



Some things you can't undo.

if he had been
with me

a novel

laura nowlin

1

I wasn't with Finny on that August night, but my imagination has burned the scene in my mind so that it feels like a memory.

It was raining, of course, and with his girlfriend, Sylvie Whitehouse, he glided through the rain in the red car his father had given him on his sixteenth birthday. In a few weeks, Finny would be turning nineteen.

They were arguing. No one ever says what they were arguing about. It is, in other people's opinions, not important to the story. What they do not know is that there is another story. The story lurking underneath and in between the facts of the one they can see. What they do not know, the cause of the argument, is crucial to the story of me.

I can see it—the rain-slicked road and the flashing lights of ambulance and police cars cutting through the darkness of night, warning those passing by: catastrophe has struck here, please drive slowly. I see Sylvie sitting sideways out of the back of the policeman's car, her feet drumming on the wet pavement as she talks. I cannot hear her, but I see Sylvie tell them the cause of the argument, and I know, I know, I know, I know. If he had been with me, everything would have been different.

I can see them in the car before the accident—the heavy rain, the world and the pavement as wet and slick as if it had been oiled down for their arrival. They glide through the night, regrettably together, and they argue. Finny is frowning. He is distracted. He is not thinking of the rain or the car or the wet road beneath it. He is thinking of this argument with Sylvie. He is thinking of the cause of the argument, and the car swerves suddenly to

the right, startling him out of his thoughts. I imagine that Sylvie screams, and then he overcompensates by turning the wheel too far.

Finny is wearing his seat belt. He is blameless. It is Sylvie who is not. When the impact occurs, she sails through the windshield and out into the night, improbably, miraculously, only suffering minor cuts on her arms and face. Though true, it is hard to imagine, so hard that even I cannot achieve the image. All I can see is the moment afterward, the moment of her weightless suspension in the air, her arms flailing in slow motion, her hair, a bit bloody and now wet with rain, streaming behind her like a mermaid's, her mouth a round O in a scream of panic, the dark wet night surrounding her in perfect silhouette.

Sylvie is suddenly on Earth again. She hits the pavement with a loud smack and is knocked unconscious.

She lies on the pavement, crumpled. Finny is untouched. He breathes heavily, and in shock and wonder, he stares out into the night. This is his moment of weightless suspension. His mind is blank. He feels nothing, he thinks nothing; he exists, perfect and unscathed. He does not even hear the rain.

Stay. I whisper to him. *Stay in the car. Stay in this moment.*

But of course he never does.

2

Phineas Smith is Aunt Angelina's son. Aunt Angelina is not my aunt; she is my mother's best friend from girlhood, her best friend still—and next-door neighbor. Our mothers had been pregnant together that spring and summer long ago. My mother respectably so, married to her high-school sweetheart for over a year with numerous pictures of their wedding scattered throughout their house with a fenced-in backyard. My father was—is—never around because of his work at The Office but Mother did not mind; she had Angelina. Angelina was pregnant from her lover. He was married and rich and far too old for her. He also refused to believe that it was his child. It would take a court-ordered DNA test a few weeks after Phineas's birth to get his father to do the honorable thing—buy Aunt Angelina the house next door to my mother, and after writing each monthly check, pretend that she and the baby did not exist for the next thirty days.

My mother did not work and Aunt Angelina taught art at Vogt Elementary across the street from her duplex, so the summer was theirs to spend. They told us that the summer of their pregnancies, Aunt Angelina would walk over from her duplex on Church Street—her stomach large and heavy, protruding, as if it were leading the way—to our large Victorian house on Elizabeth Street, and they would spend the day on the back porch with their feet propped up on the railing. They would drink lemonade or iced tea, and only go inside to watch the *I Love Lucy Show* in the afternoon. They sat close together so that Finny and I could kick each other like twins.

They made such plans for us that summer.

Phineas was born first on the twenty-first of September. A week later, likely missing the one who had been kicking me, I came along.

In September people will tell you that their favorite season is autumn. They will not say this during any other month of the year. People forget September is actually a summer month. In St. Louis, this should be apparent to people. The leaves are still green on the trees and the weather is still warm, yet people hang smiling scarecrows on their front doors. By the time the leaves and weather do begin to change in late October, they have tired of autumn and are thinking of Christmas. They never stop; they never wonder if they already have it all.

My mother named me Autumn. People say to me “Oh how pretty,” and then the name seems to glide away from them, not grasping all the things that the word should mean to them, shades of red, change, and death.

Phineas understood my name before I did. My name had what his did not, associations, meaning, a history. His disappointment when our fourth grade class looked up names in the baby name books surprised me. Every book gave his name a different meaning and origin: snake, Nubian, oracle, Hebrew, Arabic, unknown. My name meant exactly what it was; there was nothing to be discovered by it. I thought if a name was of unknown origin and meaning, it could not disappoint. I did not understand then that a boy without a real father would crave an origin and a meaning.

There were so many things that I did not understand about him over the years, but of course, of course, of course, of course, they all make sense now.

We grew up in Ferguson, a small town in the suburbs of St. Louis, composed of Victorian houses, old brick churches, and a picturesque downtown of shops owned by families for generations. I suppose it was a happy childhood.

I was quirky and odd and I did not have any friends besides Finny. He could have had other close friends if he wanted; he was good at sports and nothing was odd about him. He was sweet and shy and everyone liked him.

The girls had crushes on him. The boys picked him first in gym. The teachers called on him for the right answer.

I wanted to learn about the Salem witch trials for history. I read books under my desk during lessons and refused to eat the bottom left corner of my sandwiches. I believed platypuses to be a government conspiracy. I could not turn a cartwheel or kick, hit, or serve any sort of ball. In third grade, I announced that I was a feminist. During Job Week in fifth grade, I told the class and teacher that my career goal was to move to New York, wear black turtlenecks, and sit in coffee shops all day, thinking deep thoughts and making up stories in my head.

After a moment of surprise, Mrs. Morgansen wrote *Freelance Writer* under my smiling Polaroid picture and tacked it on the walls with the future teachers and football stars. After consulting her, I agreed that it was close enough. I think she was pleased to have found something for me, but sometimes I wonder if she would have cared as much if I had been ugly as well as odd.

For as long as I can remember, people have told me that I am pretty. This came from adults more often than other children. They said it to me when they met me; they whispered it to each other when they thought I could not hear. It became a fact I knew about myself, like my middle name was Rose or that I was left-handed: I was pretty.

Not that it did me any good. The adults all seemed to think it did, or at least should, but in childhood my prettiness gave more pleasure to the adults than it did me.

For other children, the defining characteristic was another fact I had accepted about myself—I was *weird*.

I never tried to be weird, and I hated being seen that way. It was as if I had been born without the ability to understand if the things I was about to say or do were strange, so I was trapped into constantly being myself. Being “pretty” was a poor consolation in my eyes.

Finny was loyal to me; he taunted anyone who dared torment me, snubbed anyone who scorned me, and always picked me first to be on his

team.

It was understood by everyone that I belonged to Finny and that we belonged together. We were accepted as an oddity by our classmates, and most of the time they left me alone. And I was happy; I had Finny.

We were rarely ever apart. At recess I sat on the hill reading while Finny played kickball with the boys in the field below. We did every group project together. We walked home together and trick-or-treated together. We did our homework side by side at my kitchen table. With my father so often gone, The Mothers frequently had each other over for dinner. A week could easily go by with Finny and I only being separated to sleep in our own beds, and even then we went to sleep knowing the other wasn't very far away.

In my memory of childhood, it is always summer first. I see the dancing light and green leaves. Finny and I hide under bushes or in trees. Autumn is our birthdays and walking to school together and a deepening of that golden light. He and his mother spend Christmas at our house. My father makes an appearance. His father sends a present that is both expensive and unfathomable. A chemistry set. Custom-made golf clubs. Finny shrugs and lays them aside. Winter is a blur of white and cold hands shoved in pockets. Finny rescues me when other kids throw snowballs at me. We sled or stay indoors. Spring is a painting in pale green, and I sit watching from the stands while Finny plays soccer.

All the time that became known in my mind as Before.

3

I walk toward the bus stop with my book bag slung over one shoulder. There are a few kids already there, standing loosely grouped together but not acknowledging each other. I look down at the sidewalk. My boots are spray-painted silver. My hair and fingernails are black. I stop at the corner and stand to the side. We are all quiet.

Our bus stop is at the top of the big hill on Darst Road. Finny and I used to ride our bikes down this hill. I had always been frightened. Finny never was.

I look at the other kids at the corner while pretending that I am not. There are seven of us. Some of them I recognize from middle school or even elementary school; some of them I don't.

It is my first day of high school.

I go back to looking down and study the shredded hem of my black dress. I cut the lace with fingernail clippers a week ago. My mother says I can dress however I want as long as my grades stay the same. But then, she still hasn't figured out that I'm not going to be one of the popular girls this year.

On the last day of school, Sasha and I walked to the drugstore and spent an hour picking out dyes. She wanted me to dye my hair red because of my name. I thought that was dorky but I didn't tell her; since our recent eviction from The Clique, Sasha has been my only girlfriend, my only friend actually.

"Hey," somebody says. Everyone looks up. Finny is standing with us now, tall, blond, and preppy enough to be in a catalog. Everyone looks

away again.

“Hey,” I hear one girl’s voice say. She is standing somewhere behind me and I cannot see her. I should have said hello back to Finny, but I’m too nervous to speak right now.

Last night at his house we had what The Mothers called an end-of-summer barbeque. While they were grilling, I sat on the back porch and watched Finny kick a soccer ball against the fence. I was thinking of a short story I started the day before, my first attempt at a gothic romance. I planned on a very tragic ending, and I was working out the details of my heroine’s misfortunes as I watched him play. When they sent us inside to get the paper plates, he spoke to me.

“So why did you dye your hair?” he said.

“I dunno,” I said. If someone had asked me why Finny and I weren’t friends anymore, I would have said that it was an accident. Our mothers would have said that we seemed to have grown apart in the past few years. I don’t know what Finny would have said.

In elementary school, we were accepted as an oddity. In middle school, it was weird that we were friends, and in the beginning, we had to explain ourselves to the others, but then we hardly saw each other, and we had to explain less and less.

By some strange accident, my weirdness became acceptable, and I was one of the popular girls that first semester of eighth grade. We called ourselves The Clique. Every day we ate lunch together and afterward all went to the bathroom to brush our hair. Every week we painted our nails the same color. We had secret nicknames and friendship bracelets. I wasn’t used to being admired or envied or having girlfriends, and even though Finny had always been enough for me Before, I drank it up as if I had been thirsting for it for years.

Finny joined a group of guys who were vaguely geeky but not harassed, and I usually waved to him when I saw him at school. He always waved back.

We were taking different classes. Which meant different homework. After a few weeks, we stopped studying together and I saw him even less. Being one of the popular girls took a lot of time. After school they wanted me to come over and watch movies while we did each other's hair. On the weekends we went shopping.

When I did see Finny, we didn't have a lot to talk about anymore. Every moment we spent in silence was like another brick in the wall going up between us.

Somehow we weren't friends anymore.

It wasn't a choice. Not really.

I'm looking at my silver boots and torn lace when the bus pulls up. Everyone steps forward, heads down. We silently file onto the bus where everyone *is* talking. Even though I had no reason to think Sasha wouldn't be there, I am relieved when I see her sitting in the middle of the bus. She is wearing a black T-shirt and thick, dark eyeliner.

"Hey," I say as I slide in next to her, placing my book bag on my lap.

"Hey," she says. Since I refused to dye my hair red, she dyed hers an unnatural shade instead. We smile at each other. Our transformation is complete. Sort of.

I can say *exactly* why Sasha and I weren't friends with Alexis Myers or any of those girls anymore.

I didn't try out for cheerleading.

I had planned on it. I wanted to be a cheerleader. I wanted to be popular and date a soccer player—that what's cool at McClure High instead of

football—and everything that went along with staying in The Clique. But I couldn't make up my own routine and perform it alone for tryouts, so that was that.

Alexis and Taylor and Victoria all made it onto the squad, but Sasha didn't. Officially, we weren't kicked out of The Clique, but all they talked about at lunch was cheerleading camp and the older girls on the squad who had seemed soooooo nice.

On the last day of school, Alexis and Taylor and Victoria all came to class with their hair in braids. They hadn't told us that it was going to be a braid day. We always wore our hair in braids on the same day. At lunch when we asked them why they didn't tell us, they just looked at each other and giggled. I figured they had finally realized the truth I had kept hidden; I was a Pretty Girl, but I wasn't a Popular Girl. I was different. I was strange. So I decided to give up and be the Weird Girl again, and Sasha followed me.

On the bus, Sasha leans toward me and says, "You look cool."

"So do you," I say. I turn to face forward and I see a girl walk down the aisle wearing the blue and red uniform. Her blond hair swishes back and forth in a ponytail. I am still feeling the pang of rejection when I see that she is sitting down next to Finny. By the end of the month, they will be going out, and my mother will tell me that Finny met Sylvie Whitehouse on campus while he was at soccer practice and she was there for cheerleading.

"What do you think people will say?" Sasha says. I almost tell her not to be so dorky.

"I dunno," I say.

4

For the first few days, Sasha and I eat lunch alone on what I start to call The Steps to Nowhere. The cement steps descend from the front courtyard down a hill to a field of grass and weeds that is used for nothing.

Alexis and the others wear their uniforms and smirk every time they see us, as if our new look is hostile to them. A new girl, Sylvie from St. John's Catholic School, sits at their table. Nearly all of the freshmen are from Ferguson Middle, but there is a sprinkling of these new Catholic kids whose parents could not afford the higher cost of the private high schools. These kids have been with the same classmates since kindergarten and are lost and awed in the vast sea of McClure High. It is awkward the first few days as everyone tries to figure their places out. Then, slowly, everyone slides into new alliances and a pattern begins to be set that will be followed for the rest of the year, possibly for the rest of high school.

Sasha has met a girl from St. John's who wears a crucifix and a skull on the same chain. They have gym class together and walk the track side by side for a few days before Sasha invites her to eat with us. Her name is Brooke and she brings her boyfriend Noah and her cousin Jamie with her. The next day, more people show up—so and so's friend, someone from somebody's class who seems cool. Soon we have a group hanging out on The Steps to Nowhere. Some leave after a few days, finding other groups; a few stay. By the end of the second week, a group of friends emerges from The Steps to Nowhere.

There are four girls and three boys in our group. Brooke and Noah are already together, and they are devoted to each other. They even look alike,

brown hair and freckles, and when they laugh their eyes crinkle.

That leaves me, Sasha, and Angie for Jamie and Alex. Angie, blond and a little bit chubby, still has a crush on some guy from her old school. Alex has pretty eyes, but he is short and the goofy, silly type, still a little immature. I can see by the way she looks at him that Sasha is my competition for Jamie.

I got butterflies in my stomach the first time I saw Jamie's face; his eyes are green and fringed with impossibly long eyelashes. Above that, his hair is dark, a little curly, and very messy. He is tall, skinny, and pale.

Jamie is animated and funny and he smirks a lot. He reminds me of Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Jamie leads the other boys into mischief that the girls sit back and watch from The Steps, giggling. They play football in the field with Brooke's shoe, toss balls of paper inside open classroom windows, and sing songs in a style mocking the school's a cappella group. Jamie throws his head back and laughs when his mischief turns out as planned. I watch him and think of Peter Pan telling Wendy that he just has to crow when he is pleased with himself.

Sasha and I each try to hold Jamie's attention in our own way. Sasha teases him and displays her tomboy cuteness. I am alternately demure and flirtatious. She runs down the steps and participates in the boy's games. I smile at his jokes and look up at him from under my eyelashes. Sasha holds her hand up for a high five. I cheer for him from the steps. It is a battle, but we never cut each other. Sasha and I know that when it is over we must still be friends.

Slowly, yet at the same time suddenly, because it happens in only a matter of days, I pull ahead of Sasha. She makes a valiant effort for a few lunches, but it becomes obvious that Jamie is now courting me. He sits next to me on the steps. He offers me the rest of his French fries. He tickles me. He smiles up at me on the steps while he and the boys are playing shoe-ball, and my stomach flutters. *Jamie. Jamie. James. Jamie.*

One Monday afternoon on The Steps to Nowhere, Jamie takes my hand in his, as if it has long been settled that it is his hand to take whenever he

pleases, and everyone acts as if this is normal. I hold his hand and look down at the concrete steps to try to stop from grinning and giving away my feelings. Inside, I feel like I am trembling; on the outside, I stay as casual as he is. Of course we're together, of course. Of course.

That day, Alexis and the others look at me with interest when Jamie and I walk down the hall past them, then turn away as if they couldn't care less. But they have to have noticed. He is undeniably gorgeous. Jamie is a dark-haired Adonis, a gothic prince. And he is now mine.

5

Jamie wants to go farther and I tell him that I'm not ready. We've been together since the third week of school, but it's only early November and I'm surprised that we're having this discussion already. A few days ago on the phone, he said that he loved me; I said I wasn't ready to say that back, and now, lying next to him and staring at the ceiling, I'm wondering if this is why he said it.

"Okay then," he says, and takes my hand in his.

We're both fully clothed still, and dressed in the eccentric uniform adopted by our group. We're not goths or hipsters, just odd. The girls dye their hair unnatural colors and the boys make an effort to look like they just rolled out of bed. We all wear boots and bite our fingernails. I know that we're just conforming in a different way, but this is not something that I have said out loud. What binds our group together is the shared statement that we are different—and therefore somehow better—than all of the "normal" kids at school. Especially better than the popular kids.

Now that I've actually been to high school, I have no desire to be one of those girls with the ponytails and the pleated skirts. I am thrilled to finally be allowed to be myself, even if it is still under certain confines. With my new friends, being weird is a good thing, as long as it's the same weird as them.

"Your house is so weird," Jamie says.

I turn and look at him. This is the first time he has seen my house on the inside. My mom is at The Office's Fall Festival with my father. Jamie was

sick the night of my birthday party, and Mom still hasn't convinced me to have him over for dinner.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"It's so perfect," he says. "Even your room." It is not a compliment.

I look around at the lavender walls and white wicker furniture. I shrug.

"My mom decorated it," I say, a half lie. She decorated the rest of the house and it is perfect, just like her. Everything coordinates; everything is arranged precisely so. It could be in a design magazine with my mother sitting at the kitchen table with a vase of white tulips, not a hair out of place as she pretends to read the paper. We did my room together. In the magazine, I would be in a cheerleader's uniform. I would be smiling.

"You should get some posters or something," Jamie says. I roll on my side and lay my head on his shoulder. I think to myself that he is handsome in that traditional tall-and-dark way. He says he wants to pierce his eyebrow and I've been trying to convince him not to.

"Yeah, I'll probably do that," I say. I really like Jamie, even if I'm not sure that I love him yet. He's smart and quirky and he's the leader of our group. As long as I am with him, I can never be evicted again. He rests his hand on the back of my head and twines his fingers in my hair.

"I love you, Autumn," he says. Downstairs, the back door slams. We both sit up. "Is your mom home?" he says. I'm not supposed to be alone with Jamie in the house, especially since my parents haven't met him. I'm still surprised that he was able to convince me to let him come over. I look at the clock. They still aren't supposed to be home for hours. I shake my head.

"It's probably Finny," I say.

"Are you serious?" he says.

"Yeah," I say. I've told Jamie of my sordid past, of the popularity and the ponytails. I told it as a tale of escape. How I narrowly missed becoming one of *them*. He knows too that my mom is best friends with Finny's. I told him that we played together when we were little. There had been an old picture of Finny and I on my dresser that somehow survived our separation

in middle school; for nearly two years, I only spoke to Finny when I had too, but it never occurred to me to take the picture of us down until this morning when I was getting ready for Jamie to come over. I hid it in the top drawer of my dresser under my socks.

Everyone knows who Finny is now, except they don't call him that. Everyone at school calls him "Finn." He was the only freshman to make varsity soccer. He and some of his formerly geeky male friends have now been absorbed into The Clique, but they don't call themselves that anymore. Having a name for your group is way immature now. It's strange that only a few months ago I considered these girls my best friends, and even stranger that Finny is becoming friends with them.

We were barely able to avoid having each other over for our birthdays. In middle school, it might not have been as big a deal, except my parties were all girls and his all boys. This year, our mothers thought that if we were having a mixed group, then we should invite the other too. What they didn't understand was that this year, Phineas and I are separated by something far greater than just growing apart. We move on completely different planes of existence and bringing one into the other's realm would cause a shifting in reality that would upset the entire structure of the universe. Finny was popular now. I was a misfit who had found other misfits to fit with.

They didn't talk about this in front of both of us; my mother argued with me about it, and when I told her it was absolutely impossible that he come, my mother sighed and said, "What is it with you two this year?" so I knew he was having the same argument with Aunt Angelina.

"Why would Finn Smith be in your house?" Jamie says.

"He's probably getting something," I say.

"Like what?" he says. I shrug. I don't know how to explain. "Let's go see." I don't argue with him, even though my stomach drops.

Jamie hangs back in the hallway as I look into the kitchen. Finny is crouched in front of the open refrigerator, his blond head hidden from me.

“Hi,” I say. He looks over his shoulder at me. Until middle school, we were always the same height. Somehow during those years, he shot up past me and is now six foot. It is strange to see him looking up at me.

“Oh, hi,” he says. He stands up and faces me from across the room. He blushes lightly. “Sorry, the back door was unlocked but I didn’t think anyone was home.”

“I didn’t go with them,” I say.

“Oh,” he says. “Do you have eggs?”

“Um, yeah.” I cross the room and open the refrigerator door again. Finny steps aside for me. Before I bend over, I see his eyes focus outside the room, and I know he has seen Jamie lurking in the hallway. “How many do you need?” I say.

“I dunno,” he says. “Mom just said to see if you had any eggs.” I stand up and hand him the whole carton. “Thanks,” he says.

“No problem,” I say.

“See ya,” Finny says.

“Bye.” I stay where I am and listen to him clatter down the back steps before I go into the hall again.

“Wow,” Jamie says. “You guys know each other.”

“I told you we did,” I say.

“Yeah, but that was weird,” he says. I shrug again and walk back toward the stairs. “Does he do that a lot?”

“He lives next door,” I say.

“Yeah but—never mind.” We don’t say anything until we are back in my room. I lie down on my flowered bedspread first and he scoots in next to me. We kiss for a long time, and after a while, I push his hands away and we lie together in silence. I wonder if this is what it feels like to be in love. I’m not sure. Suddenly Jamie speaks.

“It’s almost like you were supposed to be one of them,” he says. “But somehow you’re not.”

“What do you mean?” I say.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Your room and him.”

“Well, I’m not,” I say. I start to kiss him again. I’m kissing him to make him stop thinking about it. The room once again is silent except for our breathing.

I’m thinking about it though. I’m thinking about going with Aunt Angelina to pick up Finny after soccer practice. I’m thinking about the cheerleaders asking me if he is my boyfriend. I’m thinking about sitting next to Finny on the bus the first day of school.

We could have ended up together, I realize as Jamie begins to grind his pelvis against mine. He would have told me that he loved me by now, but he wouldn’t have asked about sex. Not yet.

I can see all of this as if it has already happened, as if it was what happened. I know that it is accurate down to the smallest detail, because even with everything that did happen, I still know Finny, and I know what would have happened.

“I love you,” I say to Jamie.

6

The doll is crying again.

“I’m never having sex,” Sasha says. She kneels between the clothing racks and lifts the doll out of its carrier. The saleslady folding clothes by the register looks over at us. Sasha lifts the doll’s shirt up and inserts the key dangling from the bracelet around her wrist into the small of the baby’s back. It continues crying.

“That’s what they want you to say,” I tell her over the noise. I glance over my shoulder at the saleslady. “I think she thinks that it’s real,” I say. A few moments later, the doll’s crying winds down. Sasha still holds it slung over her arm with the key twisted in it. If she takes it out before two minutes are up, it will start crying again, and if the computer chip inside the doll records that she ignored it, Sasha will get a failing grade for the project and at least a C- in her Family Science class. Sasha looks over at the saleslady and shrugs.

“Well, it’s working,” she says. “I’m never going to have sex.”

“Does Alex know?” I say. I turn back to the sale rack and continue to flip through the clothes.

“If it starts crying during the movie, I’ll break it to him then,” Sasha says, and I smile. The boys are supposed to be meeting us later. It’s been a good semester. I like our new friends and my new clothes. I’m going to have straight A’s and B’s when school lets out for Christmas, and our agreement said Mom wouldn’t be allowed to say anything about how I dress as long as my grades didn’t slip.

I hold up a black faux-corset with thick lace straps. Sasha raises her eyebrows.

“I could wear it with a cardigan,” I say. This time she laughs at me, but I’m serious. I like the idea of mixing something sexy with something school-marmish. I walk over to the saleslady. “I want to try this on,” I say. She looks up at me and nods. I see her eyes flicker over to where Sasha kneels, strapping the doll back into its seat. I follow her over to the dressing rooms and watch her unlock the door. “Thank you,” I say.

“How old are you girls?” she says to me with her back still turned.

“Fifteen,” I say. Sasha’s birthday isn’t until March, but I give her my age anyway.

“Hmm,” she says and turns to leave. Part of me hates this woman, and part of me wants to grab her sleeve and tell her that I’m actually a good kid.

“It’s a doll,” I say. She turns to face me.

“What?”

“It’s a doll. A school project,” I say. She narrows her eyes at me and walks away.

It’s an hour later at a cheap jewelry store, while Sasha is looking for a necklace for her little sister, that I see the tiara. It’s silver with clear rhinestones, the kind they used to crown the homecoming court just two months ago. We laughed and rolled our eyes at the tradition, but at the time, I’d wanted a crown, just not what it symbolized. I pick it up and slide the combs into my hair to hold it in place. I admire my head, turning it back and forth in the mirror, then step back to get the effect with jeans and a T-shirt. I like it.

“What are you going to do with that?” Sasha says, coming up behind me at the register.

“Wear it,” I say, “every day.”

“Hello, Your Highness,” Jamie says to me when we meet them later outside the mall’s movie theater. I’m thrilled to have his approval. I reach out and take his hand and he kisses me hello.

During the movie, the doll starts crying again, and Sasha and I meet each other's eyes and start laughing. We laugh so hard that I have to go out with her into the hall while she sticks the key in the doll. We stand in the hall laughing together, her with her doll and me with my tiara, and people passing by look at us like we are crazy.

It was a good time for us, first semester. It was the sort of happiness that fools you into thinking that there is still so much more, maybe even enough to laugh forever.

7

“So why have you been wearing that tiara?” Finny says. The way he says it reminds me of the way he asked me why I dyed my hair, but for some reason it pisses me off this time.

“Because I like it,” I say. It is Christmas Eve, and we are setting the dining room table with my mother’s wedding china. My father is drinking scotch in front of the Christmas tree. The Mothers are in the kitchen.

“Okay, sorry,” he says. I glance over him. He’s wearing a red sweater that would look dorky on any other guy but makes him look like he should attend a private school on the East Coast and spend his summers rowing or something. He’s walking around the table laying a napkin at every place. I follow behind with the silverware.

“Sorry,” I say.

“It’s cool,” Finny says. It’s hard to make him angry.

“It’s just that I get asked that enough at school.”

“Then why do you wear it?”

“Because I like it,” I say, but this time I smile and he laughs.

At dinner, The Mothers let us have half a glass of wine each. I am secretly giddy to be treated like an adult, and the wine makes me sleepy. My father spends a lot of time talking to Finny about being the only freshman on the varsity team. He seems pleased to have something to talk about with one of us, as if Finny and I are interchangeable, as if his duty to either of us is the same. It’s easy to understand why he would think that way; the only time he is ever home for an extended amount of time is for

the holidays, and Finny and Aunt Angelina are always with us then. Perhaps he thinks Aunt Angelina is his other wife.

Mom and Aunt Angelina talk about every Christmas they can ever remember and compare them to this Christmas. This is what they do every year. Every year, it's the best Christmas ever.

I wish I could always believe that it is the best Christmas ever, but I can't, because I know when the best Christmas was. It was the Christmas when we were twelve, our last Christmas in elementary school.

It snowed the night before Christmas Eve that year. I had a new winter coat and mittens that matched my scarf. Finny and I walked down to the creek and stomped holes in the ice down to the shallow water. The Mothers made us hot chocolate and we played Monopoly until my dad came home from The Office and nothing mattered except that it was Christmas.

It hasn't snowed for Christmas since then, and every year there has been more and more other things that matter, and it has felt less and less like Christmas.

Jamie is spending Christmas with his grandmother in Wisconsin, and I am pleased to be missing him. It is a dull ache that I enjoy prodding.

Jamie, I think, *Jamie*, *Jamie*, *James*, and I remember his tongue in my mouth. I don't like it as much as I thought I would, but I'm getting used to it. I tell him that I love him all the time now, and he hasn't said anything else about having sex. He gave me a new journal for Christmas, and even though I haven't filled up my old one yet, I'm going to start it on New Year's. He'll be home by then and we'll spend it together. *Jamie*, *Jamie*, *Jamie*.

"Autumn," my father says, "are you the sugar plum fairy this year?" There is a silence at the table as I try to understand what he means. Then I see my mother bite her lip, and I realize he is talking about my tiara. He has not noticed that I have worn this tiara every day for the past three weeks. I take a breath.

"Yeah," I say. "Just thought I'd make the dinner a little more festive." He smiles at me and takes a bite of ham. He is pleased with himself. My

mother says something to Finny, and slowly the conversation at the table resumes. After a few minutes, I excuse myself and go to my room.

I've bought some posters: Jimi Hendrix rolling on stage with his guitar, Ophelia drowned and looking up at the sky, a black and white photo of a tree without leaves. I like the effect they have on the lavender and white room, like the corset and the cardigan, like my tiara with ripped jeans. I don't look at the posters though. I lie down on the bed and look at the ceiling.

When someone knocks on my door, I pretend I'm asleep. A moment later, the door opens anyway and Finny sticks his head in.

"Hey," he says. "They said to tell you that we're done eating."

"Okay," I say, but I do not move. I am waiting for him to leave. He doesn't though; he keeps standing there like I'm supposed to do something. I do nothing. I look at the ceiling until he speaks again.

"It really sucks that he hasn't noticed," Finny says.

"At least my father's around for Christmas," I say. His expression changes only for an instant. Then it is as if a door has closed again.

"I didn't mean it like that," I say.

"It's fine," he says. "Everybody is waiting downstairs."

After he leaves, I lie in bed a little longer. I think about telling Finny how I don't care, and how it hurts, and how it doesn't really matter to me but I wish it mattered to my dad. I imagine that suddenly Finny is holding me and telling me it is okay, and he's saying that you can feel more than one way about a person. We go downstairs and he holds my hand while we watch *It's a Wonderful Life* together on the couch. When he and Aunt Angelina leave, he kisses me good night on the porch, and we see that it is starting to snow.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, wipe my eyes, and go downstairs.

8

The party is at my house, because it is big and so my parents can meet Jamie before they go to The Office's New Year's Eve party.

Jamie was good with my parents. He shook hands, made eye contact, and didn't smell like any kind of smoke. Dad was satisfied. Mom was pleased, and I have a nagging feeling that it is because Jamie is so good-looking, as if she can now rest assured that I am not too uncool at school.

Sasha, Brooke, and Angie are going to spend the night. Alex's mom is going to pick up the boys after midnight. Until then, we are alone.

Brooke has stolen a champagne bottle from her parents' party. It's wrapped up in her sleeping bag, and it will only be after it is too late that we will realize it was safe to put it in the fridge.

We eat pizza and watch a movie. The movie is not great. The boys crack jokes and try to be the one to make the girls laugh the most. Jamie is winning, of course. I lean back in the leather couch and feel like a consort.

Afterward, we sit around and talk, and everyone is trying to be funny now. Mostly we talk about the other kids at school. Eventually the conversation turns to sex, as I am learning all conversations eventually will. None of us have had sex, and we are young enough that this is not embarrassing; it is simply a fact that time will remedy. We tease each other and exchange stories of who at school has done what where. We laugh and throw pillows at each other. Sex is something to joke about. Sex seems as possible, as real, as the world ending at midnight.

Midnight. I am as excited for the kiss with Jamie as if it were our first. I've only been kissed at midnight once before, and I am eager for this kiss

to replace that kiss, to be a kiss that I will remember forever.

At eleven-fifty, we raid the kitchen for pots and pans. At eleven fifty-five, we stand at the front door and ask Jamie for the time every thirty seconds. For some reason we have decided that his phone is the most reliable.

And then, as it always does, the moment comes and passes, and even as part of me is once again surprised that I feel no different than I did a moment before, I am running across the lawn with the others, banging my pot and looking up at the stars and illegal fireworks my neighbors are setting off. We scream as if we have heard wonderful news. We shout a happy new year to each other and the trees and the others we cannot see out there, shouting at the sky like us. We scream as if this display of joy will frighten all our fears away, as if we already know nothing bad will happen to us this year, and are happy for it.

“Jamie, come kiss me!” I shout. I toss my pot and wooden spoon on the grass and hold my arms out to him. He swaggers over and pulls me to him by my hips. The others bang their pots. It is a good kiss, just like all our other kisses. The others drop their pots and exchange their own kisses. I pick up my pot and spoon again, and during the relative quiet before we begin to bang again, I realize we are not alone.

Thirty feet away, Finny and Sylvie and Alexis and Jack and all the others are banging on their pots and laughing at the sky too. Finny and I meet eyes, and he looks both ways before waving at me surreptitiously. I wave back, my hand no higher than my hip, terrified one of his friends will think I am waving to them. At that exact moment, everyone else seems to notice the others, for we are immediately in a competition that no one will ever acknowledge out loud. We are having more fun than they are. We love each other more. We are louder. We have more to look forward to this year than they do. We scream and shout and kiss some more. The boys begin their a cappella impression, and we hold out our arms and spin in the street.

And of course, we are having so much fun that we don't even notice them standing over there.

Then Jamie does something that proves once again why he is our leader.

“Time for the champagne!” he shouts, and we scream a chorus of agreement that drowns the street in our elation. We run up the lawn laughing before they can retaliate. We are so over banging pots in the street; we have way cooler things to do inside.

We drink the warm champagne out of water glasses and act like it is no big deal.

Tipsy for the first time in our lives, we begin to dare each other to kiss. Brooke and Angie kiss. I kiss Noah. Sasha kisses Jamie. And then we decide that each of us must kiss all of the others in order to seal our eternal bonds of friendship. We giggle and cluster together. Did I kiss you? Have we kissed yet? Oh my god, I kissed Alex twice.

Afterward we wash all the glasses twice. Jamie and the boys take on the manly task of smashing the bottle on the driveway and sweeping up the pieces. When they come back inside, we all take breath strips and stand together in the kitchen. The girlfriends stand with their boyfriends in preparation of the impending separation. We hold hands and lay our heads on their shoulders, sighing how sleepy we are. The boyfriends smile at us indulgently. Angie sits at the kitchen table and endures as she always does.

“Hey, did Finn Smith wave at us?” Noah says. Brooke opens her eyes and lifts her head up.

“Yeah, I saw that,” she says.

“He was probably waving at Autumn,” Sasha says.

“Why?” Angie and Noah say at the same time.

“They used to be, like, best friends,” Sasha says. Everyone looks at me.

“He lives next door,” I say. “Our moms are friends. Really close friends.”

“They spend Thanksgiving and Christmas together,” Sasha says. “Every year.”

“Oh my God, that is weird,” Brooke says.

“We’re like cousins,” I say. “If Jamie was one of the popular kids, you’d still have to see him, right, Brooke?”

“Me?” Jamie says. Everyone laughs.

“Still, it is weird,” Sasha says. “For a little while in middle school, you guys still hung out sometimes, right? I mean you guys could still be friends even—”

“Hey, I’m not the one who tried out for cheerleading,” I say, and I am no longer the center of attention.

“You did what?” Alex says, as if she has betrayed him. Sasha begs for mercy, pleading her youth, her inexperience, her naiveté.

“I knew not what I did,” she says, her hands clasped in front of her. We listen to her case, and after she has been sufficiently melodramatic, Jamie pronounces her forgiven and we all hug her as Alex’s mom knocks on the door.

The subject of our pasts is dropped for the night, and we unroll our sleeping bags and huddle together on the living room floor. We talk about our boys and which of the popular girls is the snottiest. We all disagree, each choosing the one we feel is our counterpart.

“Sylvie always looks so smug,” I say. “I *hate* that.”

“But Victoria glares at me,” Angie says. “I mean, seriously. Like this.” We all laugh at her impression, which resembles Popeye more than Victoria. Sasha and I are even more delighted, because we had both always thought her grimace was funny, even when she was our friend.

My parents come home before we have fallen asleep. They are arguing and trying to be quiet about it, and the other girls pretend not to notice. After a few minutes, I hear my father go upstairs. A moment later, my mother pokes her head into the living room.

“Did you girls have a good New Year’s?” she asks brightly. All the girls nod and say, “Yes, ma’am.” She looks directly at me. “Did you, honey?” she says. I nod, but she looks at me strangely and leaves us.

Sasha probably would have added, if I had not stopped her, that Finny and I used to spend every New Year’s together too.

9

Winter is always a dead time for me. I wish I were like the trees. I wish I could feign death, or at least sleep through the winter. My tiara continues its reign as a permanent fixture on my head. Before long, no one asks me about it anymore.

Second semester I trade Gym for health class. On the first day the teacher, Mrs. Adams, tells us that she used to be a professional water skier and leaves out the part about how she ended up a professional health teacher. It becomes apparent after the first month that every disease we study, she has known someone who has had it. Most of them were on the water skiing team. Angie has the class with me, and Mrs. Adams becomes the frequent subject of our lunch conversations.

Walking to and waiting for the bus is now my personal hell. I stamp my feet, keep my head low and my shoulders hunched, and quietly hate the world for being so cold. I am careful to always stand with my back to Sylvie and Finny. I have never told anyone how much I hate seeing the two of them together; they would make too big of a deal out of it and think it meant something stupid. I just don't like her, and they annoy me.

Some mornings, I think maybe Sylvie is talking for me to overhear. When it's really cold out, I think the idea is ridiculous and that I am stupid for even thinking it. It's cold, and nothing matters except getting inside that bus and getting to Jamie.

“So I was thinking this weekend we should go to that party—you know which one I mean.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, everyone is going to be there, so we should really go.”

“Is Jack going?”

“*Everybody* is going, Finn.”

“Class,” Mrs. Adams tells us, “eating disorders are not something to joke about. I’ve seen what they can do to a person. One girl on my water skiing team had anorexia. Another was bulimic. They were such beautiful girls, but these are not pretty diseases.”

Jamie and I talk on the phone every night before we go to sleep. We talk about getting married someday and what sort of house we’ll have and how many children. It surprises me how much he wants these things, such normal things, and nothing else.

Sometimes I am disappointed with love. I thought that when you were in love, it would always be right there, staring you in the face, reminding you every moment that you love this person. It seems that it isn’t always like that. Sometimes I know that I love Jamie, but I don’t feel it, and I wonder what it would be like to be with someone else.

I love him the most when we fight and I am scared that he will leave me. After we fight, I want so much to be close to him, and the next day I want his hand in mine every minute. Sometimes he loves me more than I love him and he wants me to pay attention to him, but I wish he would leave me alone so that I could go back to reading or talking to Angie about Mrs. Adams. Sometimes we both love each other a lot and it’s hard to hang up at night, and I wish it could always be like that.

“Class, I was young once too,” Mrs. Adams says. “I know about the pressures to have sex. Not just from your partner, but from your friends and the media and even your own body. It can be hard. But please, please be careful. I know you think that no one you know has an STD, but that’s how they spread. I remember having to hold the hands of several of my teammates after they found out that they had an STD. One girl got herpes, and as we’ve learned, that’s one that never goes away. Imagine having that forever.”

One morning, it sounds like Sylvie and Finny are fighting. They whisper back and forth, and Finny is suddenly saying a whole lot more than “Yeah.”

Now that I want to hear what they are saying, I can’t. I glance over my shoulder at them. Finny is standing next to her, glaring at the ground. Sylvie is facing him and clinging to his side as she looks up at his face. From a distance, it would be hard to tell that they’re fighting.

“Please,” I see more than hear her say. He shakes his head and doesn’t reply.

Jamie gives me a promise ring for Valentine’s Day. All day, whenever I see someone I know, I rush up to show them my hand and tell them that I have the best boyfriend ever. He gives me another tiara too. This one is gold and has more curlicues.

To everyone’s surprise, spring comes early that year.

10

It is the moment I reach my door that I realize I left my house keys in my locker. It's Thursday, the day my mother goes to see her therapist and then to the gym. She won't be home until five-thirty. It's two-thirty in the afternoon in early March. The snow is gone but it is still cold out, and it's about to rain.

I stand facing my door for a moment. I have two options. One is to stay on the porch, hope the rain doesn't blow on me, and later try to explain to my mother why I didn't take the second option.

"I'm locked out," I say as he opens the door. Even so, a flicker of confusion passes over his face.

"Oh. Okay," Finny says. He steps aside and lets me come in. I'm wearing Doc Martens and a new pink tiara. He's wearing khakis and a sweater. He's kicked off his shoes already. His socks are green. I nearly say something. What kind of boy wears green socks?

"What time does your mom come home?" I ask.

"Four," he says. His mother has a spare key. "Where's your mom?"

"It's therapy day," I say. I follow him into the living room, where he sits down on the couch. Aunt Angelina's house is always just a little bit messy, the lived-in kind of messy where books get piled into corners, and throw pillows and shoes seem to be everywhere. Aunt Angelina has never quite finished decorating either; on the wall above Finny's head, there are three

different samples of paint spread in large splotches. They've been there as long as I can remember.

"What do you want to watch?" Finny says. He picks up the remote and looks at me.

"I'm going to read," I say. I had been planning when I got home to edit a poem I started during history class, but there is no way I could take out my notebook and start writing here, in front of him.

I sit down in the armchair across the room. It's bright blue, and for years Aunt Angelina has been going to have it reupholstered, as soon as she decides on a color scheme for the room. When I hear Finny start flipping through the channels, I take my book out of my bag and glance up at him.

Finny looks like a Renaissance painting of an angel or like he could belong to some modern royal family. His hair stays blond all winter and looks like gold in the summer. He blushes a lot, partly because he is so fair, partly because he's shy and gets embarrassed easily. I know that Sylvie must have approached him first and she was definitely the one who asked him out.

Finny never tells anyone how he is feeling; you just have to know him well enough to understand when he is sad or scared. Today his expression does not tell me how he feels about me being over here. Either he couldn't care less, or he could be annoyed.

We see each other frequently, but we rarely are alone together. And even though we will still sometimes side together against The Mothers over an issue, we never have anything to say to each other that isn't superficial.

Years ago, Finny and I strung string and two cups across our bedroom windows so we could talk to each other at night. After we stopped talking, we never took it down, but finally the string rotted away.

Finny's cell phone rings and he leaves the room without saying anything.

I look down at my book and begin to read. The rain has started, and I am distracted by the sound of it. Finny used to ask me to go outside with him to save the worms on the sidewalk. It bothered him to see them drying and

writhing on the pavement the day after rain. He hated the idea of anyone—anything—ever being sad or hurt.

When we were eight, we heard his mother sobbing in her bedroom after a breakup and Finny pushed tissues under the door. When we were eleven, he punched Donnie Banks in the stomach for calling me a freak. It was the only fight he ever got in, and I think Mrs. Morgansen only gave him detention because she had to. Aunt Angelina didn't even punish him.

"Autumn is already here," I hear him say in the next room. There is a pause. "She got locked out." There is a longer silence. "Okay," he says, and then, "I love you too."

This time he looks at me when he comes back in the room.

"You guys are having dinner over here tonight, so Mom says you might as well just stay."

"But my dad's supposed to be home tonight," I say. Finny shrugs. My dad cancels family dinners frequently enough that I suppose it isn't worth pointing out to me. I shrug back and look down at my book.

When I look up again, it is because I hear Aunt Angelina coming in through the back door.

"Hello?" she calls out.

"In here," Finny shouts back. He mutes the TV and his mom walks into the room.

"Hi, kids," she says. Her long patchwork skirt still swirls around her ankles even when she comes to a stop. She brings her scent of patchouli oil into the room with her.

"Hi," we say. Aunt Angelina looks at me and smiles with the left side of her mouth. It's the same crooked smile Finny has when he's feeling playful.

"Autumn, why are you wearing a Jimmy Carter campaign shirt?" she asks.

"I dunno," I say. "Why is your son wearing green socks?"

She looks back at Finny. "Phineas, are you wearing green socks?"

He looks down at his feet. "Well, yeah."

"Where did you get green socks from?"

“They were in my sock drawer.”

“I never bought you green socks.”

“They were in there.”

“This all sounds very suspicious to me,” I say.

“Agreed. Finny, Autumn and I are going into the kitchen, and when we come back, you better have an explanation for your socks.” Finny and I glance at each other in surprise. I look away and set my book down. Aunt Angelina waits for me at the door. When I reach her, she lays one hand on my shoulder as she walks with me into the kitchen.

“Honey, your mom isn’t having a good day,” she says quietly. “Your dad had to cancel dinner tonight and it really upset her.”

To other kids, this wouldn’t sound like a big deal. But when your mom has been hospitalized twice for depression, you learn to read between the lines.

“Okay,” I say.

Last time Mom was in the hospital, I was in sixth grade. I spent two weeks living with Aunt Angelina and Finny. At the time, it was fun. Everyone kept telling me that my mom was going to be okay. They told me about chemical imbalances and how it was a sickness like any other, and that Mom would get better. So I accepted it, and every night Finny snuck into the guest bedroom and we would draw pictures on each other’s backs with our fingers and then try to guess what they were.

I doubted it would be like that this time. Any of it. For one thing, this time I’ll ask why, if it’s just a chemical imbalance, Dad seems to be causing it.

“She’ll be fine. We just all need to be really understanding tonight, okay?”

“I get it,” I say. She’s saying not to stage a teenage rebellion at the dinner table.

“Your mother loves you very, very much,” she says.

“I get it,” I say again. “It’s okay.”

“All right,” she says, and she squeezes my shoulder. Despite her promise to find out more about the mysterious socks, Aunt Angelina does not follow me back into the living room. When I come back in, Finny mutes the TV and watches me sit back down.

“Everything okay?” he says.

“Yup,” I say. “Isn’t it always?”

He laughs, a quick exhalation through his nose, then his face becomes serious again, and he cocks his head to the side. He’s asking me if I want to talk about it. I shake my head and he looks away again quickly. The sound comes back on the TV and I pick up my book again.

Back in sixth grade, he had to sneak into the guest bedroom because we weren’t allowed to sleep in the same bed anymore. We hardly ever broke the rules and I was nervous every time he came, but I never told him not to. The truth of the matter is, if they hadn’t suggested it, it never would have occurred to me that things could be different between us just because we were older. We lay on our stomachs side by side and we only touched to draw on each other’s backs. I drew flowers and hearts and animals. Finny drew rocket ships and soccer balls.

On my last night there, Aunt Angelina came and stood in the doorway. She was silhouetted in the darkness by the light in the hallway. I suppose she could see us better than we could see her.

“Phineas, what are you doing in here?” she said.

“Autumn is sad,” he said. It wasn’t until he said it that I realized it was true. There was a long silence. Finny lay still next to me. I watched her dark form in the doorway.

“Fifteen minutes,” she said, and then she left. It was Finny’s turn to draw on my back. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the shapes he traced over me. It always tickled, but I never laughed.

“Two houses,” I said. “And four people.”

“It’s our houses,” he said. “And our family.”

My mother skips the gym and comes straight home. Aunt Angelina orders pizza and we eat in front of the TV, something we never do at my house. Afterward, I claim to have homework and go home. My mother stays. She says she’ll be home later.

When I get home, I call Jamie to tell him everything. I cry, and I tell him that I’m scared. I tell him that I found out that they only hospitalize you if you’re suicidal. I tell him it’s supposed to be genetic.

Jamie tells me that he will always love me and take care of me, no matter what. He says it over and over and over and over again.

11

The field at the bottom of The Steps to Nowhere floods with the spring rain. The boys walk around this impermanent lake together, threatening to push each other in or pretending they are about to jump in to make us scream.

We hear that hardly anyone ever goes to the Spring Fling, so we decide that it must be cool and that we will go.

The girls all come over to my house to get ready. The dance is casual, and we're all wearing jeans. I'm going to wear the corset I bought with Sasha last fall.

Brooke wants to do everyone's makeup, so we take turns sitting for her while the other girls watch. I go last, and it's during my turn that she says it.

"Autumn," she says, "I'm not going to spend the night tonight."

"Why?" we all chorus. Everyone's overnight stuff, including Brooke's, is all clustered together by my bed. Brooke stops putting foundation on me and takes a deep breath.

"Because Noah's parents are out of town, and I'm going to his place," she says. There is a moment of silence.

"Are you..." Angie says, her voice trailing off. Brooke looks around at all of us, and nods. We scream and Brooke covers her face with her hands.

"Guys!" she says.

"Oh my God," Sasha says.

"Why?" I say, and then wonder if it was the wrong thing to say. Brooke uncovers her face and smiles.

"Because I love him," she says, "and it just feels right."

"Awww," Angie says.

“Wow,” Sasha says. “Now I’m going to be thinking about it all night.”
We laugh.

“We’re going to walk to his house after the dance. Tell your Mom I got sick and left early, okay?” Brooke says. I nod. “I’ll come get my stuff tomorrow.”

“You’re going to tell us everything, right?” Angie says.

“Well…” she says.

“You have to!” Sasha says. We all agree that she has to.

When the boys arrive, we all file downstairs together and my mom takes our picture before we all pile into the van to go to the school. Jamie looks hot, and I tell him in his ear on the way there. He smiles and doesn’t say anything, but when I squeeze his hand, he squeezes back.

Out of fifteen hundred students, about sixty show up for the Spring Fling. We have the floor to ourselves and we dance together in the middle and shout requests at the DJ, who actually complies. Because there are so few students, nobody stops us when we start to dance on the tables. It doesn’t matter how we dance because there is hardly anyone to see us, and our dance moves and requests become more and more ridiculous. We make a conga line. We do the Macarena when the Electric Slide is blasting out of the speakers. We exhaust ourselves dancing, drink some punch, and then go dance again. At the first slow song, Jamie asks our principal, Mrs. Black, to dance, and she does amid cheers from all across the room.

We congratulate ourselves and agree: the Spring Fling is cool because nobody goes.

It’s a long time before the DJ plays another slow song. By then my heart is pounding, and I’m so out of breath I practically collapse into Jamie. He looks so handsome that I get butterflies in my stomach looking at him. I wrap my arms around his neck and we sway to the music.

“I love you,” I say, and I’m not saying it to remind myself that I do; at this moment I can feel it.

“Love you too,” he says.

“Did you hear about Brooke and Noah?” I ask. Jamie rolls his eyes and sighs.

“Yeah, he was bragging about it all afternoon,” he says.

“Really?” I ask. “What did he say?” He shrugs.

“He just said that they were gonna do it.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What else did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything else. He just said they were gonna do it tonight.”

“Well, that’s not bragging”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why?”

“What are you talking about?” Jamie says. “I just told you that he was bragging about it all afternoon.”

“I just don’t understand how he was bragging all afternoon if all he said was that they were going to do it. That’s like, *one* sentence.”

“Never mind,” Jamie says. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t, okay?”

“But why—”

“Autumn, I don’t want to talk about them having sex, okay?”

“Fine,” I say. We finish the song in silence. Afterward, I ask Angie to go to the bathroom with me. We talk about our hair and how much fun we are having, and a little bit about Brooke of course.

“It’s kind of weird, isn’t it?” she says. “I mean that Brooke won’t be a virgin tomorrow. It doesn’t seem real.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say. We go back outside. I look at Jamie from a distance and try to bring back the good feeling I had before, but I can’t. I wonder if when Brooke kisses Noah, if she sometimes imagines that he’s someone else. I wonder if when she touches herself, he is the only one she ever thinks about.

I tell myself relationships are hard work. No one is perfect. There's no such thing as happily ever after.

On Monday, on *The Steps to Nowhere*, Brooke says that afterward you don't feel any different, except you love him so much more than before.

"But you're not like, 'Oh my God, I'm not a virgin anymore.'"

"Really?" I say. I think that that would be the only thought I could think afterward. I think that I would look at myself in the mirror and say it over and over again.

"Yeah," she says, "It's just like—" She doesn't finish her sentence; she just looks down at the boys standing by the water. They are seeing who can throw rocks the farthest. I watch Jamie win. I imagine it just feeling right with him.

"Did it hurt?" Angie says.

"Oh yeah," Brooke says.

12

“So what do you know about Sylvie?” my mother says. I take a large spoonful of ice cream into my mouth and regard her. We are sitting on the outside patio of The Train Stop Creamery, the town’s only ice cream parlor. It is the first hot day of May.

“Finny’s girlfriend?” I say. My mother nods. “I dunno,” I say. “Why?”

“No reason,” she says.

“You just started wondering about her all of a sudden?”

“Well,” she says.

“What?” I say.

“Angelina and I were just talking about her the other day, and I wondered what you thought.”

“She’s okay,” I say. “I don’t really know her.” We eat quietly for a while before I ask. “Does Aunt Angelina not like her?”

“Oh, she likes her, but I think she’s never gotten over the disappointment that you and Finny didn’t end up together.” She nudges me under the table with her foot.

“Mom!” I say. I glare at her. “I have a boyfriend.”

“I know, I know,” she says. “We just always thought that’s what was going to happen.”

“Well, it didn’t,” I say. “We don’t even hang out with the same people.”

“I know,” she says again. She sighs. I roll my eyes and eat my ice cream.

Whenever I wonder what it would be like if Finny and I were together, I never imagine that there is anyone else with us. I don’t like to think I would have had to become a cheerleader to be Finny’s friend again. In my

imagination, Finny isn't in my group, and I'm not in his; it's just the two of us, like it used to be. At school, we eat lunch together and he walks me to my classes. We do our homework together. He takes me to art films in the city. At night, we lie on our backs in the grass and talk. We burn CDs for each other. We pass notes. We hold hands at the bus stop. I imagine adoring him without question. I am certain that I would if I were in love with him.

"Is Aunt Angelina out somewhere with Finny, asking what he thinks of Jamie?" I ask. My mother smiles.

"Yes, sweetie. It's a conspiracy," she says.

"Well, if you two were talking about Sylvie, why not Jamie?"

"I like Jamie," she says. She spoons her last bit of ice cream out. "I can tell he's a good kid. His parents seem like good people."

"But you guys aren't sure if Sylvie is a good kid?" I say. I'm pleased with the direction the conversation is going, but I don't want to show it.

"Is she?" my mother says.

If the rumors are true, Sylvie is not a good kid. There is a story about her and Alexis making out in a Ferris wheel while all the guys watched, and the whole group supposedly gets drunk sometimes. They are good students though, so most adults don't suspect them of anything.

It's hard for me to imagine Finny drunk, or liking a girl who makes out with another girl for entertainment. I wonder if he's still shy when he is drinking, if he blushed when he watched Sylvie kissing Alexis.

I wonder what Aunt Angelina would do if she knew about Finny's friends.

"Oh," I say, "Sylvie is a cheerleader. She's on student council and the honor roll. She's too busy being perfect to be shooting up heroin on the side."

"All right, all right," my mother says. We stand and throw away our plastic bowls and spoons and walk out to the car.

I imagine Finny loving Sylvie, but sometimes wishing she were different, the way I sometimes wish Jamie were different. I imagine him being aroused as she made out with Alexis in front of everyone and

afterward asking her never to do it again. I imagine him feeling free and confident as he drinks with his friends, feeling included with them, a part of something.

In the car, I roll down the window and feel the warm night air blowing on my face. My mother is quiet next to me. I wonder where Aunt Angelina and Finny are tonight, what they are talking about.

I imagine Finny and I sneaking out of our houses to fool around down at the creek. I imagine leaving my blinds open for him when I change clothes. I imagine his hand moving up my thigh as we watch a movie with a blanket thrown over our laps.

I imagine that even though we were friends as children, we wouldn't have stayed children just because we were together.

13

The last day of school feels as if it is truly the last, as if I am being set free not for three months but thirty years. My scary finals are all over; all I have today are my English and health finals. I'm taking honors English in the fall, and the health final should be simple. Drugs and sex are bad; water-skiing is good.

There is hugging and squealing on The Steps to Nowhere. Sasha is the only one studying; the rest of us are more or less free. Jamie kisses me loudly and wraps his arm over my shoulders.

"Ugh, I cannot wait for today to be over," he says.

"Me neither," Noah says.

"You still haven't signed my yearbook yet, babe," I say. This is the third day I've asked him. He keeps saying he will do it later.

"I know, I know. Give it to me," he says. I hand it to him and he opens his book bag.

"Why don't you just sign it now?" I say.

"I don't feel like it right now. I'll give it to you at lunch," he says. He shoves my yearbook into his bag and zips it closed.

"Fine," I say. I've found it's just easier to let him have his way on all the little things that shouldn't matter.

"Hey, Mom says she can drive for our girls' day tomorrow," Angie says.

"Yay," Sasha says between flash cards.

"Yeah, well, you know that we're going to have a boys' day tomorrow too," Alex says.

"Okay," I say.

“And we’re going to do boy stuff that you aren’t invited to,” Jamie says.

“All right, whatever that means,” Brooke says. “But we’re just going to the mall.”

“Hey, guys, let’s go to the mall,” Noah says.

“No,” Sasha says, “you cannot go to the mall. We are.”

“We can get our nails done,” Alex says.

“And our hair. I need highlights,” Jamie says.

“Oh, shut up,” Brooke says. “You don’t even know what highlights are.”

“Why is it you guys get weird every time we do something alone?” Angie says.

“Yeah, do you think we’re plotting against you?” I ask.

“No,” Jamie says, but for once neither he nor any of the others have a comeback. The boys start talking about going to Noah’s tomorrow to play some video game.

I love you, Jamie’s note says. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. All I want from life is to marry you and have our family. Have a good summer. With me.

I close my yearbook and stuff it back in my book bag. Jamie didn’t give it to me at lunch; it’s now the end of the day. He asked me not to read it in front of the others, so I told everybody I had to go to the bathroom before we walked to Jamie’s house. I flush the toilet even though I didn’t use it, because Brooke came to the bathroom with me. When I come out of the stall, she is staring at herself in the mirror. I wash my hands and look over at her.

“Hey, are you okay?” I say. It takes her a moment to answer.

“Yeah,” she says, “Sorry, I just zoned out for a second there.”

“It’s cool,” I say. “I can’t believe that we’re not freshmen anymore. Can you?”

“No, not really,” she says.

At Jamie's pool, we play chicken-fight, climbing on the boys' shoulders and knocking each other down. Jamie and I win, and he parades around with me on his shoulders, then suddenly drops me to make me scream. I pout; he kisses me and then dunks me. A dunking war breaks out that the boys win even though there are more of us. They high five and we roll our eyes.

We lean up against the wall in the shallow end and the boys wrap their arms around our bare waists. The sun is warm on our heads and the water. It is summer and we are free.

The pizzas arrive and we lay about eating by the pool until we think we'll never have to eat again. We decide to ignore the one-hour rule and jump back in. The boys begin to wrestle and we stand to the side and watch them. After a while, I get bored, and I'm thinking I'll try to get Jamie alone in his room, when I realize that Brooke and Angie have been gone for a long time. I go inside and pad barefoot across the kitchen. The bathroom door is closed. I lean my head against it. I can hear them talking on the other side. I knock.

"Hey, what's going on?" I ask. There is a pause, and then I hear their voices again. Angie opens the door a crack.

"Are you alone?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. She opens the door enough for me to squeeze in.

Brooke is sitting on the bathtub. Her eyes are red and she is dressed in her shorts and shirt again.

"Oh my God, what's wrong?" I ask. Brooke looks down at our feet on the tile floor.

"I cheated on Noah," she says. Angie is leaning against the sink with her arms crossed. This is not new information for her. Brooke loses herself in her tears again. I sit down next to her.

"With who?" I ask. Brooke continues to cry.

“It was her lab partner, Aiden,” Angie says. “They’ve sort of been friends all semester.”

“Aiden Harris or Aiden Schumacker?”

“Aiden Harris,” Angie says.

“We just had fun together in class,” Brooke says. “I didn’t think it meant anything.”

“What happened?” I say.

“He invited me over to study for the final,” Brooke says. “He kissed me, and for a moment, I let him.”

“That’s all?”

“I stopped him and left and I wasn’t going to ever tell Noah,” Brooke says, “but I hate keeping secrets from him.” She begins to cry again. Someone knocks on the bathroom door.

“Hey, guys,” Sasha says. “What’s going on?”

We let her in and tell her the story.

“It was just one kiss?” Sasha asks. Brooke nods.

There is a knock on the door.

“Hey,” Jamie’s voice says. “What are you guys doing in there?”

“Are you plotting something?” Alex says.

Sasha opens the door and sticks her head out.

“Look, guys,” she says, “we have a really serious situation in here, so cut it out.”

“What do you mean?” Noah says. Next to me, Brooke’s cries turn into a wail. “Hey, what’s going on? Brooke?”

“Brooke, honey, do you want to talk to him?” I ask. Brooke wipes her nose and nods. Angie and I instantly stand at attention and crowd behind Sasha.

“She wants to talk to him,” I say. Sasha opens the door just enough so we can file out and Noah can slide in. We shut the door behind him and turn to face the boys.

“We should go outside,” Angie says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“What’s going on? Is Brooke okay?” Jamie asks.

“We can’t tell you,” I say. The back door closes behind us and we walk to the edge of the pool.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re guys,” Sasha says. She, Angie, and I sit down and dangle our legs in the pool.

“Noah’s in there,” he says.

“It involves Noah,” I say.

“How does it involve Noah?” Alex asks.

“We can’t tell you that,” Angie says. I nod.

“This is stupid. She’s my cousin,” Jamie says.

“I know,” I say. “But we can’t tell you.”

“It isn’t our place,” Sasha says. All three of us nod to that.

“Are they breaking up?” Alex asks.

“Maybe,” Sasha says.

“Oh my God, I hope not,” I say.

“They won’t,” Angie says.

“Okay, this really is stupid,” Jamie says. He and Alex go and sit on the patio chairs. The girls and I begin to whisper. After a while, Noah comes out and asks for Angie. She comes out alone a few minutes later.

“Is she okay?” I ask. Angie nods.

“Yeah,” she says. “She told Noah. They’re gonna walk home and talk about it.”

We swing our legs in the water and make waves, but nobody really talks. We’ve said everything we have to say to each other, and we still won’t tell the boys. Finally, after half an hour, we gather our stuff to walk home. Alex stays behind with Jamie.

When I kiss Jamie good-bye, he does not hug me back, and he looks away afterward.

“Bye,” he says.

“Bye, love you,” I say. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

That night we fight on the phone. Even though I cry, he still does not forgive me until I tell him Brooke's secret. He is instantly sweet again, and we don't talk about the fight.

At the mall the next day, Brooke tells us about her conversation with Noah while we eat in the food court. She says that Noah has forgiven her, and that Noah said he knew she was sorry and that he hated seeing her cry.

"I can't believe how much he loves me," she says. She looks down at her plate of French fries and smiles.

I start to wonder what Jamie would have said if it had been us, and I push the thought away. Nothing like that would ever happen to us.

14

We spend the Fourth of July at the fair in the park. Angie's Hazelwood boyfriend is with us and we are pleased to be a complete set of four couples. We wander around the scant stalls and booths and listen to the music. Every time we see someone from school we stop so that Angie can introduce Mike. Finny and Sylvie are at the fair too, but we do not stop for them. The fair is small so we pass by them frequently. I knew they would be there, but every time I see them, the image jumps out at me like pictures in a pop-up book. We eat a meal of hot dogs and funnel cakes, and the girls decide we want to go to the petting zoo.

I fall in love with a brown baby goat, and it falls in love with me; when I picked it up, it nuzzled me and laid its head on my chest. I ask Jamie if I can have a baby goat when we get married. He says no, and then says maybe, if it means he doesn't have to mow the lawn.

I sit on a bale of hay with Augusta, my goat, cradled in my lap like a human baby. She gazes up at me, and either she is mesmerized by the glitter of my tiara, or she thinks I'm her mother. I am singing Augusta a lullaby I have made up for her when I look up and see Finny smiling crookedly at me; Sylvie is crouched next to him looking at the pen of piglets. I stop singing and glare at him. His shoulders shake with silent laughter.

"Oh, Finn, look, it likes me," Sylvie says. Finny turns away from me and kneels down with her. I've matured enough in the past few months to remind myself that I don't really know her; maybe she's very nice.

Jamie and the others come to stand around me. They have gotten as much enjoyment as they can out of the fair for now, and they want to go

back to Sasha's.

"But I don't want to leave Augusta," I say.

"You *named* it?" Jamie says. I nod.

"Okay, put down the goat and walk away slowly," Alex says, both hands held out in front of him.

"That joke doesn't make any sense," I say. Jamie tugs on my arm.

"Come on, I'm hot," he says. I sigh and kiss Augusta on the top of her head and put her down. When I leave, she runs to the end of her tether and bleats.

"Oh," I say. Jamie takes my hand and keeps walking, pulling me along. I look back once over my shoulder. Finny is bending over and scratching the top of Augusta's head.

We wait through the heat of the day at Sasha's, then walk back to the park just before sunset. This is where I will have to leave them. My father said he would leave The Office in time to watch the fireworks with us, so Mother wants us to do it as a family. Family, of course, means Aunt Angelina and Finny too.

"Do you have to go?" Jamie says. I nod and peck his lips.

"I'll miss you," I say. He looks so handsome that even waiting to see him until tomorrow kills me.

"Call me when you get home," he says and kisses me again, for longer. I flush with pride and smile. Before I go, I wave to the others; they wave back and watch me turn away. When I glance back at them, they are all walking away together.

My mother, father, and Aunt Angelina are sitting by the lake where we always watch the fireworks.

"Hi, sweetie," my mom says. She is smiling and holding hands with my father. He stands up and hugs me.

“Had a good day, Autumn?” he asks. I nod. He steps back and looks at me quizzically. “Your hair?” he says.

“I dyed it brown again,” I say. “Yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. We smile at each other. We are both pleased that he noticed the subtle difference so quickly.

“Finny told me you made friends with a goat,” Aunt Angelina says.

“Yeah. I want a goat, Mom,” I say, then I look at Aunt Angelina. “Finny was talking about me?” I say.

“He gave a detailed description of you rocking and crooning to a little goat,” she says. Her eyes focus over my shoulder “There he is,” she says. I turn around.

Finny is walking toward us, holding hands with Sylvie.

“Hey, everybody,” he says. Sylvie grins and waves with her fingers. My father stands up.

“And who is this?” he says.

“Uncle Tom, this is Sylvie,” Finny says. “Sylvie, Uncle Tom.”

“Hi,” she says and grins again.

“Nice to meet you,” Dad says. “Here,” he adds, stepping to the side, “I’ll move so you girls can sit together.”

It seems my father cannot tell the not-so-subtle difference between Sylvie and me.

I am now sitting between my father and Sylvie. Finny is on the other side of her, and The Mothers are talking together on the other side of Dad.

I stare straight ahead at the patch of sky where the fireworks will be. Finny and Sylvie are holding hands next to me. I have a choice. I can either continue to sit with them in silence, or I can try to be friendly and have one of the shallow conversations Finny and I sometimes have when we are together.

“How much longer do you think it will be?” she asks. Finny looks at his watch.

“Ten minutes,” he says. She sighs.

“Have you ever noticed that time goes slower while you’re waiting for fireworks?” she says.

“Well, time always goes slower whenever you’re waiting for something,” he says.

“I think it’s even slower when you’re waiting for fireworks,” she says. Finny opens his mouth.

“I agree,” I say. Sylvie looks at me in surprise. “I think it’s because when we’re not looking at our watches, we’re looking at the light fading in the sky. The anticipation never escapes our perception.”

“Huh,” Finny says.

“I guess so,” Sylvie says. She looks like she thinks that there will be a catch to agreeing with me. We’ve never spoken before outside of necessary pleasantries at school or the bus stop: *Excuse me. Thank you. Hey, you dropped this.*

“So, by your logic, if we look at the lake instead of the sky, time will go faster,” Finny says.

“Well, only as fast as when we’re waiting for something else,” I say.

“Okay, well, let’s look at the lake,” he says. I look at the lake. Once, in that time I call Before, my father decided to take Finny and I fishing. I was bored and climbed a tree overhanging the water. Finny thought that it was thrilling and sat all afternoon, telling me not to shake the branches of the tree because it was scaring the fish. I tried to be still for him. He caught one small fish. Aunt Angelina had no idea how to clean it, so she put it in the freezer where, after she had forgotten it, it froze completely solid. Sometimes Finny and I would take it out and examine it. We ran our fingers over the stiff scales and poked its frozen bubble eye, and talked about what it must be like to die. Months later, when his mother finally remembered to throw it out, we were sad for the loss.

“I went fishing in this lake once,” Finny says to Sylvie.

“Really?” she says.

“I was just thinking about that,” I say and laugh.

“Our frozen fish?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I don’t think time is going any faster,” Sylvie says, but just then the fireworks begin.

I’m quiet for the next hour, and let them whisper to each other. Sylvie leans her head on his shoulder. I think about Jamie somewhere in the park watching these fireworks without me. I imagine leaning against him, feeling him breathe next to me, and I ache as if I had not seen him for weeks.

The fireworks leave smoky patches in the sky, and the smell of sulfur drifts down on us. Next to me, Sylvie giggles. I am wishing she were not here. It is not fair; it was supposed to be just us, family.

I want to either be alone with Jamie or be alone with Finny.

The thought startles me, and I glance over at Finny’s handsome face, momentarily lit up by the lights in the sky. I never let myself think about what it is that makes me imagine us together sometimes or if it means anything. I love Jamie.

I look back at the sky.

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