

SMALL  
TOWN  
HEARTS

*lillie vale*

*Swoon* READS  
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK  
An imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 978-1-250-19235-6 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-19236-3 (ebook)

BOOK DESIGN BY KATIE KLIMOWICZ

First edition, 2019  
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2  
[swoonreads.com](http://swoonreads.com)

*To everyone who ever needed a second chance*

# one

An hour before closing time, a stranger walked into the Busy Bean.

Next to me, Lucy dumped coffee grounds in the compost bin. She bent over, flicking wet grounds off her fingers. “Hey, Babe, can you—”

“I’ve got it,” I said, grabbing my notepad from the counter, already on my way. The guy was cute. If our new seasonal waitress had been out here, she would have tried to get to him first.

The boy hovered awkwardly near one of the corner tables. He was tall and lithe, with mussed brown hair that was on the side of gold, and a blue polo that brought out his eyes.

“Is anywhere fine?”

“Yeah,” I said, gesturing to the available seating. “I can take your order here if you’re ready or you can just come up later, if you need a few minutes.”

Mystery Boy chose a table that came from a home and garden center, chipped stones in the mosaic face of a woman on the circular surface. The chair he sat on was wrought-iron and from a different patio set, the green seat plump and gleaming with the sheen of new leather.

He glanced at the chalk menu on the wall behind the counter. A smile bloomed over his face. “Nice art.”

I followed his gaze. Lucy alternated between neat capitals and

loopy lettering to advertise the regular items and the day's specials. Her daisy-chain border was in neon yellow, and some of the flowers had faces.

"Yeah, my friend's a regular Matisse," I joked.

The boy laughed, a rich, velvety sound, like the decadent filling inside a chocolate truffle.

I sensed eyes on the back of my neck, and I reached to rub the tingling patch of skin. I could practically *feel* Lucy's interest.

I pulled a blunt-tipped pencil and notepad from my apron pocket. "What can I get for you?"

Lucy's voice in my head went through a litany of the things I could give him. I squashed that voice. None of that was on our menu.

Since Elodie and I had broken up last year—since she'd broken my heart—I had gone on a handful of dates that never led anywhere beyond awkward "See ya arounds" and fended-off kisses at the end of the night. Most of them had been nice, cute, and witty. Local boys who were salt of the earth, sunny girls who collected kisses like seashells. The first few dates, the butterflies had been flapping in full force, producing gale-force winds. I'd convinced myself I was crushing. I didn't want to *always* be Penny and Chad's third wheel. But when my dates' faces swooped close, eyes closing in anticipation . . . I couldn't go through with it.

It wasn't the act or intimacy of the kiss itself. I just had no interest in them. The other dates were middling at best, butterflies keeping quiet and still. Just nervousness, I'd figured. And then, one day, those butterflies were gone, too. It was just me left.

One corner of Mystery Boy's mouth crooked upward. I realized too late that he was looking at me with expectation. Jerked out of my

reverie, I stared at him. “Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” I said, shooting him a sheepish smile.

“One of those days, huh?” he asked understandingly. After repeating his coffee order, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the glass-enclosed cake stand on the counter next to the register. “What kind of cake is that?”

“German chocolate. There’s some delicious coconut-caramel frosting on it.” Unable to resist, I added, “I made it myself.”

He looked tempted for a second. “Just the coffee.” His palm stretched across the large sketch pad he’d brought with him, the cover smudged with charcoal pencil.

I gave it a curious look, then smiled an easy grin. “Sure. You got it.”

“Thanks,” he said while opening the sketchbook. He poised his pencil over the blank page, already looking down.

At this angle, I could see half-moon smudges under each eye, like he hadn’t been sleeping well. I didn’t realize that my feet weren’t moving until he glanced up, his golden eyebrows scrunched in surprise. Feeling heat creep into my cheeks, I turned and fled, retreating to the safety of the counter before I could do anything else to embarrass myself.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you lingering over there with the *summer boy*, Babe Vogel,” Lucy said. Her voice was low, but her smirk was at full volume.

“That? That was just good customer service.” Cheeks still hot, I moved to the stainless-steel carafe, and in wordless unison, Lucy slid a white ceramic mug across the counter for me to fill.

“Uh-huh,” she teased, fluttering her eyelashes at me. “Better

get this over there. Along with some of that exemplary customer service.”

I huffed, resisting the impulse to roll my eyes. “You know I’ve never gotten involved with a summer boy,” I said, shimmying out of the way of the grimy dishcloth she swatted at me.

Despite what Lucy thought, I wasn’t crushing on tall, blond, and gorgeous sitting in the corner table. Sure, he was aesthetic. And mysterious. And new to Oar’s Rest, the sleepy little Maine seaside village that spilled over with tourists during the summer and turned into a ghost town the rest of the year.

Nestled on the coast, Oar’s Rest attracted all kinds of people, but mostly the artistic kind. The kind of girls who tucked flowers into their hair and rode shiny new bicycles. The kind of boys who had paint and cigarette stains on their fingertips, battling for flesh. Writers who secreted themselves away from the real world and then slipped away from their rented houses and emerged in the fall with a bestseller.

Mystery Boy thanked me when I delivered his coffee, returning his attention to the sketchbook.

Lucy was waiting for me when I returned to the counter.

“Don’t even say it,” I warned.

“I wasn’t going to say anything!” She threw up her hands. She let a beat pass. “Did you *see* his face? Go say something!”

I pursed my lips, eyeing him from across the room. “What? That’s so weird. I’m not going to do that. He could have a girlfriend. And anyway, I hate when guys walk in and start to creep on me. It goes both ways. I’m not going to hit on him out of the blue.”

“It’s not that weird. Someone has to make the first move.”

“Lucy,” I said, lifting an eyebrow, “the cardinal rule of every beach town is that locals do not get involved with tourists. They always leave.”

“I can’t even remember the last time you went on a date,” said Lucy. “And those girls and guys were *cute*.”

I picked up a mug that didn’t even need cleaning and began to rewash it just to have something to do. When I was nervous, I had the telltale habit of wringing the bottom of my shirt, and the last thing I wanted was for Lucy to know she’d hit a nerve.

She was right. I hadn’t been serious about anyone in a few years because I’d been dating Elodie Hawkins on the sly. El had graduated a year ahead of me and gone off to art school in California. Going out of state wasn’t enough—she seemed to want to get as far from Maine as she could without crossing an ocean.

A memory blurred into my mind’s autofocus, sharpening until I could count the freckles spattered across El’s nose and cheeks, her hair thrashing in the wind, the wisps of the cotton candy body spray she loved. If I closed my eyes, I could almost smell it. I could almost see the gray of the sky, the birds circling overhead. The sorrow in her eyes as she said she wasn’t ready to tell people about us—about her.

“Excuse me.”

I turned, facing Mystery Boy. “Hey, what else can I get for you?” I flicked my eyes toward the German chocolate cake.

His eyes followed mine and his grin widened. “Just wanted to settle my bill.” He flopped down a five-dollar bill on the counter.

Counting out his change, I placed it into his open palm, intensely aware of my fingertips grazing his warm hand.

“Thanks.” He turned to leave, then paused, seeming to wrestle



with a decision. “I’ll take you up on that cake some other time.” With a final nod to me and Lucy, he headed for the door.

When he left, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “Did that sound like he was planning on coming back, or like that’s the last time we’ll ever see him?” I wondered aloud. Though I’d been working at the Busy Bean for almost three years, this was the first time I’d hoped a tourist would be a repeat customer.

My curiosity wasn’t lost on Lucy. “So you *are* interested in a summer boy.” Lucy’s voice held a grin. “And he’s cute. Hint, hint.”

“Maybe he’s here for classes at the art center.” I stared through the window at his retreating back, wondering where he was heading. “He had a sketchbook with him.”

She shrugged. “Wouldn’t surprise me. I think they’re starting their summer program this week.” She paused. “I heard Elodie Hawkins is coming back to be a mentor. Weren’t you two friends?”

*What?* The wind was taken right out of my sails. El was coming back? She hadn’t said anything. She could have texted, she could have emailed . . .

Elodie had left town, left me. I shouldn’t care if she was coming back. I’d gotten over her. But there were some things I couldn’t tuck away as easily. She was like a second beating heart inside me—tingling, magnifying, terrifying. This heart was carnivorous. It hoped and hurt at the same time. Hearing her name again filled me with a savage rush of life, something I couldn’t hold back any more than I could keep the memory of *us* at bay.

Being the one left behind never got easier. After Mom, maybe I should have wised up. Nothing stayed the same forever, but when I remembered the soft, dazed look El wore right after I kissed her, I

had thought that *this* could. *We* could. In possibly the biggest plot twist of my life, though, I'd discovered we couldn't. And just like that, everything I'd cherished for so long became a bitter enemy. Elodie left town, but the ghost of her was still here, haunting.

As I opened my mouth to ask Lucy where she'd heard about Elodie's return, I was interrupted by the storeroom door creaking open. Ariel, our new waitress, had volunteered to unpack some of our new inventory at the start of her shift, but instead of the sounds of moving coffee cans and creaking aluminum shelves, there had been silence all afternoon. I'd forgotten she was even there. It hadn't taken Lucy and me long to figure out that *organizing the inventory* was code for texting her friends in the privacy of the storeroom.

Ariel breezed out, already pulling her apron off her head. Her brown hair lifted with static. "So I've just about wrapped up in there—"

I blinked at the pile of boxes behind her before the door swung shut. "Really? It doesn't look like you've made any headway."

"—so I think I'm going to take off." She reached for the tip jar with an apologetic smile. "Mind if I bum a few bucks?"

Lucy made a strangled noise.

"No way," I said. "We divide the tips up at the *end* of the week. And there's still twenty minutes before we close."

Ariel's face turned red. "Right. Sorry." She withdrew her hand, cradling it against her chest. Her expression turned wounded. "It's just . . . something came up and I'd really appreciate it if—"

I wasn't in the mood to listen to one of her half-baked excuses. "Yeah, whatever." I frowned. "Go."

As she left, Lucy and I exchanged matching looks. Lucy sighed noisily. “How has she not been fired yet? She’s the *worst*.”

I took a peek into the storeroom. Nothing had been done, except some creative shuffling that might have fooled a manager who didn’t know Ariel and her distinct lack of work ethic. With a sigh, I let the storeroom door close. “I’ll talk to Tom when he comes in tomorrow.”

“Good,” Lucy said with vehemence. “I don’t care if I have to work overtime. I’d rather make the extra cash than pull her weight for free.”

She was absolutely right. I nodded in agreement.

We worked in silence to clear everything away before closing up. “See you tomorrow,” I said as I locked Busy’s door.

“See ya!” Lucy called over her shoulder as she jogged toward her boyfriend, waiting on the beach for her with his dogs. He took off his cap and waved it at me.

As the warm sunlight outside enveloped me, I almost—*almost*—forgot the cold dread that had gone through me when I heard of Elodie’s return. My eyes sought out my lighthouse, small and distant above me. The place where we’d met most often, the one place in town no one would see us. And so, of course, it was the place where El felt the most comfortable. It was the only place she could be herself. The only place we could be a *we*.

What would I say to her if she really was coming back? Would she even want to see me? Did I even want to see her?

A boat coming back to shore blew its horn, a sharp, trumpeting sound that rattled me out of my thoughts. I felt like a girl overboard.

But it turned out there was no mayday call for returning ex-girlfriends.



It was at the most beautiful moment of firefly twilight, when the sun had dipped just beyond the water, that I reached my best friend Penny Wang's houseboat. It was far enough from the beach that we were away from everyone's prying eyes, so Penny probably didn't think twice before waving me onto the deck with a bottle of beer in one hand and her phone in the other.

"Hey," I said, flip-flops thwacking against the pier.

"You took your sweet time getting here," she said in response, tipping the bottle to her lips. She sat cross-legged on the deck, phone balanced on one thigh. "I was just about to text you."

I joined her, sinking down and letting my back rest against the wall. "Everyone we know is out on the beach. Hard not to stop when everyone wanted to talk. Isn't it weird how all the people we didn't talk to in high school are suddenly acting like they're going to miss us?"

Penny snorted. "Graduation messed with their brains." She twirled her finger in circles next to her ear. "They're living in some parallel universe where we give a shit."

"Maybe in some universe we do," I said, laughing.

She typed something furiously on her phone before turning it facedown on her thigh. "All the me's in all the universes hate them unequivocally."

I didn't even have to think about it. "Then all the me's do, too."

"That's why you're my best friend," she said, bumping her arm against mine.

We stared out across the water, letting the silence last. I hoped she felt just as warm and squishy inside as I did. "So you won't believe this," I said.

“Hmm?”

“Elodie’s coming back home.” I let the bombshell drop, satisfied to see the surprise on Penny’s face.

She leaned closer toward me, clutching the neck of the bottle tight. “Really? She told you that?”

“Hell no. You know she didn’t want to keep in touch.” She’d snipped me out of her life so easily. Even a year later, the bitterness and hurt rankled.

Penny’s lips twisted into a scowl. “Ugh. Are you going to try talking with her again?”

I shook my head. “That ship has sailed.”

“Good,” she said. “I’d have kicked your ass if you got back with her after what she put you through.”

“That’s why you’re my best friend.”

“I mean, it was fine if she just wanted to break up,” said Penny. “But she didn’t have to be such a bitch about it. Cutting you out of her life like that was super shitty. She didn’t have the balls to date you while she was here, but she managed to break your heart with no problem.” She made an aggravated sound of disgust.

“I’m over it,” I said. “But thanks for the ex bashing.”

Penny smirked. “Any time.” She held the beer out with her right hand. “To summer. And graduation. And to never talking to any of those fuckwads again.”

I grinned and took a sip before handing it back to her. “And lying out on the beach and eating tacos and ice cream every day.”

This was what I loved about summer, the free pass to be totally lazy and do things only if we wanted to do them. And nobody could

say boo about it. It was like the rest of the year was an impostor somehow, and summer was the only time that everything moved back into place.

“God, yes. The tacos. Now I’m craving some bulgogi,” said Penny. “I want pickled cucumbers so bad. And sriracha mayo.”

The Korean steak tacos were her favorite, while I preferred the fish. Jeju BBQ was the only place in town that served street-style Asian tacos, and everything on their menu was pure rapture.

“Let’s go get some.” I bumped her shoulder. “Tacos are always a good idea.”

“I wish. We have something to do first, though.”

“If it’s more important than tacos, it must be serious.”

“Not kidding, B.” She paused. “Hey, so this is kind of awkward, but I was wondering if you could you do me a favor?”

I scrunched my forehead. Penny didn’t often ask for favors, at least not so obviously. So whatever this was, it had to be A Big Deal. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Would you go talk to Chad for me and, um, tell him I don’t want to see him?”

“What? Why?”

She didn’t meet my eyes. “Because I broke up with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, sure,” I said, swiping the bottle of beer out of her hands. Penny’s houseboat swayed beneath us, gently bobbing with the tide. “Ha ha.”

“I’m not kidding. I told Chad we were through yesterday, but I didn’t really handle it that great. He wants to come over, and I just know that if I see him so soon, I’m going to feel crappy and then—”

Penny let her hair spill out of its bun and wound the elastic around her wrist. She waited for me to take a swallow before snagging the bottle back. “Please, Babe?”

Our shoulders brushed as I turned to look at her in disbelief. “What? You dumped him yesterday?”

She pursed her lips.

“You . . . you didn’t tell me.” I was in the deep end. I was always the first one she went to when it came to Chad, when it came to anyone. Loss took hold in my stomach, filling my limbs with cold. “Why—why did you break up?”

“I didn’t know that I was going to,” said Penny. “It kind of happened out of nowhere. I wasn’t planning it.”

“So you broke up with him . . . just because?” They had been together for years. Since we were fourteen. Was this a joke? Was there something I wasn’t getting? A minute ago, everything had been okay.

She looked back at me, stare for stare. There wasn’t a hint of a joke in her eyes. I’d always thought her brown was much more beautiful than my blue—warm and friendly and all-encompassing. She didn’t look that way now. Still, I waited for her face to break into a smile, for her to cry *Gotcha!* and tease me about how I’d fallen for it.

I felt sick, my stomach thrashing. Queasy, I looked away. I had this writhing *thing* inside me, something terrified and angry and wholly new. Something that Penny had birthed. Something that, worst of all, wanted to go along with what she wanted just so I could stop feeling this way. This sick, petrified way that told me that everything had just changed.

I wanted to heave. I wanted to scream. This was our summer—

Chad's and Penny's and mine. The very last summer we'd have before college.

From where we sat, cross-legged on her deck, I could see the wooden slats of the pier where we'd used chalk to draw a yin-yang sun and moon. The fiery sunburst orange and the calm blue melded together to form one shape that represented wholeness and harmony.

That was us, Penny and me.

"It just all feels so same-y," said Penny. Her voice sounded like it was coming from very far away. "Like we've been the same people our entire lives and nothing's changed. College is my chance—his chance, too—to start again."

I didn't like the way she said that. Like she'd been paused for the last few years. It hadn't been that way for me. These were the best years of our lives. How could she not see that?

She stretched her legs out and let her head loll back. Her voice softened. "Babe, I just . . . I think this is what's best for me."

I wouldn't argue with her. And anyway, it was done. It was already over. My opinion seemed unnecessary now.

"Could you just run some interference and make sure he doesn't drop by?" asked Penny. The edge of desperation in her voice didn't sound right, not on her.

I startled out of my fog. It was one thing to accept her decision; it was another to actually involve myself in the fallout. "How do you expect me to do that?"

"He texted me. Said he's going to come over." She dropped her eyes to her lap. "I didn't really give him a reason yesterday. Could you . . . could you do, like, a Breakup 2.0?"



This was too much, even for her. I gaped. “No way. He’s your boyfriend. I’m not going to just—it’s not my place, Penny. Oh my God. It needs to come from you. Properly, this time.”

Her lips scrunched. “Just tell him I haven’t changed my mind.”

Crazy to think that if I hadn’t started school a year late, we wouldn’t have ended up in the same grade. The three of us had been friends since elementary school. Didn’t she care that he was my friend, too? I wanted to scrunch in on myself, ball myself up like a wad of paper. I didn’t have a lot of constants in my life, but Chad and Penny? I thought I could count on them always being there, all of us always being together. The three of us were a team. Without our friendship, I would have fallen apart the past year. Between my ex-girlfriend leaving for college and my mom spending less and less time at home, I’d clung to my friends like the lifelines they were.

She must have read the conflict on my face, because she sighed and handed back the bottle. “I don’t think I can face him, B. It’s just . . . it’s Chad. It’s not easy.”

I laughed. “And it is for me?”

“We’re starting college in September. People are supposed to break up before they go to college.”

My arms flushed hot. *We* weren’t starting college—they were. Penny had the habit of saying it like I’d be right there on their first day, but I wouldn’t be.

“That’s because most people go to different colleges,” I said. “You two are staying right here in Oar’s Rest. You don’t *need* to break up.”

“What if I just want to?” asked Penny. “What if I want to start fresh with someone new? What if *I* want to be different? Don’t I have that right?”

The cold hand of dread felt its way down my spine as Penny's words echoed over and over in my head. With a little *snip snip*, could I be cut out of her life just as easily? When she talked about starting over, it was hard not to feel like she was shedding our friendship like a snake that had outgrown its skin.

Penny put the bottle to her mouth and took a deep swallow, buying me the time to collect my racing thoughts. Her silence made me feel paper-thin. It was just summer, but she was already thinking about fall. About being someone else in fall, someone who wasn't recognizable as my best friend or Chad's girlfriend. In that moment, she reminded me so much of one of the paper dolls we'd played with as children. Her mom had bought a book of them for us, sweet-faced dolls punched out of pages, who could be altered with just a change of outfit into someone new.

In the distance I heard the dull thuds of stroller wheels bumping over the pier. A seagull's caw as it swooped over the water and landed with nimble grace on a support beam. The sound of water cresting at the bow of a boat slicing through the stillness.

Penny touched the cold bottle to my knee. "So? Will you? Please?"

I couldn't say yes to her. There was no way. I ignored the *thing* in my stomach. Chad was our friend. Having this incredibly awkward discussion with him on her behalf would feel too much like us versus him. It was fine if Penny wanted to start college single, but I didn't want to choose sides.

It wasn't like when we were kids. It had been easy to be the mediator then, to fix whatever had cracked before it actually broke. When you had two best friends, it was just something you had to do if you

didn't want to be torn between them. I didn't want to feel the pressure of having to choose. We'd never really had this conversation, but I couldn't help but feel a little betrayed anyway. I had never wanted to pick one of my best friends over the other. And yet here I was.

"Chicks over dicks," said Penny.

In this situation, it wasn't him who was the dick.

I rubbed the side of my nose, resenting her easy assumption that I was on her side. It wasn't that I wasn't, exactly, but I wasn't her henchwoman, either. It felt dirty and grubby to do her work for her. Not looking at her, I mumbled, "Right. Yeah. I know." I felt like it was expected of me.

A memory floated from the deepest recesses of my mind, softly blurred at the edges. When we were little kids, Chad had been chubby. He wasn't one of the boys who had made fun of Penny's lunches, but he'd joined in the laughter. So when he'd started hanging around us more often, making it clear he wanted to be our friend, Penny made him do all kinds of stupid things to earn our forgiveness.

It was her favorite game to make him ring someone's doorbell and run away as fast as he could, only we were always faster, so we were already giggling behind a hedge while he was huffing and puffing his way down the driveway. He was the one who got in trouble, not us. A decade later and it still made my mouth taste sour.

But she was my first real friend. The first friend who had chosen me back, not someone who was forced to play with me because our moms set up a playdate. The way we'd treated Chad was mean, and even back then, I'd known it was wrong, but Penny had the kind of charisma that made us want to pass her test of friendship.

Penny was like that. If someone said something to her, it wasn't

just hers to deal with. It was mine and Chad's, too. And Penny was always willing to show up for a fight and have our backs. It made me proud that she unfailingly thought of us as a team, but for the first time, I didn't want it to be us against the world. Not if the world was Chad.

"Babe," snapped Penny, impatient now. She frowned at me.

She wanted me to tell her I'd do it. She was waiting for me to do what she wanted. The hard edge in her voice couldn't be softened even by the glow of alcohol.

Would I be the next to go if I failed her now? My vision swam. All I wanted was for things to go on like they always had. There was safety in things staying the same. A year from now, five years from now, all I wanted was for us to be the same, doing things together, being the people we'd always been. I didn't want to be the kind of friends who drifted apart after high school, the kind who could live in the same town and still be strangers. I didn't want to think about fall and college and uncertainties. I wanted what *was* certain. I wanted what was right now. Was that so wrong? Was it so unreasonable?

"Babe," said Penny. "I really need you. Please, will you talk to him for me?" She reached out to twine her fingers between mine. She squeezed. I understood. She needed me to be her strength.

The *thing* in my stomach was roaring at me. I squeezed my eyes shut. My friends were my everything. They meant more to me than any of my exes ever had. The only way this summer would be saved was if I saved it. I knew my role well. I could be the captain and get us through these rough waves.

"All right," I said. My shoulders hunched, defeated. "If you really want me to."

The tension lifted with her smile. “Oh my God, thank you, thank you, thank you! I just know if I do it, it’ll turn into this whole big thing. Chad and I need a better reason to stay together than habit.” She rolled her eyes. “We’re not Rory and Logan.”

She loved *Gilmore Girls*. I wasn’t such a fan, but I watched it for her. “If you *were* Rory, though, then I’m Jess,” I said. “Because I’m always there for you.” It was hard not to say it with a little resentment, but she didn’t appear to notice.

“You are,” said Penny, pale skin shimmering in the hazy glow of twilight. Her smile was luminous as she leaned forward to lay her head on my shoulder. “You’re the best, B.”

The guilt that churned in an angry whorl dissipated when she pressed her cool lips to my curve of my shoulder. We stayed like that for a minute, or maybe it was more than that. The beer lay between us, forgotten, and the outside waves and chatter dulled to nothing.

The stillness was broken only when Penny’s phone beeped. She tore herself away to look at the screen. “It’s Chad,” she said, holding the phone up as proof. “He just left his house.” She typed something back, face inscrutable. “Feels too weird to have him back in my house after yesterday. I told him to wait on the beach. You can meet him there.”

“The beach?” Guilt stabbed at me again. “Penny, I don’t know—”

“It’s not a big deal.” She placed her phone on the deck and leaned against the wall. She cast a sidelong glance at me, lips pursed. “You said you’d do it.”

It needed that she felt she had to give me a reminder. I’d played the go-between to smooth over one of their little tiffs, but this was a

big deal. It wasn't like when they argued about how to spend Friday night or when Chad caught Penny returning someone's flirtations at her parties. Those times had been different. "But—"

"Go!" she said, her voice sharp with urgency. "He's going to just come over if you take too long to show."

"But I don't know what to say to—"

Penny shoved at my shoulder. "You promised."

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Babe, I just don't want to see him right now. I don't want to feel bad about doing what I need to do. If I don't do this now, then . . . everything will always be the same. We'll always be the same. I can see it all stretching in front of me. College, engagement, marriage, children, just . . . all of it! I can't deal with love like this. Not right now. We just graduated. I want to be *free*. I want to feel like I'm growing up, like I'm doing real things. I don't feel like that when I'm with—" She paused. "With him."

But I'd heard that little crack in her voice. She hadn't been about to say *with him*. She'd meant to say *with you two*. Both me and Chad. Tingles shot up my spine. If this was my test, I would make sure to pass. I would do what she wanted.

The *thing* in my stomach calmed. I was doing what it wanted, too.

I stood up. "Okay, okay!" I flashed my palms at her. "I'm going."

As I scrambled onto the pier, I almost lost my balance. Dotting the boards in front of her boat like a welcome mat were her yacht and sailboat doodles. Chad always encouraged her to pursue art—even when we were little kids, he'd been the first to buy her arts and crafts.

My breath caught as I looked down. Something uncomfortable stole across my heart. My foot had severed the yin-yang chalk drawing.

## two

I intercepted Chad at the other end of the pier. He looked up from his phone, vague surprise crossing his face. “Where’s Penny?” His blue eyes darted over my shoulder like he expected her to materialize out of thin air.

“Can we—” I looked around, faltering. There was nowhere for us to go that would be private. Even if Penny didn’t care, and I was sure that deep down she did, I wouldn’t break the news to him in front of other people. Especially since some of our high school dude bros were lounging nearby.

I found an abandoned stretch of sand that was more pebble than beach and pointed to it. Chad slowed his loping strides until we were side by side. From the frequent sidelong glances he threw me, I could tell he was itching to ask what all the secrecy was about.

Chad shuffled his feet in the sand. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t just want to talk to my best friend?” Part of me thought that if I delayed the conversation, it would be easier.

He snorted. “Come on. When’s the last time you and I”—he gestured between us—“actually talked?”

As I opened my mouth to respond, he beat me to it.

“And I mean just us. Me and you. About real stuff, things that matter.” He fixed me with a pointed stare.

He had me there. Conflicting emotions built up inside me until

my chest felt tight and stretched. Penny knew that this was a big ask. But she'd asked it anyway. That was Penny all over, but this wasn't me. I wasn't okay with this. I wished to God I hadn't agreed, but now I was here and Chad was here, and there was no escape route. Penny was probably on her second beer by now, waiting for my text to tell her I had it all handled. Before, her faith in me would have been a comfort. Now it was a noose.

"Kinda worrying me here, Babe," said Chad. He kicked at the sand, and when I still couldn't unstick my mouth, he kicked some right onto the tops of my feet.

I shook the sand out of my flip-flops. "I heard about what happened yesterday."

His mouth opened and closed. He took a step closer, lowering his voice. "She told you?"

Now it was my turn to fidget. I slipped my foot from my flip-flop and dragged my big toe through the sand, creating a line between us.

"Damn," said Chad. "It feels weirdly more real if she's actually telling people."

I bristled. I wasn't *people*. Immediately, my irritation rerouted. It wasn't him I was upset with. What was I doing here? This wasn't my place. I had no right to break his heart, and now that I thought about it, really thought about it . . . Penny didn't, either.

What was her excuse? She wanted to be single? She didn't want to be one of those girls who went to college with a boyfriend and had to miss out on meeting new people?

None of that was a good enough reason to dump someone who loved you.



“Babe, seriously. What’s up?” Chad took a step closer and settled his hands on my upper arms, as if he was trying to steady me.

The last time he was this close—the last time we’d talked about *real stuff*—he had said something neither of us had been ready for.

One of his buddies shouted at him from the beach and Chad half turned, waving him off. When he looked back at me, concern pooling in his eyes, I felt something inside me give.

This was Chad, my best friend. The guy who taste-tested all my cookies and cakes, even the ones that didn’t turn out great. The guy who showed me how to build my first sandcastle when we were kids, and then chased the older kids away when they tried to demolish it. The guy who taught me how to change a tire and drive a stick, even though I told him these life skills would be totally wasted on a girl who didn’t need to own a car. I couldn’t draw this hideousness out. Not for his sake, or for mine.

“Penny doesn’t want you to come around tonight,” I whispered. “She wanted me to tell you that she isn’t going to change her mind.”

My words hung between us, suspended and fragile, like the smallest puff of breath could blow them away. It took a second for it to register on his face, and when it did, I wasn’t prepared.

His cheek twitched as his expression morphed into disbelief, then hurt, then anger. He didn’t need to speak for me to know everything he didn’t say. I felt it, too. Cheated, somehow. The sadness was there, too, but more than that it was the feeling of being used.

Chad didn’t move away, but he dropped his arms. They hung limp at his sides.

“Hey. C’mon. Talk to me.” I caught his hands, even though they were like unyielding marble. “Don’t shut me out.”

“Did she tell you why?” His voice was hoarse. “Because she didn’t really give me a reason.”

“I . . . no.”

“Really?” He shot me a confused look.

I shook my head. “I didn’t even know until a few minutes ago.”

“Oh.”

“She . . . she may have said something about wanting a fresh start. Um, because of starting college in the fall. I think she just wants to feel new again. Like she’s someone else.”

“She could always change her mind. You know how she gets,” he said. “Just blowing off steam. Because I didn’t want to have dinner with her grandparents after graduation.” He waved his hand, crumpled face now looking a bit less hopeless.

He made it sound like it was easier if Penny had decided to end things on a whim. Maybe because it could mean she decide to *un*-end things on a whim, too.

“It isn’t like those times.” I drew my lips under my teeth, letting my jaw apply blunt pressure, blunt pain. “She was for real. I think she meant it. No, no, she did mean it.”

Some of the hope dwindled from his face. I hated that I was the one who had caused it.

He took a deep breath, tilting his face to the side. “Wait, so what does ‘feeling new’ mean, anyway? Be someone else?” Seeming to skip from denial straight to anger, his voice turned sharp. “Or be *with* someone else?”

The distinction was just one word, but it was so much more than that. The air was sucked out of me. Oh, God. I hadn't thought of that. It hadn't even occurred to me that she could want to be with someone else—someone who wasn't Chad.

"I bet it's fucking Vince," he said. "He's always hanging around her. Maybe it's already started between the two of them." He slid his eyes to me, nostrils flared. "You'd tell me if it was like that, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would. If I thought she'd messed around behind your back, do you think I would be doing this for her? You know me a hell of a lot better than that," I fired back. "She doesn't want to be with you anymore. I'm sorry. She asked me to tell you so she didn't have to. I have no idea if it has anything to do with Vince or any other guy." I hesitated before saying, "And it had nothing to do with your not going out to eat after graduation."

It didn't. I would have known if it had, because Penny had just rolled her eyes when Chad said he was going to get baked with the guys instead. At Penny's insistence, I'd gone in his place.

"I should still talk to her," said Chad, looking more unmoored than I'd ever seen him. "Maybe we can still figure this out."

"You shouldn't," I said, jumping in front of him when he started to turn around. "It'd just make things worse. More awkward."

His eyes searched mine, raw and hesitant. "She really doesn't want me there, does she?"

It would be another dagger in his back if I confirmed it. I settled for saying nothing, but even that said it all.

My silence drew a brittle laugh from him. "Yeah. Okay. Great." He threw his hands in the air. "Thanks for the message."

“I didn’t want to,” I said, voice small. “You’re both my best friends. It was awkward for me, too, you know.”

“For you? It doesn’t even affect you.” He paused. “Shit, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. You’re part of this, too. I didn’t mean it like—”

I wrapped my arms around myself. “No, you did. It’s fine. I was being—I didn’t think before I spoke. I know you’re hurting worse than me.”

Chad’s face was bathed in shadow. The sun had already dipped beyond view, the golden dusk giving way to dusty lavender. His face tilted in the direction of Penny’s houseboat, looking more faraway than I’d ever seen him.

I wasn’t so sure my being here was helpful. She should have been the one to break things off, properly. I’d thought maybe she was right at first, that I’d be able to do it gently and without drama, but now . . .

My stomach lurched. Penny was a coward.

Whether it was me or her, it didn’t matter who did the hurting. It hurt Chad either way.

Self-loathing burned through me. I’d been flattered Penny thought that I had a way with Chad, that I was better with him than she was. But what about this was better? I could see it the way he saw it. Humiliation, to be told by a friend rather than his girlfriend. Shock, that it came out of nowhere. Hurt, that a relationship of four years didn’t even merit a face-to-face conversation.

I couldn’t stand the silence anymore. “God, this is so fucked up, isn’t it?” I said. “Do you want to—I mean, if you wanted, we could go for a drive along the highway. Or head back to my place. If you want to just get away for a little while . . .” I trailed off, blinking. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Chad smiled. It was tinged with sadness, but it was still there. “You’re always thinking of me,” he said, fondness coming through in the way his smile reached his eyes, crinkling the outer corners. “You’re a great friend, you know?”

Before I could answer, he took a step closer. And then he was everywhere, invading my space with his strong arms and broad chest. With his face buried in the crook of my neck and my blonde hair tangled between us, I hugged him back.

The heaviness that had settled in a leaden pit in my stomach didn’t disappear, but lessened somehow. I was cocooned by the scent of warm sunshine on his skin and spicy aftershave, and his hug felt like forgiveness.

He was the first to pull back. His arms tightened around me, all hard muscle and bare skin. His fingertips electrified. The moment was charged, and I knew we were on the precipice of something.

“Babe,” he began to say.

I tensed, pressing my lips together. The softness in his voice, the tenderness in his eyes . . .

“Maybe . . . maybe we could give you and me a go,” he continued.

There was something so comforting about being in the arms of someone you loved, but this—no, this was wrong. We couldn’t have this conversation. Penny trusted us, trusted me.

Chad fell silent.

It was a warm summer night, but my body flashed cold. I knew what he wanted to say. He’d said it before, once, when we were drunk and Penny had fallen asleep. In the hazy dreaminess of dawn, while the gentle sways of Penny’s houseboat lulled us into sleepiness, he’d whispered, “I love you, Babe.”

We'd never spoken about it. In the light of day, I hadn't wanted to bring it up, hadn't wanted to know in what way he meant it. Later, it was easier to just assume he loved me as a friend—of course that was how he meant it, and I felt the same. But it always hung between us as the last real thing we'd shared.

"It could have been you," he said, breaking the silence.

His voice sounded too loud and too *everywhere*. Our hips were still touching, so with one soft push on his chest, I put space between us again. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Penny," said Chad. He ducked his head as if embarrassed. "I liked you both. It was just that she asked me out first."

Something inside me sparked. It was half anger, half interest. I stifled the latter to focus on the former. He had liked us both? As if the outcome didn't matter, as if Penny didn't matter. What an asshole.

"Wow," I scoffed. "That's pretty shitty. We're not interchangeable."

"That's not how I meant it!" Chad looked up, eyes flaring with emotion. "You're both my best friends. I love you both."

Years ago, I'd been at Penny's house for a sleepover when she'd dared me to call him and ask him out. I'd been too chicken, so she'd grabbed the phone from me and raced to the bathroom. I'd gone screeching after her, freaked out that she would say something dumb and embarrass me. She'd locked the door behind her, cackling, turning it off just long enough to very sweetly ask for Chad when his mom picked up the phone.

I had no idea how long I'd waited outside the door, uncertainty and excitement giving me that prickly having-to-pee feeling. Would he say yes? Or would he think it was super weird that I didn't have the guts to ask him out myself? When it finally opened, Penny was the

one who had the date with Chad, not me. She hadn't realized how much I'd wanted him back then, not even when I shoved my way into her bathroom and slammed the door. I stayed there for half an hour, pretending I was sick, even when Mrs. Wang came to ask if I was okay.

I didn't want a reason to feel more upset right now. Hearing that it could have so easily been me wasn't the soothing balm that Chad had intended. It was dumping the whole salt shaker into an open wound.

The space between my eyes was beginning to hurt. "I should go."

"Babe, wait."

"You're her boyfriend," I said heatedly, but he cut me off.

"Ex-boyfriend." Chad exhaled. "Remember?"

I glared. Considering what had just happened, I wasn't likely to forget.

He lifted his hand tentatively, stopping centimeters away from my face. When I didn't move, he brushed his knuckles across my cheekbone. The featherlight tenderness seemed out of place somehow. Everything about this seemed out of place. "I wish," said Chad, "that it had been you. Maybe things would be different now."

There had been a time that I wished it had been me, too. Once, long ago.

But Penny had never let me feel, not for one instant, like I was the third wheel. Every step of their relationship, I'd been there. Every up and every down. She asked me to go birthday shopping with her, let me pick out a shirt for Chad that matched his eyes. She deferred to my judgment when I told her to give him some space. She asked me to spend the night, all three of us curled up in her bed, after an exhausting night of partying.

I knew what I owed her for wanting me as much as she wanted him. I also knew she would view the words Chad was saying—and the old, decrepit emotions he was stirring—as disloyalty.

“There hasn’t been anyone for you since Elodie left,” he murmured. “And now I don’t have anyone, either.”

His implication was clear. But was he really saying what I thought he was? Or was he just looking for some comfort in a what-could-have-been?

Flustered, I tried to find the right words. “It doesn’t work like that. Just because we’re both single doesn’t mean that—” I broke off, dropping my eyes to the sand.

“We make sense. We could just try it. See how we feel after.” Chad took a step closer. And then another one. “Maybe it’ll be magic.”

My head hurt, but it had nothing on the excruciating sensation that was sporadically clenching and unclenching my heart. Was he as afraid to be alone as I was? We were back on the precipice, but this time, I didn’t want to pull away.

I wanted to fall.

So when Chad bridged the distance between us and tipped his head down to mine, I let myself fall over the edge. As his lips settled on mine and his hands squeezed my hips, I kissed him back not for myself, but for the girl I used to be.

For the part of myself, no matter how small, that still fluttered when he said he wished it had been me and him for the last four years.

I wasn’t falling for him, I knew that. My feelings for Chad were very much in the past tense, faded into nostalgia. I was just falling for the moment. The what-could-have-been. The what-almost-was.

But this wasn’t just a fall. This was a ruination.



## three

When I woke up the next morning, it took a second for everything to sink in. And when it did, queasiness quickly followed. I stumbled to the bathroom, desperate to brush the bad taste out of my mouth. Last night's whiplash was still fresh in my mind. The way everything had gone so wrong, so fast. Perfect summer with my best friends? Ha! Whatever we were now, whatever this was . . . it was the antithesis of perfect. But a little trick I'd learned after Elodie left was that baking would get my mind off things. I was usually an early riser, but today I woke even before the sun came up and made my way, bleary-eyed, to the kitchen. It was time to cookie.

Within minutes, my narrow galley kitchen was in disarray. Flour, sugar, and eggs lined the counter in bowls, and by the time the oven had preheated, my arm was sore from mixing. A few drops of vanilla and a handful of dark chocolate chunks later, I had my cookie batter ready. I laid out two dozen cookies on my baking trays, sprinkled them with sea salt and crushed pistachio, and then into the oven they went.

There was no time to rest, though. I still had the doughnuts to make. Using the same ingredients, I browned butter in a saucepan before mixing it with everything else, then poured the cake doughnut batter into molds. I popped them into the oven right as the cookies came out.

While I worked, I focused just on the task right in front of me. The tacky feel of the dough in my hands, the ache in my shoulder as I whisked. The aroma of warm sugar escaping when the oven opened, the crunch of the sweet and salty pistachio cookies when I bit into them.

It was only when the doughnuts came out that my flurry of activity came to a stop, and the world came rushing back. Penny. Chad. My perfect summer hanging in the balance of what could potentially turn into A Great Big Thing.

I sighed, leaning against my now-spotless counters. It had been such a mistake returning Chad's kiss last night. It wasn't a bad kiss, exactly, but it wasn't a good one, either. If he'd been waiting for some magical moment full of fireworks and electricity, this wasn't it. I thought of myself as a pretty good kisser, but the total lack of *anything* on his face had given it all away—this wasn't the outcome he'd been expecting. Nostalgia wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. The kiss hadn't meant anything to either of us.

Our friendship would change when both of my best friends started college. Even though Oar's Rest Tech was right in town, I couldn't count on things staying the same. Maybe they'd make new friends. Maybe I'd be the one to drift away like a lost kite, no one to chase after me. I squeezed my eyes shut against the image. There were a thousand things that could happen. Maybe Chad would finally buckle down and start taking school seriously. Maybe Penny would make new girlfriends, people in her marine technology program who would share her interests. What was holding the three of us together, after all? High school? Memories? Blurry nights of booze?

Chad was right. We hadn't talked about anything real in a long time. These days it was all houseboat parties and lying around on the

beach. Penny reveled in her role as party hostess—for her, fun usually involved a bottle or three. Chad and his friend John were fixing up a car together. And then there was me. Stuck in limbo. Penny had clearly changed, but I hadn't. I was still the same Babe. I didn't want things to change. And if they did, I didn't want it to be now. Not when we still had the summer for ourselves. I'd worry about everything else when it happened.



Half an hour later, Penny swung by my lighthouse home with a four-pack of ginger beer tucked into the basket of her bubblegum-pink bike. “Hey!” she called out.

Using the wooden stepladder, I made my way down to the ground-floor kitchen to open the door. The third floor was the bathroom and laundry room, separated by a wall; the second floor was a cozily cramped living room with all my furniture pointed at a bookshelf instead of a television. I could still remember the look on my friends' faces when they asked for my nonexistent Wi-Fi password. I preferred books to TV—any shows I sat through were usually just to bond with my mom. When I was younger, it was *Sex and the City* reruns. Now it was anything with glamorous, high-powered middle-aged women, and she watched them with her roommate, Abby. If I wanted to watch anything, I made do with the data on my phone and the public library's hot spot.

From my fourth-floor bedroom, I'd seen Penny coming. I swung the door open before she even had to knock. “Hey,” I said breathlessly, running a hand through my hair like I had been in a rush to answer the door and not because I'd been standing behind it for a minute freaking out.

Her eyes zeroed in on the tote slung over my shoulder. “Where are you off to?” she asked, forehead scrunching.

“Work.” I had a long shift today at the Busy Bean.

Honestly, I was glad to have the excuse not to linger and chat. With my kiss with Chad still branded on my memory—and my lips—it was impossible not to feel the scorch of guilt. Yes, they were broken up, but I doubted she would see it that way. It wouldn’t matter that I didn’t want to be with Chad, or take something that was hers, but it still felt like a betrayal. And I knew that.

I pulled the door shut behind me and pretended not to see Penny’s face fall.

She touched the neck of one of the ginger-beer bottles. “I was thinking we could hang out. I just wanted to say thanks for handling . . .” Her hand fluttered between us. “You know, everything with Chad.”

“Yeah, no, absolutely.”

“You said he took it okay?” Penny paused, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. “He’s cool still being friends?”

After he kissed me, the only thing I was concerned with was pretending it hadn’t happened. We hadn’t talked about what the breakup would mean for him and Penny. We’d parted ways, both flustered and reeling from the mistake, and I’d beat a retreat back to my lighthouse. But under her scrutiny, I could only give a tense, jerky nod. What else could I do?

In the twinkling twilight, it had been so easy to let the world fade away. I could still see the recklessness in his eyes, feel the warm breeze against my neck. The chatter on the beach and the crashing of the waves. I could remember what it felt like to be a kid again and to want Chad to want me the way he wanted Penny. But

I'd known, even before we kissed, that I wasn't that girl anymore. That was what no one told you about the road not taken. You can't go back to the start of something that was never yours to begin with. Sometimes you just had to deal with taking the wrong exit ramp.

Penny exhaled. "Well, thanks. It was pretty cool of you to help me out."

I remembered the bite in her voice as she'd hustled me off her houseboat. My chest tightened. She was mistaken if she thought I'd had a choice in the matter. I didn't want her to be fucking *grateful* now.

"Yeah," I said, bringing my hand to my forehead to shade against the brilliant glare of the morning sun. "No problem." I grabbed my bike from where it leaned against the candy-cane-striped lighthouse wall.

"We can bike down together?" Penny offered. Without waiting, she got back on her bike and used her heel to push back the kickstand.

The descent from my clifftop lighthouse wasn't steep, but the road was narrow and winding. The breeze carried traces of azaleas and roses, tickling my nostrils and kissing my cheeks.

As my thighs pumped, I tried not to look at her, tried not to give her any opening to continue the conversation about Chad. I just wanted to wipe last night from my mind. The embarrassment, the awkwardness, the kiss. A fresh shiver went down my spine and I pedaled harder, faster.

We reached the town center of Oar's Rest, forced to slow for pedestrians and cars. The ride down never got me out of breath, so I

knew the tightness in my chest had everything to do with Penny's proximity and the secret that hovered between us.

*Hang in there, just hang in there*, I said to myself over and over like a mantra. In just a few short moments, I would be able to duck inside the shop and Penny would be on her way. Just hang in there.

As I waved to one of my regulars, a young mother pushing a stroller into the Busy Bean, Penny drew up alongside me. My muscles stiffened.

She came to a stop, angling her wheels so I couldn't go past her. "Hey, speedy, you didn't tell me it was a race!" she said with a laugh.

I smiled stiffly and swung my leg over the bike, getting off. "Guess you win."

Tom, the owner, was bent in front of the windows with a watering can. As he straightened from the window boxes, he raised his dark-brown hand, then called out cheerfully, "Morning, girls!"

"Morning, Tom." I wheeled my bike by the handlebars, sidestepping Penny.

"Hey," said Penny with a bright smile, undeterred. She swiped her glossy black hair over her shoulder. "Coffee smells wicked good."

It was hard not feeling a little intruded upon when she let her bike lean against mine on the rack in front of the shop. "You're coming in?" I asked.

She nodded. "Think I'll get something to go."

She followed me in, smiling and waving at the familiar faces of Oar's Rest. While she was waylaid by a table of young high school girls, I shimmied myself behind the counter, where Lucy was making coffees to go.

It was only once I donned my familiar green apron and breathed

in the strong, aromatic blend of our house favorite that my unease faded. It was as if my apron was a suit of armor, strong enough to protect me from whatever came my way.

The Busy Bean, affectionately known to the locals as Busy's, was an eclectic cluster of kitsch and old-world charm. Nothing matched—not the mugs or the furniture. The tables and chairs were solid European workmanship, odds and ends that Tom had picked up at antique malls and liquidation sales, with the odd bit of patio furniture thrown in. I loved the jumbled look of the place, “tasteful eclectic,” as Tom called it.

Now that I was here, it was easy to think of Busy's as my castle and the separating counter as my moat. It divided me and Penny, made me feel a little less emotionally and physically attached. Not quite a drawbridge, but it'd work in a pinch.

“Slow morning,” I said, surveying the room.

Busy's earned its name during the summer months when the tourists descended en masse on our coastal Maine town. In the days leading up to tourist season, however, work consisted of chatting with the locals who came in with their books and portable chess sets, half-heartedly wiping down spotless counters, and offloading the day's baked goods before they got dry and stale.

“Mhm.” Lucy pressed domed plastic lids on the to-go cups. “Everyone's down at the beach. Surprised you didn't see them.”

Truth be told, I'd been a little distracted by Penny's presence, otherwise I was sure I would have been more observant. Hands behind my back, I tightened the apron strings. “Why? What's going on?”

“Sign-ups for the sandcastle competition start today!” Lucy chirped, sticking in the bright red straws. “You signing up?”

My neck prickled. The sandcastle competition was an annual tradition that came around every August, and competition was fierce. In the weeks leading up to the event, our town would spill over with tourists, and there wouldn't be a lot of space on the beach to practice.

In the kids' division, teams could have as many members as they wanted, since it was all about the fun of participation. When we were younger, Chad, Penny, and I had dominated the competition, but once we hit sixteen, we were in the adult group. It also meant everyone taking part was in it to win it, and there were some pretty savage pseudo-professional sandcastles erected on our beach. And because it was more competitive, teams were restricted to just two people. Since Chad and Penny were dating . . . well, it hadn't been a surprise who the odd woman out had been.

"Signing up for what?" asked Penny. She sidled up to the counter and leaned forward on her elbows.

I made eyes at Lucy, but she answered Penny anyway.

"The sandcastle competition," said Lucy. She shot Penny a grin. "Think you and Chad have what it takes to beat me and Lorcan?"

Penny's smile dwindled. It was no secret that she and Chad always came in second to Lucy and her boyfriend. Chad always stressed, coming up with convoluted plans to maximize the number of towers and fortify the walls against collapse. Penny hated getting sand everywhere, but she loved the limelight of being a winner's girlfriend.

"Hey, sorry. Too early in the day for trash talk?" Lucy made eye contact with the table of girls and waved them over to collect their drinks.

As the door banged shut behind them, Penny said, "I'm not competing this year."



Lucy's eyes flicked to me. "Are you?"

"Yeah," I said, shrugging. "There's usually someone left over who doesn't have a partner." Between my skill and my dud partner, we usually scored third place.

Lucy's face lit up.

I knew what she was going to say before she said it, and in that microsecond, the guilt was gasoline in my stomach.

"Babe, you and Chad should team up!" Lucy said excitedly. "Oh my God, now *that* would be a real competition."

She'd lit the match.

Penny blinked. "What? Oh, I didn't even—" She turned to me, forehead creased. "Do you . . . I mean, you could if you wanted."

It sounded like an offer, but was it a test? The idea of actually standing a chance to win first place was tempting, and I knew that together, Chad and I could pull it off. He'd been the one to teach me how to build sandcastles competitively. He'd taught me everything I knew. What angle to hold the tools that would get the best results. The creative vision to create something beautiful. The patience to erect that vision into reality.

I could still remember being thirteen and letting him take my hand, feeling the sprinkle of sand against my palm. Every grain of sand had a story, Chad had said. A history of the earth that stretched behind us so far that it was only the tiniest of pinpricks against the horizon. Chad didn't take a lot of stuff seriously, but building sandcastles was his religion.

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to be on the A team. I wanted to *win*. And yet . . . was Penny hoping I'd say no?

I searched her face for any sign of fakeness but came up empty.

Did I owe it to Penny to brush off Lucy's suggestion? To pretend like this didn't feel like my chance to come in from the cold? Like I didn't know that Chad and I could take home first if only we had the chance?

He'd been right when he said we used to be able to talk, just us. We'd been able to hang out and text each other without freaking out about whether we should include Penny. But when they'd started to date, it had changed everything.

It wasn't just me and him, or me and Penny. It became the three of us together, no secret too secret. Everything was laid bare between us. Nothing was secret, but we couldn't be open with each other anymore, either. Chad was right. When had any one of us *really* talked?

It was only group texts from then on, and hanging out became a trio activity. We'd made a few Golden Trio jokes—Penny insisted she was Harry, even though we all knew she was a total Slytherin—and at first, I hadn't seen it. That Penny couldn't, or wouldn't, trust us on our own.

The stare I exchanged with Penny had turned into a stalemate. I couldn't say anything, not if I didn't know what the right answer was. I was keenly aware of the dull, throbbing beats of my heart.

The silence had lingered too long. Enough for Lucy's friendly smile to waver into something awkward and uncertain. I wondered if she even knew what a minefield her innocent suggestion had been.

"Sure," I said at long last. I was testing the waters, so I made sure not to look away, not even to blink. "I mean, if you're sure you're not going to do it. The competition. With Chad."

"Uh, I don't think so." Penny's face betrayed nothing. "So, Luce, I'll just take my usual to go."

The couple sitting at one of the tables by the door scraped back their chairs. While Lucy began preparing Penny's drink, I headed to clean up the mess. Some coffee had spilled onto the table, milky liquid pooled in the dents and gouges of the wood. I took my sweet time clearing up. After carrying the used cups and plates back to the dishwasher, I swept away muffin crumbs and sopped up the coffee. By the time I was done, Penny had already gone. A glance out the window told me she was biking away. My heart twinged—this morning could definitely have gone better.

I wrung out the rag in the sink. Coffee dribbled down the drain in a steady brown stream.

"Is everything okay with you two?" asked Lucy. "It's just . . . I kind of feel like I stuck my foot in it back there. About you and Chad?"

I squeezed the rag even harder. "Nah, everything's good."

"You sure?" she pressed.

It wasn't my place to tell Lucy that my friends had broken up, and that I'd been way more involved in the process than I wanted to be. I shifted my feet, leaving the rag draped over the sink. "It's fine, we're fine, it's all fine," I said through a smile, although the words were more for myself than for her.

*We're fine, we're fine, we're fine* became my new mantra, although the repetition did zero to convince me. Partly because I already had the feeling deep in my gut that we weren't.



"Oh, shit. Babe." Lucy glanced at the wall clock. Both hands had aligned at the twelve. "Don't you have to go check in the dude who's renting your mom's house?"

“I almost forgot about that. I can’t believe it’s noon already.” It felt like just a few minutes since Penny had left. “I better get moving.”

“Fingers crossed he’s cute!”

“Are cute boys all you think about?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s the *only* thing worth thinking about.”

I rushed for the door. “Back soon!”

“You better. I’m not crazy about handling the lunch rush by myself!” Lucy called after me.

I made my way along the boardwalk toward my mom’s house. My old house looked out on the beach, painted the color of lacy green fronds. The door was burgundy, and in front of it stood a boy. When he turned around, my eyes widened.

“You!”

It was the boy from Busy’s, the one I had dubbed Mystery Boy yesterday. His eyes lit up with recognition, and the wood creaked as he stepped off the porch.

“Me,” he agreed, using his thumb to point over his shoulder. “I wasn’t expecting the cute waitress to follow me home.” A faint smile played on his lips.

I breezed past the word *cute* with an awkward laugh. “I didn’t follow you. This is my house. Well, my mom’s house. I’m here to check you in.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “I guess that makes you my landlady.”

“I guess that makes *you* Levi Keller.”

He nodded and pulled a folded square from his back pocket, smoothing it out against his thigh before handing it to me.

My eyes skimmed the email confirmation. “Looks like everything’s in order.” I glanced at him. “You should have given me a call yesterday. I would have let you in early.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “It wasn’t a big deal.” He tilted his head to the car parked at the curb. “I didn’t want to bother anyone. I didn’t really think ahead when I decided to drive here early,” he said with a rueful smile.

I swallowed. Maybe if he’d given me that call, I wouldn’t have gone to Penny’s place. Rationally, I knew I couldn’t blame Levi, but the unwelcome thought had taken hold: Everything that had happened last night could have been avoided.

“Anyway, my car was comfortable enough for one night.” Even his eyes seemed to smile at me.

I moved past him to slide the key into the lock. From here, I could smell the clean detergent that clung to his clothing. My stomach fluttered. It was just the sweet smell of laundry. Why was I so hyperaware of it? I twisted the doorknob. Hard. “Come on in.”

I didn’t know much about him. All Mom had told me was that our renter was in Oar’s Rest on a eight-week grant sponsored by the local artist colony and the historical society. Since the house was empty after I’d moved into the lighthouse, Mom decided to rent it out for some extra cash. Levi would be the first one to stay there.

Wait. I knew his name from somewhere. I rifled through my memories, hunting him down. The answer pressed gently against my mind, and I grasped at it, pulling tight. Cotton candy perfume and a laugh like a fairy tale. The bouncy, natural curls falling across her brown shoulders as she leaned forward, snatching the macaron from my hand.

*One day I'll be in Paris for an art show and I'll eat these every day.  
If Ladurée's are better than mine, you'd better not tell me, El.  
C'est impossible! Your macaron is magnifique!*

I remembered her feigning a look of total horror that any macaron could be better than mine, even if they came from the most famous pâtisserie in Paris. At the time, I'd glided past her Paris-for-one future, even though it was pretty much the most glaring writing on the wall I could have asked for.

I was trying to be cool and unaffected, but inside, my heart hammered in relentless beats. How had I missed this? Levi Keller. It had been a name I'd heard on and off when I'd been with Elodie, but it had faded from my mind in the last year we'd been apart. I sneaked a covert look at Levi. Was it him?

I could remember El lounging on my couch, scrolling through his Instagram feed on so many of our secret dates that it felt like she was in a relationship with the wrong person. The last time she'd done it, I'd dragged my head up from her lap and asked her to come back to me, please. She'd kissed me, quick and sweet, said "Just a sec," and gone back to her phone. It was only when I got up that she snagged my wrist and let her phone slide into the gap between the cushions. *I'm right here, Babe. I'm not going anywhere. C'mon, don't be mad.* And I couldn't be. Not at her, and not for long. At least back then.

Levi took a delicate sniff, then crinkled his nose like he was about to sneeze.

The house smelled like pine, thanks to the trio of overpowering scented candles on the mantelpiece. Memories accompanied the nostalgic fragrance: me, Chad, and Penny doubled over in laughter on the couch, watching C-list slasher flicks; Mom coming home late from

her hostess job in Bar Harbor, but never too late to still spend time with me before bed. Our couch was imprinted with the memories of many midnight hot chocolates, Mom's favorite drink, and her firm insistence that neither of us would go to bed until my homework was done.

The entry was small, and Levi and I bumped shoulders. A frisson of electricity went through my arm. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, but he hadn't seemed to notice.

A leather couch and two armchairs pointed toward the TV stand, and a laminated list of emergency numbers was underneath the remote. Painted driftwood from last summer's art exhibition hung on the walls, and there were probably more oversize shells on our shelves than actual books. Mom really loved playing up the seaside cottage aesthetic.

"Wow, this is great. I like the look in here," he said, glancing at the gigantic seashells and glossy photography books on the kitschy Americana center table.

I gave him a walk-through, explaining which knobs to fiddle with on our ancient washing machine, and pointing out the closest grocery store from the second-floor hallway window. He seemed especially impressed with the view of the beach from the master bedroom.

"So," I said once we were back downstairs, "there's milk and eggs in the fridge, bread on the counter, and some menus on the dining table if you want to eat out. There's also stuff for coffee and tea in the cupboards, and you can just help yourself to anything else you find in here."

"Thank you," said Levi, ducking his head into the kitchen for a quick glance. "That's really nice. I wasn't expecting a welcome package."

There was no reason for me to linger, and yet my feet were stuck to the floor. I searched my mind for something—anything—to say that would keep the conversation going, but what came out was: “So, art, huh?”

*Oh my God, did I just—*

Levi’s lips twitched like he was fighting back a grin. “Art,” he replied gravely.

“Cool.” I swallowed, feeling my cheeks warm. “So, uh, my phone number is on the contact list next to the TV. If you have any questions, feel free to call. I hope you have a pleasant stay.”

“I’m sure I will.” His blue eyes held mine.

Realizing I hadn’t told him my name yet, I added, “I’m B—”

He cut me off. “Wait, I’m good at this. Bella!”

“Uh, no.” My left eyebrow scrunched.

“Becca? Becky?”

Taken aback, I stared.

“Bonnie?”

“Are you just going through all the Bs?” I asked.

“Hold on, I’ll get it in a minute.” He eyed me for a long, inscrutable moment.

“You’re not going to get it,” I said with confidence.

He shot me a cheeky grin. “Hey, I’m on a winning streak right now. I’m really good at this.”

“Could have fooled me,” I muttered, but not so loud that he’d hear.

Levi kept his eyes on my face, brow furrowed deep like he was calculating the odds.

I folded my arms across my chest. He wasn’t going to get it.



“Barbara,” he said slowly, deliberately.

*What?!*

Okay, now that was pretty weird. I thought for sure I’d have him guessing for at least another ten names. Barbara wasn’t really modern, and I always got a double take when I introduced myself by my full name.

He saw the twitch of my lips and his own smile bloomed. “Ha, guessed it,” he crowed.

“Lucky guess,” I said, folding my arms across my chest. I fought off my smile, trying not to be charmed by his silly grin—a losing battle.

Levi’s eyes crinkled. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

I hadn’t gone by Barbara since first grade, when the teacher told the class to let her know if we went by a nickname. But he just looked so proud of himself that I let him have his win. It was oddly endearing, and anyway, it wasn’t like we’d be seeing each other enough for the antiquated name to bug me, anyway.

“I’m tempted to put you to the test in guessing other things,” I said.

“Go for it.”

“Not scared I’ll disprove your ESP?” I teased.

“Nah.”

I was tempted to poke a little hole in his confidence. But then I remembered Lucy was waiting for me back at Busy’s. With reluctance, I cleared my throat. “Sadly, gotta head back to work.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I acknowledged with a dip of my head, unable to bite back my smile. “You know where I’ll be. And you have my number, so, um, just call me or drop by Busy’s if you need anything, all right?”

“Aye, aye.” One side of Levi’s mouth lifted in a crooked grin.  
“See you soon.”



I’d made it back from the house just in time to catch the tail end of Busy’s lunch rush, and in between plating up sandwiches, soups, and salads, I gave Lucy the entire play-by-play.

“Are you serious?” Lucy’s squeal was deafening. “He’s the one renting your mom’s house?”

The regulars didn’t look up. We were all used to her frequent high-pitched noises.

I laughed, swabbing the counter with renewed vigor. “Yeah, I know. I was . . .” I trailed off, unable to put it into words. “Surprised,” I said after a long pause. “Crazy coincidence, right?”

“This is *perfect*,” said Lucy. “You don’t have an excuse anymore. He’s staying in town for the next eight weeks. You could totally ask him out.” Her eyes shone. “He’s gorgeous, B. This is meet-cute material, I swear.”

“Meet-cute? You’ve been watching too many rom-coms.”

She tilted her head. “And you haven’t been with anyone in ages . . .”

I’d been with Elodie, but no one except Chad and Penny knew that. I shook my head. “Just because I’m single doesn’t mean I’m lonely. I have my friends.”

“Sure,” said Lucy, “but having a partner is different from having a friend. You can’t just hold your friend’s hand whenever you want to, or kiss them good morning, or . . . you know?”

She had a point, but the idea of getting to know someone new wasn’t as easy as she made it sound.

I grabbed her hand. “See? I’m holding your hand right now.”

“Okay, okay!” She pulled her hand free and laughed. “But you get my point.”

“I can’t hit on my renter,” I pointed out, forcing a grin, though I felt far from amused. “Owner’s daughter hits on guests’ is not what I want to see on TripAdvisor, thank you very much.”

“Why’d ya have to make it sound so sleazy?” Lucy complained over the gurgles and glugs of the dishwasher.

“We don’t even know if he’s single,” I reminded her. “Or if he’s interested in dating anyone. Besides, he’s just here for the summer.” I chose not to share with her that he’d called me “cute.” Lucy would read too much into it.

She rolled her eyes. “Details, details.”

“Not everyone’s as lucky as you and Lorcan,” I said. “You two make it look easy. It’s been, what, two years?”

“Yeah.” Lucy gave me a curious look. “Hasn’t Penny been with Chad for way longer, though?”

“Oh, right. Yeah. She has.” I gave the rim of the mug a furious swipe, wishing I could scrub the words out of Lucy’s mouth in as easy a gesture. My sun-bleached hair escaped the crook of my ear and fell into my face.

On reflex, my hand shot up to push my hair behind my ear. The movement drew my eye to the gold butterfly ring on my middle finger, a birthday present from Chad.

*Chad.* I still had no idea what to say to him. How to even talk to him after what we did. The one thing I knew was that it would be way easier than talking to Penny.

“Babe?” Lucy touched my shoulder. “I know I’m not Penny, but

you can talk to me. You've looked kinda edgy all morning. Don't just say you're fine." She looked at me sternly. "Not unless you mean it."

Well, Lucy would find out eventually. "Chad and Penny broke up," I said. "That's why she's not competing with him in the sandcastle competition."

Lucy's eyes widened before she squeezed them tight in a wince. "Oh, shit. I knew I said something to make things weird, but I didn't know—"

"It wasn't you," I said. "It was already weird. She totally put me in the middle."

"What do you mean?"

"She didn't exactly break up with him right. So I had to take care of it."

There was a long, drawn-out silence. Lucy watched me wash the same mug over and over in what was, I knew, an aimless endeavor.

"You're kidding," she said. "She actually asked you to do that?"

"She needed me," I said, because it felt disloyal to say anything else. Even if I wanted to. And then, because I needed to tell someone, and I definitely wasn't ready to tell Penny yet, I said, "He kissed me."

Lucy lowered her voice. "*What?* He just decided to up and kiss you? That fast?"

I waited for her to tell me I was a terrible friend, that I had to come clean, that I was in the wrong—but she didn't. Her eyes welled with sympathy. Sympathy for me. Surprise and relief surged through me. Lucy was on my side.

She sighed and reached over to turn the tap off, forcing me to stop rubbing at the mug. "You'll wash the paint right off," she said with a forced, cheerful smile. She held her hand out and I passed her

the mug, which she dried off with a drying rag and replaced with the others.

I snagged the black elastic on my wrist and looped my hair through. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

“Sorry.” Lucy exhaled. “I can’t believe that she—wait, can I just say this one thing before we drop it?” I nodded. “I can’t believe she had you do that! They’ve been together forever! She owed him more than—and him! What is up with him? Didn’t he care that he’d just been dumped? He just . . . he kissed you? Just like that?”

My hands tangled in a snarl of blonde hair as I wound my hair into a sloppy bun. She’d just voiced so much of what I was thinking, and her outrage felt like a warm, safe blanket wrapping around my shoulders. I shot Lucy a smile. “*Thank you.*”

She made a disgruntled sound in the back of her throat, like a cat working out a hairball.

“Trust me,” I said. “Anything that you’re thinking has already gone through my mind. Multiplied by a thousand. Raised to the power of freaking out.”

My perfect summer was in jeopardy, and no boy, no matter how cute he was, would be able to save it. Only I could do that. With some serious CPR, although this time I’d stay as far away from mouth-to-mouth as possible.

I waved at a few customers on their way out the door, savoring the salty breeze that swept in along with our boss, Tom. He lifted his hand to tip an invisible hat, and his gruff voice called out, “Not too late for a sandwich, is it?”

“Coming right up!” I promised, already slicing into a round of

blue cheese. I pulled away a creamy, marbled wedge and set it aside. “Hey, Lucy, can you—”

She was already on it. “Done, and done!” she pronounced, showing me two slices of rustic, thick-cut bread grilling in the pan, surrounded by a light, buttery froth.

We worked in unison, Lucy slathering apricot jam over one slice while I put blue cheese on the other, spreading it evenly with a butter knife. Then, while I began putting ingredients away, she stuffed arugula leaves between the slices and put the sandwich in the panini press.

“How’s the day been, ladies?” Tom asked, leaning against the counter. He raked his eyes over our clean workspace.

I had to answer before Lucy did. Quickly, I jumped in. “Pretty good. Had a few new people come in for lunch,” I said, trying to ignore the flutter in my stomach as I vividly remembered yesterday’s blue-eyed customer.

The butterflies beat their wings in steady, insistent *flap flap flaps*.

“Looks like tourist season is going to hit us any day,” said Tom.

“I’m already seeing more out-of-state license plates,” added Lucy.

Tom grunted, scratching at his wiry black stubble. “Right on schedule. I always love to see ’em come, and I love to see ’em go.”

We didn’t need reminding. Tourists were all anyone in Oar’s Rest could think about in the days leading up to T-Day.

The sandwich sizzled inside the panini press, fragrant sweetness spiraling upward when I lifted the lid to take a look. Using a spatula, I slid the perfectly golden sandwich to a plate. “Dig in.”

Tom grinned around a mouthful of his first bite. Lucy and I exchanged a smile—we both knew how much Tom loved a savory grilled cheese with just the right amount of ooze.

“Everything come in okay?” He chewed, swallowed. “Ariel around?”

I thought of the new inventory still boxed and taped in the storeroom. Lucy’s eyes were on me as I cleared my throat and said, “Um, well . . . she took off earlier for her lunch break.”

Tom frowned. “Again?” At my nod, he sighed. “I’m sorry. Hiring her was a mistake. She seemed so earnest.” He rested his cheek against his palm, the worry lines at the corners of his eyes deepening.

“Everyone’s like that at the interview,” I offered, compelled to wipe the dejection from his face. “I mean, even we”—I gestured at Lucy—“wanted to impress you.”

“The difference is that you girls have *continued* to impress me ever since you walked into the interview.” A fond smile stole across his face. “Do you think she should get another chance to impress us?”

“No,” said Lucy.

I gave a half-hearted shrug. I’d never fired anyone before.

“Well, let me know. No sense throwing more good money after bad if that girl isn’t earning her wages.” Tom pushed his plate toward us. “Lunch was great.”

As Tom ambled to his usual table in the back, waiting for his buddy Ralph to come in for their daily chess game, I let out a heavy sigh.

Lucy sucked in her cheeks. “Y’know, there’s such a thing as being too nice a manager.” She paused. “I hope you aren’t going to give her another chance. She doesn’t deserve the free pass.”

For a brief second, the wild thought raced through my mind that

if I earned myself some karma points, maybe the universe would reward me with some goodwill and make things less weird with Penny. Ugh, but that wasn't how good deeds worked, was it? You had to do things selflessly.

"Babe." Lucy poked my arm.

"Maybe you're right," I said reluctantly. "But if it was me, I'd really hope someone would give me that second chance." I wasn't just talking about work.

Lucy shook her head. "You can't always count on having a second chance. Sometimes you just get the one roll of the dice. Bam. You're done. Do not pass *Go*. Do not collect two hundred dollars."

She was right. She was absolutely right. Just as I was about to tell her so, I was cut off by the soft chime of the door opening, the bell knocking against wood. I opened my mouth with an automatic greeting, faltering when I saw who came in. The surprise was sucked out of me and replaced with something infinitely more complicated.

"Hey, Babe." Penny shoved her hands into the pockets of her overalls with an easy smile. The purple lace of her crop top peeked through the gaping armholes. "Can I get an iced coffee to go?"

I tuned out the background chatter as I made her drink, guilt tightening around my chest like a too-tight shirt. We went through the usual motions of *Hey, what's up?* and *Just a busy day, you?* but every time I looked at her, all I could see was her and Chad. Me and Chad.

Penny rubbed at a dark, sooty mark on her cheekbone. Looking at me from under hooded lids, she seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

I snapped the lid in place and slid the drink to her. "So how was work today?"



Penny had enrolled in a two-year marine technology program at Oar's Rest Tech so she could be a boat mechanic. She'd managed to get herself an apprenticeship over the summer for some on-the-job training. Since we were kids, she'd loved boats, whether they were on the open water or docked at the marina. For her eighteenth birthday, her parents had given her a houseboat of her own, but she'd only started living there after graduation.

"Great!" she said, her dark eyes lighting up. "Next week Rolly's going to teach me how to scuba underwater to pressure wash the underside of a boat."

"To get the algae off?"

"Yeah." Her shrug held a hint of nonchalance. "He's making me earn my stripes by teaching me how to scrape a boat on land first."

I winced in sympathy. The scum line on the hull, not to mention the other stains from rust and deposits, was notoriously difficult to remove. "That'll take forever."

"He says I've got to use some elbow grease to learn respect for the vessel." She rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. "Put in the time and do it right."

For a moment, things were normal again. But her words plucked at me—had I already earned my stripes with Penny, or did I still have a way to go? We'd been friends for years. Surely we were at the point where I could tell her about that moment of madness on the beach. That I didn't want to be with Chad, but that if she was okay with it—and *only* if she was okay with it—I'd love to win first with him this year in the sandcastle competition.

My stomach twisted. If I told her Chad and I had kissed, everything I wanted this summer to be would go up in flames.

“I’m having a party on my boat this weekend,” said Penny. “It’ll be fun to get a little crazy before the tourists get here.” Looking embarrassed, she ducked her head and clutched her plastic cup. “And I’m going to be pretty busy at the art center this summer. I, um, took Chad’s suggestion about enrolling in a couple of classes. So it’d be cool to spend some time now while we still have it?” She looked like she wanted to say more.

I sucked in my lip. “Yeah, definitely. I’ll try.”

It shouldn’t have been so weird, and a big part of that was my fault. But without the third person in our trio, my relationship with Penny felt like it didn’t fit. Or maybe it was me who didn’t fit.

Penny seemed to take my answer for what it was. She shifted on her feet, nodding. “Did you and Chad get all signed up for the sandcastle competition?”

I tried to dissect her words. Even though I hunted for an undercurrent, there wasn’t one. Carefully, I said, “Not yet. I’ll do it after work.”

“Cool.” She lifted the cup. “See ya!”

After she left, for one quick, hard stab of a moment, I wished everything could go back to the way things used to be. Before we graduated. Before Penny asked me to handle the fallout with Chad for her. Before Chad kissed me. Before I let him.

Life wasn’t meant to be preserved in amber, though. Already, the soft-focus memory of being seventeen was blurry around the edges. It was like clinging to a cloud. At seventeen, life had been perfect. Invincible. I had my friends, my girlfriend, my mom. Then poof, all gone. How had things gotten so complicated? Was it like this for everyone? How did you hold on to your life when it was changing so fast?