids and brushed it. It was long that summer, almost to my waist. Then I changed out of my bathing suit and put on white shorts and my favorite gray shirt. My dad said it matched my eyes. I smeared some strawberry frosting lip gloss on my lips and tucked the tube into my pocket, for later. In case I needed to reapply.

In the car Susannah kept smiling at me in the rearview mirror. I gave her a look like, *Quit, please*—but I wanted to smile back. Conrad wasn't paying attention anyway. He was looking out the window the whole ride there.

"Have fun, kids," said Susannah, winking at me as I closed my door.

Conrad bought me a caramel apple first. He bought himself a soda, but that

was it—usually he ate at least an apple or two, or a funnel cake. He seemed nervous, which made me feel less nervous.

As we walked down the boardwalk, I let my arm hang loose—*in case*. But he didn't reach for it. It was one of those perfect summer nights, the kind where there's a cool breeze and not one drop of rain. There would be rain tomorrow, but that night there were cool breezes and that was it.

I said, "Let's sit down so I can eat my apple," so we did. We sat on a bench that faced the beach.

I bit into my apple, carefully; I was worried I might get caramel all stuck in my teeth, and then how would he kiss me?

He sipped his Coke noisily, and then glanced down at his watch. "When you finish that, let's go to the ring-toss."

He wanted to win me a stuffed animal! I already knew which one I'd pick too—the polar bear with wire-frame glasses and a scarf. I'd had my eye on it all summer. I could already picture myself showing it off to Taylor. Oh, that? Conrad Fisher won it for me.

I wolfed down the rest of my apple in about two bites. "Kay," I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "Let's go."

Conrad walked straight over to the ringtoss, and I had to walk superquick to keep up. As usual, he wasn't talking much, so I talked even more to make up for it. "I think when we get back, my mom might finally get cable. Steven and my dad and I have been trying to convince her for forever. She claims to be so against TV, but then she watches movies on A&E, like, the whole time we're here. It's so hypocritical," I said, and my voice trailed off when I saw that Conrad wasn't even listening. He was watching the girl who worked the ringtoss.

She looked about fourteen or fifteen. The first thing I noticed about her was her shorts. They were canary yellow, and they were really, really short. The exact same kind of shorts that the boys had made fun of me for wearing two days before. I felt so good about buying those shorts with Susannah, and then the boys had laughed at me for it. The shorts looked a whole lot better on her.

Her legs were skinny and freckled, and so were her arms. Everything about her was skinny, even her lips. Her hair was long and wavy. It was red, but it was so light it was almost peach. I think it might have been the prettiest hair I'd ever seen. She had it pulled over to the side, and it was so long that she had to keep flicking it away as she handed people rings.

Conrad had come to the boardwalk for her. He'd brought me because he

hadn't wanted to come alone and he hadn't wanted Steven and Jeremiah to give him a hard time. That was it. That was the whole reason. I could see it all in the way he looked at her, the way he almost seemed to hold his breath.

"Do you know her?" I asked.

He looked startled, like he'd forgotten I was there. "Her? No, not really."

I bit my lip. "Well, do you want to?"

"Do I want to what?" Conrad was confused, which was annoying.

"Do you want to know her?" I asked impatiently.

"I guess."

I grabbed him by his shirt sleeve and walked right up to the booth. The girl smiled at us, and I smiled back, but it was just for show. I was playing a part. "How many rings?" she asked. She had braces, but on her they looked interesting, like teeth jewelry and not like orthodontics.

"We'll take three," I told her. "I like your shorts."

"Thanks," she said.

Conrad cleared his throat. "They're nice."

"I thought you said they were too short when I wore the exact same pair two days ago." I turned to the girl and said, "Conrad is so overprotective. Do you have a big brother?"

She laughed. "No." To Conrad she said, "You think they're too short?"

He blushed. I'd never seen him blush before, not in the whole time I'd known him. I had a feeling it might be the last time. I made a big show of looking at my watch and said, "Con, I'm gonna go ride the Ferris wheel before we leave. Win me a prize, okay?"

Conrad nodded quickly, and I said bye to the girl and left. I walked over to the Ferris wheel as fast as I could so they wouldn't see me cry.

Later on, I found out the girl's name was Angie. Conrad ended up winning me the polar bear with the wire-frame glasses and scarf. He said Angie told him it was the best prize they had. He said he thought I'd like it too. I told him I'd rather have had the giraffe, but thanks anyway. I named him Junior Mint, and I left him where he belonged, at the summer house.



chapter three

After I unpacked, I went straight down to the pool, where I knew the boys would be. They were lying around on the deck chairs, their dirty bare feet hanging off the edges.

As soon as Jeremiah saw me, he sprang up. “Ladies and Gentlemen-men-men,” he began dramatically, bowing like a circus ringmaster. “I do believe it is time ... for our first belly flop of the summer.”

I inched away from them uneasily. Too fast a movement, and it would be all over—they’d chase me then. “No way,” I said.

Then Conrad and Steven stood up, circling me. “You can’t fight tradition,” Steven said. Conrad just grinned evilly.

“I’m too old for this,” I said desperately. I walked backward, and that’s when they grabbed me. Steven and Jeremiah each took a wrist.

“Come on, guys,” I said, trying to wriggle out of their grasp. I dragged my feet, but they pulled me along. I knew it was futile to resist, but I always tried, even though the bottoms of my feet got burned along the pavement in the process.

“Ready?” Jeremiah said, lifting me up under my armpits.

Conrad grabbed my feet, and then Steven took my right arm while Jeremiah hung on to my left. They swung me back and forth like I was a sack of flour. “I hate you guys,” I yelled over their laughter.

“One,” Jeremiah began.

“Two,” Steven said.

“And three,” Conrad finished. Then they launched me into the pool, clothes and all. I hit the water with a loud smack. Underwater, I could hear them busting up.

The Belly Flop was something they’d started about a million summers ago. Probably it had been Steven. I hated it. Even though it was one of the only times I was included in their fun, I hated being the brunt of it. It made me feel utterly powerless, and it was a reminder that I was an outsider, too weak to fight them, all because I was a girl. Somebody’s little sister.

I used to cry about it, run to Susannah and my mother, but it didn’t do any good. The boys just accused me of being a tattletale. Not this time, though.

This time I was going to be a good sport. If I was a good sport, maybe that would take away some of their joy.

When I came up to the surface, I smiled and said, “You guys are ten-year-olds.”

“For life,” Steven said smugly. His smuggy face made me want to splash him and soak him and his precious Hugo Boss sunglasses that he worked for three weeks to pay for.

Then I said, “I think you twisted my ankle, Conrad.” I pretended to have trouble swimming over to them.

He walked over to the edge of the pool. “I’m pretty sure you’ll live,” he said, smirking.

“At least help me out,” I demanded.

He squatted and gave me his hand, which I took.

“Thanks,” I said giddily. Then I gripped tight and pulled his arm as hard as I could. He stumbled, fell forward, and landed in the pool with a splash even bigger than mine. I think I laughed harder right then than I’ve laughed in my whole life. So did Jeremiah and Steven. I think maybe all of Cousins Beach heard us laughing.

Conrad’s head bobbed up quickly, and he swam over to me in about two strokes. I worried he might be mad, but he wasn’t, not completely. He was smiling but in a threatening kind of way. I dodged away from him. “Can’t catch me,” I said gleefully. “Too slow!”

Every time he came close, I swam away. “Marco,” I called out, giggling.

Jeremiah and Steven, who were headed back to the house, said, “Polo!”

Which made me laugh, which made me slow to swim away, and Conrad caught my foot. “Let go,” I gasped, still laughing.

Conrad shook his head. “I thought I was too slow,” he said, treading water closer to me. We were in the diving well. His white T-shirt was soaked through, and I could see the pinky gold of his skin.

There was this weird stillness between us all of a sudden. He still held on to my foot, and I was trying to stay afloat. For a second I wished Jeremiah and Steven were still there. I didn’t know why.

“Let go,” I said again.

He pulled on my foot, drawing me closer. Being this close to him was making me feel dizzy and nervous. I said it again, one last time, even though I

didn't mean it. "Conrad, let go of me."

He did. And then he dunked me. It didn't matter. I was already holding my breath.



chapter four

Susannah came down from her nap a little while after we put on dry clothes, apologizing for missing our big homecoming. She still looked sleepy and her hair was all feathery on one side like a kid's. She and my mother hugged first, fierce and long. My mother looked so happy to see her that she was teary, and my mother was never teary.

Then it was my turn. Susannah swept me in for a hug, the close kind that's long enough to make you wonder how long it's going to last, who'll pull away first.

"You look thin," I told her, partly because it was true and partly because I knew she loved to hear it. She was always on a diet, always watching what she ate. To me, she was perfect.

"Thanks, honey," Susannah said, finally letting me go, looking at me from arm's length. She shook her head and said, "When did you go and grow up? When did you turn into this phenomenal woman?"

I smiled self-consciously, glad that the boys were upstairs and not around to hear this. "I look pretty much the same."

"You've always been lovely, but oh honey, look at you." She shook her head like she was in awe of me. "You're so pretty. So pretty. You're going to have an amazing, amazing summer. It'll be a summer you'll never forget." Susannah always spoke in absolutes like that—and when she did, it sounded like a proclamation, like it would come true because she said so.

The thing is, Susannah was right. It was a summer I'd never, ever forget. It was the summer everything began. It was the summer I turned pretty. Because for the first time, I felt it. Pretty, I mean. Every summer up to this one, I believed it'd be different. Life would be different. And that summer, it finally was. I was.



chapter five

Dinner the first night was always the same: a big pot of spicy bouillabaisse that Susannah cooked up while she waited for us to arrive. Lots of shrimp and crab legs and squid—she knew I loved squid. Even when I was little, I would pick out the squid and save it for last. Susannah put the pot in the middle of the table, along with a few crusty loaves of French bread from the bakery nearby. Each of us would get a bowl, and we'd help ourselves to the pot all throughout dinner, dipping the ladle back into the pot. Susannah and my mother always had red wine, and us kids had grape Fanta, but on that night there were wineglasses for everyone.

“I think we're all old enough to partake now, don't you, Laur?” Susannah said as we sat down.

“I don't know about that,” my mother began, but then she stopped. “Oh, all right. Fine. I'm being provincial, isn't that right, Beck?”

Susannah laughed and uncorked the bottle. “You? Never,” she said, pouring a little wine for each of us. “It's a special night. It's the first night of summer.”

Conrad drank his wine in about two gulps. He drank it like he was used to drinking it. I guess a lot can happen over the course of a year. He said, “It's not the first night of summer, Mom.”

“Oh, yes it is. Summer doesn't start until our friends get here,” Susannah said, reaching across the table and touching my hand, and Conrad's, too.

He jerked away from her, almost by accident. Susannah didn't seem to notice, but I did. I always noticed Conrad.

Jeremiah must have seen it too, because he changed the subject. “Belly, check out my latest scar,” he said, pulling up his shirt. “I scored three field goals that night.” Jeremiah played football. He was proud of all of his battle scars.

I leaned in next to him to get a good look. It was a long scar that was just beginning to fade, right across the bottom of his stomach. Clearly, he'd been working out. His stomach was flat and hard, and it hadn't looked like that last summer even. He looked bigger than Conrad now. “Wow,” I said.

Conrad snorted. “Jere just wants to show off his two-pack,” he said, breaking off a piece of bread and dipping it into his bowl. “Why don't you show all of us, and not just Belly?”

“Yeah, show us, Jere,” Steven said, grinning.

Jeremiah grinned right back. To Conrad he said, “You’re just jealous because you quit.” Conrad had quit football? That was news to me.

“Conrad, you quit, man?” Steven asked. I guessed it was news to him, too. Conrad was really good; Susannah used to mail us his newspaper clippings. He and Jeremiah had been on the team together these last two years, but it was Conrad who’d been the star.

Conrad shrugged indifferently. His hair was still wet from the pool, and so was mine. “It got boring,” he said.

“What he means is, he got boring,” Jeremiah said. Then he stood up and pulled off his shirt. “Pretty nice, huh?”

Susannah threw her head back and laughed, and my mother did too. “Sit down, Jeremiah,” she said, shaking the loaf of bread at him like a sword.

“What do you think, Belly?” he asked me. He looked like he was winking even though he wasn’t.

“Pretty nice,” I agreed, trying not to smile.

“Now it’s Belly’s turn to show off,” Conrad said mockingly.

“Belly doesn’t need to show off. We can all see how lovely she is just looking at her,” Susannah said, sipping her wine and smiling at me.

“Lovely? Yeah, right,” said Steven. “She’s a lovely pain in my ass.”

“Steven,” my mother warned.

“What? What’d I say?” he asked.

“Steven’s too much of a pig to understand the concept of lovely,” I said sweetly. I pushed the bread to him. “Oink, oink, Steven. Have some more bread.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said, breaking off a crusty chunk.

“Belly, tell us about all the hot friends you’re gonna set me up with,” Jeremiah said.

“Didn’t we already try that once?” I said. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about Taylor Jewel already.”

Everyone busted up laughing then, even Conrad.

Jeremiah’s cheeks turned pink, but he was laughing too, and shaking his head. “You’re not a nice girl, Belly,” he said. “There’s plenty of cute girls at the country club, so don’t worry about me. Worry about Con. He’s the one

missing out.”

The original plan was for both Jeremiah and Conrad to work at the country club as lifeguards. Conrad had done it the summer before. This summer Jeremiah was old enough to do it with him, but Conrad changed his mind at the last minute and decided to bus tables at the fancy seafood buffet instead.

We used to go there all the time. Kids twelve and younger could eat there for twenty dollars. There was a time when I was the only one twelve or younger. My mother always made sure to tell the waiter that I was younger than twelve. As, like, principle. Every time she did it, I felt like disappearing. I wished I was invisible. It wasn't that the boys even made a big deal out of it, which they easily could have, but it was the feeling different, like an outsider, that I hated. I hated it being pointed out. I just wanted to be like them.