

THE  
YEAR  
THEY  
FELL

DAVID KREIZMAN

{Imprint}  
MAKE YOUR MARK  
New York



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The Curse of the Sunnies:  
Steal this book and be permanently unfriended.  
Each party you host will be minimally attended.

*For Tash*

THE  
YEAR  
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FELL

# 1

## DAYANA

ON THE NIGHT THEIR PARENTS' PLANE DID A header into the Caribbean Sea, Josie and Jack Clay threw the biggest blowout River Bank High School had ever seen. Wait. That came out really shitty. It's not like the twins knew about the crash during the party. Nobody in attendance did, especially not Archie Gallagher and Harrison Rebkin, whose parents were on the same doomed flight. I got *my* party on the way I always did: alone in my tiny, sweltering room, in front of the computer, stalking them all on social media.

I prepared my usual dinner: One blueberry Greek yogurt, two cans of Rock 'n' Roar energy drink, unicorn puke in my vape pen, and as many pills as I could swipe from Papi's stash. With my parents away on vacation, I had my pick of the in-home pharmacy. I lined up the bottles at the edge of my laptop like a tiny audience. Alprazolam, clonazepam, sertraline . . . the names of at least four different doctors on the labels. My father didn't move his ass for much those days, but

he never missed an opportunity to score from his enabler of the week.

I rattled out a few yellows with a name I recognized from the commercials. You know, the one starring White-Lady-Riding-Bike-with-Cat-in-Basket and Whiter-Dad-Climbing-Tree-with-Adorable-Kids. I swallowed the pills and washed them down with the energy bevs. Now *there's* a commercial I could get behind. Brown-Teen-with-Purple-Hair-and-Face-Full-of-Piercings swallows a magic pill and suddenly the world comes to life in vibrant colors. Birds sing and a butterfly lands on her shoulder. Her clothes explode in flowery pinks and ruffles. The rings and studs drop from her ears, nostril, septum, eyebrow, and upper lip. Mami would empty the rest of the bank account for that little miracle. What wouldn't she give to have her precious little princesa back?

While I waited for Papi's little helpers to do their thing, I joined Josie Clay's #epicClayparty #LastPartyBeforeSenior Year, already in progress. I clicked on a photo of blonde, beautiful Josie and her ginormous shaved-headed brother, Jack, on the porch pre-party. I hit print and watched as it rolled out.

Cyber lurking wasn't something I was super proud of. It's just what I did. It had been a hundred years since Josie, Jack, Archie, Harrison, and I were in the same class at Sunny Horizons Preschool. Josie dropped me as her bestie a long time ago. Or maybe I dropped her. Whatever. Things happen. People change. I wasn't bitter or anything.

If I'm being honest—and why the shit not at this point—

I kept watch on a lot of people. Their Snapchats, Instas *and* finstas. I was pretty much up-to-date on Jack, his whole football team, and the rest of the student council; pretty much all of Josie's followers. And she had A LOT of followers. All those characters I saw in the hallways. Spray-tanned white girls in miniskirts, making out with their hoodie-wearing boyfriends. I'm not saying I wanted to be part of their group. They were mostly asswaffles anyway. Their music was poser urban electronic techno-crap. They were fake to everyone outside their group and even faker to each other.

But they had drama. Stories. Lately my story was just a lot of me sitting home by myself getting high.

As #epicClayparty #LastPartyBeforeSeniorYear cranked up, Josie and her crew of look-alikes seemed to be spending more time posting pics, showing the world they were having fun rather than actually *having* fun. All of her *new* besties must have wanted a selfie with Josie. Josie in her clean white dress, holding a red cup and smiling like she'd just won Miss Teen New Jersey. Cody Salamone wearing a scarf and winter beanie with his board shorts, hugged her from behind. Was he her newest boyfriend? How long would *he* last? Josie was everywhere, that grin at the center of every post from the party. The smile wasn't real though. I knew that smile, the one that said "I'm not really here right now." It never quite reached her eyes.

While their house was under siege, Josie's 'rents were on their way to the islands with Mami and Papi, Archie's parents, and Harrison's mom. They'd become friends when we

were all in preschool together. And they were still friends, even if we weren't. I wondered what would happen in a few days when the Clays got home. Maybe they already knew about Josie and Jack's party and didn't care. By the time they returned, the cleaning lady would've fixed it all up anyway.

'Course my parents wouldn't have given two mouse balls if I'd thrown a party, invited the entire high school, and provided free meth at the door. Papi wouldn't even notice and Mami would be thrilled that I'd at least done something "normal." Not that anyone would come to my shindig anyway. And who could blame them for avoiding me? I've heard the rumors; that I'm a vampire or a Santeria witch or a Santeria vampire-witch. That I eat babies for breakfast. Didn't matter that I was a vegetarian. Most of the time. Not like anybody would talk to me to find out. Mami would say, "Daya, maybe if you try to look a little less . . . *rough*, people might not be so afraid to get close to you." I was okay with the distance. Really, I was.

I scrolled back through the latest posts in my feed, all filtered to perfection. But to me, the action in the background was the real show. There you got to see people in their natural states, when they didn't know the camera and I were looking. Frosh chick nervously fixing her lacy bra straps. Hot-shit wrestler gazing longingly at his teammate. I was about to scroll past a picture of a bored-looking Jack Clay when I spotted something really fucking weird over his left shoulder.

I clicked and zoomed in on two sad and lonely figures hovering near the snack table. Archie Gallagher clutched the bulky sketchbook jammed under his arm, his thick-framed glasses so smudged with Doritos dust I could barely see his eyes. I'd say he was the last person I'd ever expect to see at Josie's party, but he was at best tied with the pale, awkward creature looming above him. As far as I knew, Harrison Rebkin hadn't been to a party since his eighth birthday was shut down when he had a panic attack at Chuck E. Cheese's. What in Satan's name were these two doing there? We were all buds back at Sunny Horizons Preschool, but those days were way gone. Our little group had scattered to the winds years ago. No chance Josie invited those two and not me. Right?

With my brain starting to fuzz around the edges, I closed my eyes and saw myself gliding into the party. Atop the perfectly manicured lawn, the crowd would part for me. I'd feel the beat from the sound system going right through my body. Some of the less douchey guys might even check me out. Josie, in the middle of a conversation with a horde of her followers, would sense me at the door. She'd turn and smile, like no time had passed. Like we were four years old and she was my lifeline in the scary world of the Sunny Horizons Preschool playground.

### *I Am. Your. Friend.*

Just like she did then, she'd take my hand and lead me inside, where Jack, Archie, and Harrison were waiting. The five of us, the way it used to be back at Sunny H.

I pulled open the fridge. On shelf after shelf were perfectly lined-up containers, each labeled in Mami's neat lettering. Food from our native Costa Rica right next to our adopted American "cuisine." Casado cozying up to pasta with meat sauce and broccoli casserole. I had no desire to touch any of it. I wanted Mami to come home in a few days and see it all still sitting there. Rotting.

I cracked one of Papi's beers and took a few gulps, leaving the refrigerator door open. Was it possible I could hear the music from the party this far away? I let my head bounce forward and back to the beat I may have only been imagining. What if I *did* take a stroll over to Chez Clay. You know, for research. I could roll in all coolio, grab myself one of those red cups, and chill in the yard. It's not like I'd be bothering anyone. I mean, could I possibly be any more toxic than my old amigos Archie and Harrison?

My legs were getting a little rubbery, but I figured I could make the ten-minute walk to Josie's house if I started now. She would be happy to see me. I was really starting to feel that. Stopping by this party would change things between us. Maybe the pharms were doing a job on me, but I was starting to feel . . . hopeful? Like senior year could actually be different. Less lonely. Less . . . tragic. Jack and Josie had thrown a rager and somehow Archie and Harrison showed up. And now I was going, too. It had to mean something.

I stuffed a bottle of Xans into my shoulder bag; you know, for the road. Losing my buzz halfway there would be

disastrous. I reached for the door, but before I could open it, two beams of light flooded the kitchen.

Headlights were coming up the driveway. A car door slammed. Then another. Papi's car? It didn't make any sense. I looked out to see him trudging up the front steps, Mami was tearing after him, screaming in Spanish. I wasn't completely sure this was really happening. Why would they be here? It felt like they'd left just a few hours ago.

Mami usually tried to keep her English and Spanish separate. But when she was pissed, she was pissed en español and inglés.

Papi kissed me on the head and walked straight for the bathroom. Mami blasted through the front door after him. I wasn't sure this was actually happening.

"Wait. I don't . . . Aren't you supposed to be in Antigua?" I blurted.

"Anguilla," Mami snapped. "And no! We are not there because your papi's passport expired last month. Ask me when he checked. In the airport!"

"You didn't go?" I tried to shake out my brain. I thought I still heard the beat from Josie's party.

"¿Estás sorda? Six hours and a half trying to find a way to get on a plane. After what it took us to get *into* this country, and now we can't leave? So now Jennifer and the Gallaghers and the Clays are drinking margaritas on the beach while I'm here in this house on this street with this—" She stopped as she noticed the bag slung over my arm. "Are you going somewhere?"

“Oh, this?” I slurred. “There’s this, um, senior year party thing at Josie and Jack’s and weirdly Archie and Harrison are there so it’s kinda like this reunion thing maybe—”

Papi walked out of the bathroom holding several pill vials in his hand. Shit. “Daya, did you take some of Papi’s medicine tonight?”

Mami walked over, pried open my eyes like oysters, and shook my bag. “¿Drogas? You know what they do to you, how they pull the life from you?” She glared at Papi.

“So, can I get rolling to the shindig or what?” I asked.

“No,” snapped Mami. “No party! You will sit here with me and wait until the drugs are gone from your body.”

“What? You have no right to—”

“You could overdose. I will not find you tomorrow morning floating in Richard Clay’s pool.”

Mami’s rant was interrupted by a blast of music from her phone. She put it up to her ear. “¿Hola? Hello? . . . Yes, this is Vanesa Calderón. No, we did not get on the flight from Newark. We were not permitted to board.” She glared at my father. “Yes, connection to Island Hopper Airlines from St. Martin to Anguilla. With our friends. I booked it through—”

Her voice sounded far away. I leaned against the wall. I was starting to fade, and feeling like I could be sick. I let out a big yawn only a moment before the phone fell out of my mother’s hand and smacked on the cracked, yellowing tile. The rest, I have to admit, is kind of a clusterfuck in my brain.

Mami crying, choking out what the guy said to her on

the phone . . . Completely giving up on English. Papi coming to hug us . . . I was slipping away and scrambling out of the house . . . Almost plowing into a neighbor walking her yappy little dog . . . Running through the dark . . . Every block looking the same . . . Cars parked everywhere in the Clays' neighborhood . . . Loud hip-hop music . . . Nobody on the giant front lawn at Josie's like in my fantasy . . . Shoving the gate . . . Opening the door . . . Everyone looking at me . . . Thousands of eyes . . . The followers whispering at me, pointing . . . Some dick in his varsity jacket grabbing my arm, trying to drag me out . . .

Josie's new best friend, all in my face with fake lashes and her nasally voice that goes up at the end of everything she says. "Um, hi? Not trying to be rude? This is Josie and Jack's private party? You're not invited? You should probably find somewhere else to be?"

Josie, walking toward the door to investigate the disturbance at her party . . . Jack right behind her . . . Harrison and Archie hugging the wall near the stairs . . . We're all here, I thought. We're finally all here . . . The Sunny Horizons Preschool Class of 2007 . . .

I was so out of breath and wrecked out of my mind I could barely form a sentence. I braced myself against the wall, hoping just to stay on my feet. A different person might have planned a speech while she was staggering over to Josie's house. She would've had soothing words and a comforting tone. She could've eased into it and told them to sit down first. 'Course, a different person wouldn't have gotten so

messed up in the first place. Josie stared blankly as I reached out and touched her face. It was like it took her a few seconds to even recognize me.

“Dayana? What are you doing here?”

The only way to describe what happened next is to say it vomited out of me. “D-dead. I had to come say . . . the plane . . . It went down . . . Nobody made it . . . They’re all dead . . . Fuck me, I’m so wasted . . .”

I don’t know if there’s a right way to tell the four people who used to mean more to you than anyone in the world that their parents died in a plane crash, but I can confirm with absolute fuck-all certainty that there is a wrong way.

# 2

## ARCHIE

I CAN SEE THE FUTURE. THAT'S WHAT I USED to tell people. Also in my wheelhouse: mind control, super-speed, and X-ray vision. Oh, and I was born on another planet to genius scientists killed in an intergalactic civil war. Who wouldn't want to hang with someone like that? That last part could've even been true. It's not like I ever met my birth parents. And I know one thing: wherever I came from was much different from where I ended up.

In the comics being different meant you were special, gifted. In real life, different is just *different*. Being black with white parents doesn't really get you much, other than a million stares and insulting questions. Still, most of the time, dudes don't just start out as superheroes. Their powers only come out later, like after some experiment goes wrong or there's a terrible accident. A terrible accident, yeah.

All I'm saying is maybe there was a reason Jack Clay invited me to his party that night I ran into him at the

7-Eleven. I mean, in the last three years of high school and the previous three years of middle school before that, Jack and Josie had never even added me to one of their massive group chats, much less a guest list. So what inspired Jack to invite me that day if it wasn't, you know, fate or whatever?

Okay, so I did bust him loading up on red cups, Doritos bags, and other assorted party swag, which means guilt could be in the mix. Plus, he must've noticed how the rat-faced clerk was following me up and down the aisle making sure I didn't steal anything. I wanted to be like, yo, this giant angry bald white dude is a way bigger threat to store security than the black art nerd in the thick glasses. But that's the way it goes, even in a "progressive" town like River Bank. Different is different.

I lied again when I said I ran into Jack. More like he ran into me. Through me. I was just sucking down a Slurpee and looking at my sketchbook one second and the next I was counting the lights and covered in orange goo. I scrambled through the book, making sure none of my drawings were wet or smeared.

"Archie," grunted Jack. "Didn't see you there."

When I get nervous I have this habit of talking nonstop. Dad called it Jabber-Jaw. "My bad. I was looking down and I didn't see you and . . . It's hard not to see you. You take up the whole aisle. Practically the whole store. I don't usually do the orange Slurpee thing, but the Coke one was all watery and I like a thicker consistency. Anyway, I was on my way to see this girl and she asked me to get her one. Okay, that's a

lie. There's no girl. The orange was for me. But that guy was following me and—”

Jack reached down his paw and yanked me off the ground so hard I was momentarily airborne. “My parents are out of town for a few days,” he said once I’d landed. “Yours too, I guess.”

“Oh yeah. I’m solo, too. Well, not solo. I’ve got Lucas. Little brothers, right? What are you going to do? I didn’t even see my mom and dad when they left for the airport this morning. They let me sleep in. We’re cool like that. Plus, I had nothing to do, so . . .”

“Uh-huh. Anyway, we’re throwing a party. Jo is. End of summer, beginning of senior year thing. You should come.”

“I should?” My voice cracked with surprise.

He shrugged. “Sunny Horizons forever.”

Did Jack really feel that? Is that why he invited me? Did he really still think about the days when he and Josie and Harrison and Dayana and I were friends? Why would he? He had football and hot girlfriends and scaring ninth graders so much that they memorized his schedule and took elaborately planned detours to class. Of course, I still thought about our little group enough for all of us.

My house was like two and a half blocks from Sunny Horizons Preschool. I rode my scooter past the playground just about every day. Like a boss. Sunny H had changed since we were there. The faded blue awning with the yellow sun still hung above the entrance to the school. But years back, the people in charge decided that it was more important for

kids to be safe than to have fun. So now the play area was all soft and round. The huge oak we used to run around and climb up was now just a stump. Dad said the tree got some kind of virus and they had to put it out of its misery. I didn't even know that was a thing.

I know it's pretty sad that thirteen years later I still missed preschool. I get it's not normal. But it was never *normal*. I mean, who else makes the only real friends they've ever had when they're four? Guess I'm not really made for groups. I'm not sporty enough for the athletes, or smart enough for the brains. I'm not artsy enough for the other artists, or weird enough for the weirdos. I went through a phase where I tried to be black enough for the black kids, but I felt like a fraud and they knew it. But of course having white parents wasn't enough to make me blend in with the white kids either. So I was lost somewhere in the middle. But back at Sunny Horizons, Josie and Jack and Harrison and Dayana and I were all already different. We weren't one thing. We were everything. And somehow that made it work.

I always knew I was different. It wasn't like Mom and Dad could hide it from me. No one could look at us and think, *He came from them*. But they always told me skin color meant nothing. I was their son. Mom explained how hard they tried to have a baby the regular way. They did a bunch of shots and operations, and spent almost all of their money—that's how much they wanted a kid. But nothing worked, so they brought me home when I was two in what they call a closed adoption. Mom and Dad never got to see my original

birth certificate, or even learn the name of my birth mother. I wondered about her sometimes, but the law said I couldn't find out who she was until I turned eighteen. Laura and Phillip Gallagher were German-Dutch and Irish and they were the only parents I ever knew.

Mom said even though we were a family, it was important for me to hold on to my "culture." She would try out "soul food" recipes she'd found online and Dad would play jazz and hip-hop in the car. We'd have "African American Pride Night" where they'd rent movies about people like Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, and Madea. I never told them how uncomfortable those nights made me feel. Mom used to complain that there were no other black kids my age in the neighborhood. She set me up on playdates with Dayana Calderón, whose father had met Dad at work or something. Dayana didn't look anything like me, but she was born in Costa Rica and her skin was darker than their other friends' kids. The problem was, Dayana didn't speak English and I didn't speak Spanish. I don't remember much about those awkward playdates except feeling like Mom and Vanesa were watching us like pandas in the zoo.

So I discovered drawing. And comics. A place where people who are different can be heroes, where a group of freaks and oddballs can become a superteam and save the world. Every good comic starts with an origin story. But not every origin story ends with an ordinary loser becoming a costumed crusader fighting for truth and justice. Sometimes, an origin story is just about how a lost boy finds people who

change his life, and how a bunch of very different kids get put in a room by their parents and become something bigger.

Dayana only really knew one English sentence at first. Jack was always sick, and when he was in school, he spent most of his days in time-out. Harrison was full of worries and fears. It was Josie who brought us together. And it was Josie who kept us that way.

I've been told that most people don't remember much from preschool. But I have my drawings to remind me. They're sort of like a record of our time there. Mom kept them all. At least all the ones I didn't give to Josie.

In my first week at school, we were all playing hide-and-seek on the playground. Josie put a finger to her lips and silently showed me how to get up to the lowest branch on the big tree. She bounded up there in three seconds and when I struggled, she reached down and pulled me up with her. We sat there together and watched everyone run around below us. It felt so good to be up there with her. When we got back to the classroom that day, I drew a picture of Josie and me in the tree. I wanted to show it to her, but I was too scared. So at snack time, I walked over to her cubby and slipped it into her Yankees backpack. After that, I drew another picture every day. Sometimes it was of her or Jack or a squirrel on the playground or all five of us. I'd drop it into her backpack when she wasn't looking. She never mentioned the drawings to me, but I saw how she'd run to her cubby at the end of school. Like she couldn't wait to open it.

Dad took to calling us the World's Cutest Gang: "The

Sunnies.” We may have been cute, but we operated like the Hells Angels or any other badass gang. The Sunnies stuck together. We didn’t let anyone else in. And we were not afraid to fight for each other. Like when Jack got really sick the week of preschool graduation. Everyone thought he wouldn’t be able to leave home to be there. As the legend goes, Josie, Harrison, Dayana, and I decided that if Jack couldn’t be at the ceremony, then we wouldn’t go either. We did it together or not at all. Nothing our parents said would change our minds. Finally, Mr. and Mrs. Clay offered to host the graduation in their backyard so Jack could come outside and we could all graduate together. I’ve gone over my drawings from that day a lot of times. In a lot of ways, it was the beginning of the end of “The Sunnies.”

The Clays and the Rebkins and the Calderóns—these were Mom and Dad’s friends. As my parents told it, when they started trying to have a baby, they had moved out to the suburbs. Dad scored a civilian accounting job at the local army base, Fort Benson, and Mom found work as an ER nurse. They were pretty isolated until I came along, so my school gave Mom and Dad their social network. The four families came from different places, but they were all young parents and they formed a group, just like we did. They’d stick us kids out in the yard to play while they’d hang out and drink wine and laugh. At some point, they all decided they needed a couple of days in the sun without us around. So they called in babysitters or grandparents and they flew someplace warm for a long weekend. Which instantly

became a tradition; after that first trip, they went away together every year. And it all started at Sunny Horizons.

There's one part of preschool graduation I don't need drawings to help me remember clearly. We were sitting near the pool in Josie's backyard. Mom tried to take a picture of Dad and me, but he insisted she be in it. Mom hated having her picture taken. She always avoided it, but Dad said she'd be sorry one day when there were no photos of her at all. He handed his camera to Harrison's father, Bobby.

Bobby squeezed us together. "Hey, Arch, you psyched you're gonna be a big bro soon?"

I felt Mom and Dad stiffen behind me. Before Bobby could take the picture, Jennifer grabbed her husband by the sleeve and dragged him off so they could fight. Mom and Dad shared a weird look and she reached into her bag and handed me an oatmeal raisin cookie and a juice box. And that's how I learned I was going to be a big brother. In the six months since they'd discovered the news, Mom and Dad hadn't been able to find the right time to tell me they were having a baby.

"Is this baby going to be adopted, too?" I asked.

"No, kiddo. Your mom is pregnant. You know what that means, right?"

"I thought you couldn't have a baby like that. You said your tummy had a boo-boo."

"We thought so, too, sweetheart. It just . . . happened. I don't know why. Even the doctors say it's amazing. Maybe it's because you got me ready to be a mother."

“I was just here to get you *ready*? ”

“No! No, of course not. I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean that being your mom . . . I don’t know . . . Phillip? ”

“This is going to be a great thing, pal,” said Dad. They each took one of my hands.

I kept looking at Mom’s belly, picturing the baby inside it. “What color will his skin be? ”

Mom and Dad looked at each other again. “He’ll be white,” said Dad. “Like us.”

They did their best to say the right things. They’d only love me more. I’d always be their first. Nothing was going to change.

Everything changed.

The baby in Mom’s belly turned out to be my little brother, Lucas, who was a miracle before he was even born. Once out in the world he was the best infant and the cutest toddler. He slept like a dream and talked early and he ate all his veggies. Dad’s prayers had been answered. Lucas had this thing called coordination that somehow escaped me entirely. He could kick a soccer ball with both feet and throw a baseball harder than I could by the time he was four. He didn’t need glasses to see things that were far away. His palms didn’t sweat when a grown-up talked to him. He had Dad’s red hair and blue eyes and Mom’s smile. Everyone said so.

It’s a total bummer when you realize your baby brother is cooler than you are. He had more friends. Girls texted him. Coaches begged him to be on their teams. And the worst

part of all—Lucas was a great kid. He wasn't all cocky like some of the athletes. He pretended to look up to me, even though I knew that wasn't possible. Why would he? He'd ask me to have catches with him or play *Call of Duty*, and never rubbed it in my face after crushing me in both. He didn't make fun of my drawings or ask why I never had a girlfriend.

Life would've been so much easier if Lucas were a dick. At least then I could've hated him. At least then being jealous would've been acceptable.



After Sunny Horizons, Josie, Jack, Dayana, Harrison, and I headed to River Bank Elementary for kindergarten. And we stayed friends for a while. We'd always been such different people, but it didn't really matter. Until it started mattering. I was the first to see the little cracks. Jack picked everyone else to be on his team for kickball; Harrison's mom cancelled playdates while she was going through her divorce; Josie hung her backpack in her classroom lockers. My drawings stayed in my sketchbook. As the years went on, the cracks grew. Somehow when we walked out of Sunny Horizons, it's like the spell holding us together was broken.

It's a freaky thing, watching your friends change from a distance. Like that time-lapse photography where the buildings stay the same, but the clouds and the people race by. Jack, who'd always been small and sickly, hit a growth spurt and hulked out. Dayana spent middle school wearing

pink, sparkly skirts, but showed up in high school in oversize black T-shirts and combat boots. Harrison started busing to math classes at the local college. Josie . . . well, Josie is a whole different thing.

I'm sure I changed, too. But not that much. I still wore glasses and read comics and rode my scooter. I still only felt right when I was drawing. I thought about girls and sex, and sex with girls. But I never got anywhere close. And besides, there was only really ever one girl who mattered.

I tried to keep the gang together, but it was already too late for the Sunnies. I don't think the others even noticed. And if they did, they didn't seem to care. When the five of us were first drifting apart, I'd see one of them in the hallway and we'd talk or walk home together. But after a while we started running out of things to say to each other. So then it turned into a quick "hi." Before long it was just a nod. And then, finally, nothing at all. By the time we finished our junior year of high school, I guess you could say we were pretty much strangers to each other.

Until the day our parents fell out of the sky.

# 3

## JACK

THE LIFE DRAINED FROM JOSIE'S FACE. HER mouth drooped open. Her arms turned to rubber. She fell back against the wall and her knees collapsed.

"Jo?" I tried to yell over the music, but my voice came out like a whimper. "Jo . . . ?"

A minute ago, Jo had commanded the living room. Pouring drinks, dancing on the bar, flirting with her boyfriend, directing the DJ. This was her party. Her world. Now my twin sister was a puddle on the floor.

I finally found my voice. "Get away from her!"

Dayana kept cursing and crying and saying how sorry she was and how beautiful my parents were.

"Shut up! Stop. Stop talking so I can think."

*Get Josie out of here.* The one clear thought in my head. Get her somewhere safe. Her dress was riding up her thighs, so I leaned over to tug at the bottom, and that's when I got a close look at her eyes. Fixed. Empty. The black parts swal-

lowing up the green. I didn't know if Dayana was telling the truth about Mom and Dad, but Josie was gone. And I was alone.

I scooped her up into my arms. I hadn't carried her like this since that time on the softball field four years ago. Back then I could barely lift her. Now I hardly felt her weight at all. All around us, the party went raging on.

Her best friends didn't even notice she'd gone down. All those worshippers, trading loyalty for selfies and perfect parties. Feeling important because she let them be around her. Now they were too busy getting wasted and hooking up to even move aside for us. But if I was good at anything it was making people move out of the way.

Archie put his hand on my shoulder and I almost took a swing at him. "What happened to her?" he asked.

Earlier that night, Josie had found me alone by the keg in the backyard. When I stayed inside the party too long, bad things started to go on in my head. The music, everybody yelling at once, flooding my brain with noises and information. My girlfriend, Siobhan, kept trying to have "a talk." I couldn't concentrate on a word she was saying so I gave up and came outside for air.

Josie slid open the glass patio door, sneezing as she walked outside. "I always get sick when I'm stressed out," she said.

I handed her a napkin and she pushed it away. "I thought we understood our roles on planning the party," she snapped. "I do the heavy lifting and you lift heavy things."

"What's wrong?" I went back over the assignments she'd

given me. Keg, snacks, cups. I'd written it on my right hand so I wouldn't forget anything this time.

"Did you invite Archie Gallagher?"

Oh. I could see inside where Archie was nursing a beer by the snack table. Harrison stood next to him. I know I didn't invite *him*. "I didn't think he'd actually show up. Did he bother you or something?"

"No. No, it's not like that. It's just . . . tonight's supposed to be perfect. I need it to be."

"You want me to throw him out?"

Cody appeared at the door and smiled at her through the glass.

"It's fine," Josie said, making herself smile back at Cody. "I'll be fine."

She'd been planning this party all junior year. Maybe even longer. She'd decided who would be there, what they would eat and drink, what the DJ would play, even how they would hashtag the event. Both our names were at the top of the invites, but Jo ran the show. I moved the furniture and rolled up Mom's expensive rugs, carried the kegs to the yard, chatted up neighbors, and traded football stories with the cops to make sure we wouldn't get shut down. She'd never risk giving me more responsibility than that. And that was fine. I knew my role.

When I was about eight, I found one of those sonogram pictures the doctor took of Mom's stomach when she was pregnant. Fetus A—Josie—was facing forward, looking straight at the camera. Fetus B, on Josie's left, was curled up

and turned toward her. They found out later that the way we were stuffed in there kept me from getting all the nutrients I needed. But Dad said it just looked like I was waiting for her to tell me what to do.

I looked down at motionless Josie in my arms. Archie was still blocking our path. And now Harrison was there, too. They were the only two people in the party who'd noticed.

"Did she pass out?" asked Archie.

"It's very hot in here," said Harrison. "She looks flushed."

"Can I get her water? I think I should get her water. Where is the water? All I see is beer and—"

A thought sliced through my head. *Their parents were on the plane, too.* I pushed that aside and used Josie's legs to shove Archie and Harrison out of the way. Then I carried her upstairs and punted open the door to her bedroom.

Josie's room was one massive collage of wall-to-wall pictures of Josie with her friends. Thousands of smiles and duck lips and peace signs. So forced and phony. I eased her down onto the bed and propped fluffy white pillows under her head. Jo's eyes were open, but she didn't look at me or at anything else.

"We're going to figure this out, Jo. I promise."

I slammed open her laptop, typed in her password, and googled *plane crash*. 56,500,000 results. A jumble of words and images. Like all fifty-six million results were on the screen at the same time. Plane crashes in Germany, in South Korea, in Salt Lake Fucking City. What island were they on?

What island were they flying to? Aruba? St. Something? Shit, I wrote it down somewhere.

I dug through my pockets for the paper where Mom wrote her instructions, but all I could find were two dimes and an empty gum wrapper. Why hadn't she just texted them to me? What was the name of the island? Something with an A . . . Antigua? *Plane crash Antigua*. Nothing within the last year. Anguilla! Mom said they were flying to one island and then transferring to one of those little puddle jumpers. She hated flying, especially small planes . . . *Plane crash Anguilla*. First result.

I squeezed my eyes. Locked them in. Focused. One word at a time. *If it's hard to concentrate, try harder*, Dad used to say. *I know you're smart. You're my son. But you'll never get anywhere if you don't apply yourself. Don't listen to those labels from your teachers. Labels are excuses for being lazy*.

"Six Americans Dead in Offshore Plane Crash." I gripped the laptop until my knuckles turned white. The bass was thumping downstairs. The ceiling fan whirred over Josie. My heart beat in my ears. I tried to read the full article, but my eyes jumped all around. Words popped off the screen . . .

KILLED    SMALL PLANE CRASHED  
NEW JERSEY    INSPECTOR    WALLAS LAKE POLICE  
TWIN-ENGINE    RESCUE AND RECOVERY  
                  SHALLOW WATERS  
NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE    DECEASED PERSONS    NTSB  
NO SURVIVORS    VICTIMS' IDENTITIES

*No survivors. Victims. Deceased.* I hurled Josie's laptop across the room. It shattered against the wall and she still didn't budge.

"They're gone, Jo," I whispered. "They're gone."

I grabbed a blanket and threw it over her legs. "Wake up. Please."

A loud *WOOO* exploded through the open door from downstairs. Up here, the world had just broken forever, but downstairs everything was the same.

I wandered down to the living room barely feeling my legs. It's like I was watching it all in a movie. The lacrosse guys were standing on the couch doing shots. A pack of drunken girls were attempting to rap along to the music near the DJ. Some wasted idiot was leaning his head against a photo of our family trip to the Cape.

I felt rage and pressure building up inside me. Like on the football field. Or when Dad got in my face. I hated this fucker touching our picture. I wanted to hurt him and everyone else in the room. I shoved two people aside and headed straight for him. But before I could reach the guy Siobhan came up and stuck her hand in my back pocket.

"Sorry about before, babe. You know I hate it when you don't listen to me? Where've you been? Someone said Josie's really messed up?" The music was pounding my head.

"Jacko!" Cody was holding Dayana by the arm. "What did 'Walking Dead' say to Josie? What's going on, dude?"

I grabbed Cody by the throat and slammed the back of

his head against the door. Then I dragged him out to the porch and launched him down the steps. When I walked back inside, the party had suddenly gone quiet.

I shoved the DJ and snatched his mic. “Get out!” I shouted. “Get the fuck out! All of you.”

When they didn’t move, I moved them. When they resisted, I got rough. When they tried to reason with me, I got rougher. Soon they were running out on their own.

Siobhan tried to talk to me, but I shut her down, too. “Go. Just go with your friends.”

I don’t know if it took five minutes or two hours to clear the room of all but three. When I finally slammed the door I was breathing heavy and bleeding from a scratch on my arm. Only Archie, Harrison, and Dayana were left. The three who were never supposed to be here in the first place.

Archie looked panicked. “We were just about to—”

“Go upstairs,” I growled. “She’s already in there.” Dayana covered her mouth and stumbled past me.

Archie used the back of his hand to wipe his glasses. “You want us to go up to Josie’s room?”

Upstairs, Josie hadn’t moved. I couldn’t be sure she’d even blinked. Her feet were poking out of the blanket, her shoes resting on the clean, white comforter. I carefully unstrapped them and tossed them on the floor.

From the open bathroom came a horrible, guttural sound. “*Bluuuuuch!*” Dayana was kneeling in front of the toilet, puking her guts out.

“Hey,” said Archie. “You realize this is like the first time

we've all been in the same room together in like thirteen years."

"Bluuuuch!"

"Well, pretty much the same room. I mean, I'm not sure you count the bathroom, but we did walk in at the same time so that probably counts. Not that it matters, but I'm just saying."

Harrison reached down to pick up the pieces of Josie's laptop. "What happened to this computer? You're going to need it for the start of school. I think I could fix it if you'd like me to . . ."

"Jack," said Archie, "what's wrong with Josie? 'Cause it seems like she's—"

"Don't go near her!" I shouted.

Archie pushed up his glasses and backed away. "Sorry. Has she said anything? Anything at all?"

On the wall behind Josie's bed hung a photo of Mom and Dad holding us at our Sunny Horizons backyard graduation. Dad was smiling and gripping a bunch of balloons, Mom was wearing her tennis whites. It was the last time the five of us had all been in this house together with our parents. "Something happened." *Small plane crash. No survivors.* Archie and Harrison looked at me with these dumb expressions on their faces. "There was . . . an accident. That's what Dayana came here to say. There was an accident." *Victims' identities. Deceased persons.* "Our parents. The plane. It was like one of those little shitty ones that go island to island. They didn't make it."

They weren't getting it. Or didn't want to get it. Archie clutched the sketchbook under his arm. "What do you mean, they didn't make it?"

"Didn't make it. The plane went down."

Harrison looked curious. "You're saying there was a crash?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying. The fucking plane carrying my mom and dad and your parents—"

"My parents?" asked Archie.

"Yes, yours, too." I wanted to bash their heads together.

Harrison already had his phone out, tapping it frantically. "Mom, it's me. Call me as soon as you get this. It's urgent."

What was wrong with them? "She's not calling you back. Are you listening? They fucking crashed. There were no . . . There were no survivors . . ."

"Oh, God," moaned Archie as it finally hit. He leaned over and the glasses slipped off his face as he put his hands on his knees. "Oh, God. Oh, God."

Harrison stared at his phone. "She didn't call. My mother had an international plan on her phone. If the plane were going down it would've taken minutes before it crashed. If she was aware of what was happening, she would've—"

"Oh, God. Oh, God."

My hand clenched into a fist. "Stop saying that!"

Archie bolted straight up. "Lucas. My little brother. I have to tell my brother. Oh G—" He caught himself and took a step away from me.

Dayana stumbled out of the bathroom, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. “Do you have Lysol? Shit. It’s a mess.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“About your parents. Did the airline call you?”

“No, my parents weren’t . . . They’re not . . . Papi—his passport. They couldn’t go. They weren’t on the plane . . . I’ll grab some paper towels to clean up and then I’ll leave. I should go.”

Wait. Her parents were alive?

Archie was crying and sucking in big gulps of breath. “Josie?”

“She’ll be fine,” I snapped. “Don’t worry about her.”

“But is she . . . ?”

“I said she’ll be fine!”

He swiped an arm across his nose. “Jack, I think . . . I think I saw her like this once before. Well, not this bad, but quiet and—”

I ordered them to leave. All three of them. I wanted them out. I needed to be alone with my sister. I would take care of her this time. I would protect her.

I heard the front door close. Josie’s chest moving up and down was the only sign she was still alive.

“Don’t do this to me, Jo. Please, talk to me.” She didn’t move an inch. Not even her eyes.

I took off my shoes and climbed up onto the big, soft bed. My weight made it creak and sag in the middle. The house was silent now except for Josie’s breathing. It sounded ragged,

like she'd taken water into her lungs. Just like in that old sonogram, Josie was facing forward. I curled up on her left, turned toward her.

Waiting for her to tell me what to do.



When we were kids, lying beside Jo was the only thing that quieted my thoughts and calmed me down. Most of the day, there was this *pressure* racing around in me. Pushing me to move around, to do something, anything. Sitting still in class was torture. I'd yell out or throw a book or kick someone else's chair just to let some of that energy out. And then when Dad came home he'd yell at me for getting in trouble at school again and the pressure would build some more.

But when it got really bad, Jo always knew when to pull me away to her room. I'd lie back, stare at the ceiling, and concentrate on her voice while she talked about softball or her friends or whatever. There was finally peace. And relief. But as I lay next to her the night of the party, she was silent and the thoughts in my head were never louder.

Dad's parents, Grandma Nelly and Grandpa Ralph, arrived after 5 A.M. and found me there, still waiting for Josie to talk. They'd both been crying, but they were dressed nicely like they always were.

"Josie, can you hear me? It's Grandpa. Can you say something, sweetie?"

I told them she'd be fine, that she just needed a little time to deal, but Grandpa called his friend Dr. Mike to ask his

advice. Grandma seemed very worried about the mess downstairs. “People are going to be coming here, Jack. We can’t leave it like this. Your parents wouldn’t have wanted that.” So she called Marybeth with the news that her longtime clients were dead, and their house wasn’t going to clean itself. Marybeth showed up, shaky and sniffling, and Grandma followed her around the house pointing out spots she was missing.

As soon as the stores opened, Grandpa started making trips to delis, supermarkets, and coffee shops. “Your mom and dad meant something to a lot of people. To this community. You will never be alone. Wait until you and Josie see how they come out to support you.”

He was right about the people. But wrong about Josie seeing it.

While Jo remained under, our house filled up and stayed that way. News of the crash spread and by the next morning cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors, Dad’s coworkers, Mom’s book club, even strangers started showing up. All I wanted to do was stay with Jo, but Grandma forced me to shower, shave, put on nice clothes, and come downstairs. “At least *one* of you needs to be there. And Dr. Mike is going to stop by later. I’d like him to take a look at Josie.”

Everyone asked about Jo. When you’re 6’4”, 260 pounds, and your parents just died, you can’t hide. Without Josie, I had to be the host of the party. Put on a jacket, greet people at the door, thank them for coming, listen to their boring stories, their bullshit clichés. When I tried to disappear to

the basement to hit the heavy bag, Grandpa stopped me to deliver a speech about being “the man of the house.” His son would be proud.

When we were six, Mom made Jo and me take piano lessons with some lady down the block. For a year, all we practiced was how to play “Heart and Soul,” that duet everyone knows. Jo got it right away. As usual, it took me eight times as long. I had a hard time sitting still on that bench. But eventually I got it.

Once we had it down, the lessons stopped. And at every single party in our house Mom would lead us to the piano like a couple of show ponies. We’d sit at the piano, Josie playing the high notes and me playing the low ones. Mom would announce to everyone that this song was perfect for us because her twins really were two parts of a whole. I was the heart and Josie was the soul. I wondered if the people in our house the day after the crash were waiting for an encore.

Grandpa’s buddy Dr. Mike showed up looking like he’d just come from playing eighteen at the golf course.

“Thanks for coming, Mike. My granddaughter is upstairs.”

Dr. Mike shook my hand and didn’t let go. “I’m sorry, pal. Your dad . . . I ever tell you about the time we won the member-guest tournament? So Rich lines up the putt and I’m thinking there’s no way. Not even Rich Clay can make this. I mean, you know your dad. The guy was like a god, but—”

“Who the fuck cares?” It shot out of my mouth before I

could stop it. But it felt good. I'd been keeping it inside so long.

"Excuse me?"

"Who. The. Fuck. Cares? He's not a god. He's dead. Mom's dead, too. And Josie might as well be dead. Who the fuck cares about golf and cold cuts and stains on the fucking carpet?"

Grandpa rushed over and dug his fingers into my bicep. "What are you doing, Jackie? Everyone's looking at you."

I ripped my arm away and he stumbled back into the bar, knocking a bottle of vodka to the ground, where it shattered. As Grandma hurried over to clean it up, I bolted out the door, ripped off my sports jacket, and just kept going. I ran down our block and kept going. Past Dayana's house. Then Archie's. Past Sunny Horizons.

My legs were shot and my lungs were burning, but I ran as hard as I could. I only stopped when I got to the beach and I couldn't go any farther. I stood there, sucking in the salty air, staring at the waves. I know the ocean is supposed to calm some people down. I didn't get that. It never stopped moving. Encroaching onto the land. Wave after wave after wave. Relentless. Pulling everything in, smashing it back down.

When I finally staggered back up the driveway at home it was dark out and my dress shirt was soaked through with sweat. My calf started to cramp and I bent over to stretch when I noticed the smell of a cigarette. I limped into the backyard, where a woman in a black dress was smoking

behind a bush. She spun around when she heard me approaching.

Dayana's mom. "Vanessa?" I said uncertainly.

"Lo siento. Jack, sorry . . ." Her voice sounded dry and hollow.

The back door slid open. We hung back as Grandpa Ralph walked outside to show off the pool to an older couple I didn't recognize. When they went back inside, Vanessa coughed violently. Her face looked puffy and swollen, like a boxer's.

"Daya . . . She is in the car."

"You can come inside. Both of you."

I heard jingling as Dayana hurried around the corner. Her eyes were red and glassy. "We should go, Mami. I told you this was a mistake."

Why? Vanessa was their friend. She worked with Dad at the law firm. She probably knew him better than most of the people inside. "*They're* the ones who should go home," I said. I can't deal with everyone saying the same shit, the same pointless shit. "'They were wonderful people.' 'They loved you.' 'They were lucky to have you.' I just stare and nod."

"It's like Mom and Dad are throwing a party, but they're not here. And Jo's gone," I said.

Dayana let go of her mother's arm. "Still?"

"I don't understand," said Vanessa. "Where did Josie go?"

"She's awake and her eyes are open, but she's not there. I don't know where she is. My grandparents want her to see a doctor. I just . . . I just need her to wake up."

“If you need help, don’t be afraid to ask.” Vanesa removed another cigarette from her purse and lit it with a shaky hand. She looked over at Dayana. “Fourteen years and not one smoke,” she said, “since we arrived here.” The cigarette slipped from her fingers and dropped to the ground. She cursed in Spanish, then said, “Your dad. He was a busy man. I know he was hard on you, but—”

“Mami! He just said he doesn’t want to hear bullshit. Come on.” Dayana started to drag her mother back to the car.

“What’s it like?” I asked, stopping them in their tracks.  
“What?”

“What’s it like to be almost dead?”

Vanesa stared at me. I wished I hadn’t asked that.

She just turned and ran off.

Dayana didn’t know what to do. “I’m sorry, Jack. I’m sorry it’s all so fucked-up.”

I stood there in the driveway. Alone again. Vanesa’s cigarette smoldered in the flower bed. I stubbed it out with my heel and watched the smoke float up and slowly drift off into the sky. I dropped to my chest at the side of the pool and dunked my head into the cool water. I thought about how when she was little Jo used to sit at the bottom of the pool and how it always freaked me out. With my face in the water, I couldn’t hear anything coming from inside the house. I kept my head under until my lungs burned and I started to feel light-headed. Until I couldn’t last any longer. *Almost dead.*

I pulled my face out and gasped for air as the water

dripped off my shaved head. As I stood up, I got a weird feeling someone was watching me. I looked over at the blue house peeking out of the trees behind ours. In a small window on the top floor, a ghostly face pressed against the glass. As soon as I spotted him, Harrison pulled the blinds closed and disappeared.

I turned and walked back toward the house, toward Josie. The house had never been more full of people and it had never been emptier.

# 4

## JOSIE

OF COURSE I HEARD ALL THE RANDOMS coming and going. Grandma kept bringing visitors into my bedroom to talk to me. They had lots of kind and loving words to say about Mom and Daddy. And I could feel the vibration of my phone blowing up next to me. I heard Jack promise everything would be okay. I also heard him go into the bathroom by himself, turn on the water, and scream until his voice was hoarse.

But most of the time it was coming from far away.

When I was little, I liked to see how long I could hold my breath underwater. Daddy would set his stopwatch and I'd fill my lungs and sink to the bottom of the pool. I liked hanging out down there. The sun made these shimmering reflections that looked like the sky on a different planet. You could hear voices at the surface, but it's like they were coming from someplace else.

So when Dayana's words sunk in at the party, it's like this

hole opened behind her, one only I could see. I just wanted to go away, to pretend that none of this was real. So I pinched my nose and I dove in. As a kid, I never got to see how long I could stay down there because Jack would get all anxious, dive in, and try to drag me to the top. He was small and not very strong, but he kept tugging at me until I had to come up. Daddy said it was just like Jack to give up before I did.

He was a lot bigger and stronger now, and he worked hard to drag me to the surface, but I kept going under again. Underwater was peaceful and safe. Time didn't matter. Nothing was real. I didn't have to think about Daddy and Mom.

What was the last thing I said to them? I couldn't even remember. I was in the middle of some text-chain drama over the party guest list when they hopped a car to the airport. Did I even say goodbye?

Jack brought me food and changes of clothes, and I could hear how he was struggling. I know that when things go wrong for Jack, he sometimes does dangerous things. Destructive things. Like when he stole Daddy's car and crashed it. I couldn't let him do that. So I tried to resurface. For Jack.

I'd been down here before. And I'd made it back up. But this time as I pulled and kicked, as much I reached for the light, there were weights on my ankles, dragging me down.

Jack was out for another run when Grandma led Siobhan and Cody into my room. Siobhan had been my best friend since I chose to sit next to her in ninth-grade science. She was

tall and popular and you did not want to get on her bad side. But she was loyal to me and she was willing to be mean so I didn't have to. Cody was everything you could ask for in a boyfriend. Hot, sensitive. He was a surfer so he had a great body and this amazing messy hair. And he never asked for more than I gave him. I watched from underwater as they arrived at my bedside. Siobhan was crying. She'd brought me flowers and when I didn't reach out for them, she set them across my legs.

*You should see your feed. It's so full of love right now.*

*Cody squeezed onto the bed next to me. I mean when the party ended like that, we didn't really know what was happening, babe. And then Jack went apeshit and started throwing everyone out. If you guys had told us right away . . .*

*Siobhan patted my hand like she was petting a scared dog. We wouldn't have gotten so pissed. When you didn't text back last night, I was freaking? Like, when do you not text back? And then I was like, what, am I not good enough to be with you when your parents die? Like aren't I supposed to be there for you and Jack? But then someone said you were like in a coma or whatever so we rallied? Wait. Can she even hear us? She moved to the other side of me. I think we should selfie this, just so everyone knows you're okay.*

*Is she okay?* Cody whispered.

Jack returned to find them squeezed into my bed as Siobhan tried to find the right camera angle. His voice was tight as he asked them to leave the room. I could hear him unloading on them once they got to the hallway. *Don't come*

*back here without asking me first. I don't care what my grandparents say. Just go!*

When Jack came back into my room, Grandpa Ralph and Grandma Nelly followed him. *Why did you let them in here?!*

Grandma Nelly picked up my wrist to check my pulse. *They love her, Jack. She can't just stay in here by herself. What if I call over your friends? Archie and Harrison and the Calderón girl.*

*They aren't our friends.*

*Of course they are. You share something. Josie needs that. She needs people.*

*She needs me.*

Grandma Nelly cleared her throat twice and nodded at Grandpa. He blew his nose into a handkerchief. *Jackie, your grandmother and I want to take Josie to see someone. A specialist.*

*I let you march Dr. Mike in here to see her. He said she's fine.*

*He didn't say she's fine. He said give her another day and then bring her in. And Dr. Mike is an orthopedist, not a therapist. Your sister requires professional help.*

*I'm helping her, Jack insisted. She'll come out of it. She's eating, right?*

*Barely, said Grandpa Ralph. She's barely breathing. I did a search on this. What she's doing is called dissociating. It's a symptom of post-traumatic stress. It's serious. People come in here and look at her like she's some kind of oddity—*

*I don't give a shit about those people. I don't even know half*

*of them. Let them come here and stare and eat the fifty-seven pounds of chicken salad you bought, but you're not taking Jo anywhere.*



*Today's the day, Jo. They're calling it a memorial service instead of a funeral since the bodies . . . Unless you want Grandpa dropping you off at the hospital, I'm going to need you to stay with me. And if you don't shower and get dressed, Grandma will do that for you. Your black dress, with the stuff on the shoulders, is hanging on the door. Be downstairs in twenty. What do you say before every party? "Game face on."*

I turned my head to look at him.

Jack stopped at the door. *Jo—*His voice caught in his throat. *We're gonna be okay, Jo. I mean, not okay-okay. Not for a long time. Maybe never again. If I said different, you'd know I was lying. But okay. I'm here when you're ready. I'm heart. You're soul.*

So I hauled myself off the bottom of the pool and got dressed for my parents' memorial service. But I sank back down when Jack started to cry in the limo.

Archie was right. This wasn't the first time I'd almost let myself sink to the bottom when life on the surface got too ugly. I'd been down here before, when all that stuff happened with Coach Murph. When it got really bad.

'Course it wasn't always like that. At the beginning it was great. He was the best softball coach I'd ever had.

When I was ten, Coach taught me how to throw a windmill pitch. "You put a little action at the end and the ball

will rise up right at the batter's chin. She'll be too afraid you're gonna take her head off to even think about swinging. And, JC, you just give her that sweet smile and let her know you own her."

Coach Murph called me "his little machine," and together we won three league championships, two AAU golds, and four all-star tournaments. I'd never had a coach who cared as much as he did. I'd never had an anyone who cared as much as he did. Daddy was always traveling and Mom was on fifteen charity boards, but Coach never missed a game. He even offered to drive me to practice and tournaments in the blue Mustang he called "Shirley." On the road, he introduced me to his "old-guy music," like Bruce Springsteen and Guns N' Roses. For some reason, he really liked singers who screamed. He talked to me like a real person, not just a kid. He told me about life, how he'd wanted to be a pro baseball player but had to give it up when his elbow got shredded. How I should never lose sight of what I want because one day you could wake up and find you're working at a car dealership and coaching girls AAU softball just to stay close to the game you love. Not that he didn't find it rewarding.

Daddy was in D.C. on business when we won states. I'd never seen Coach Murph so happy. After the game, he gave me the trophy and told me to keep it in my room because I deserved it. On the way home, Coach asked if I was hungry. I waited in the car while he picked up some sandwiches. He drove Shirley down near the beach and parked, but he left the key in the ignition so we could listen to the radio.

He handed me my chicken sandwich, and then he pulled out a bottle of wine and a plastic cup. “Do you have any idea how proud I am of you?”

“Thanks.” I’d seen him have a couple of beers at a softball picnic, but he’d never had a drink in the car before.

He poured himself a cup, drank it, and refilled. “It’s so wrong that your parents weren’t there to see what you did today. It’s the same thing with Christine. She doesn’t understand why I do this, why it means so much to me. To us.”

Coach hardly ever talked about his wife in front of me. She’d never been to one of our games. “Christine doesn’t want you to coach softball?”

“We were really young when we got married,” he said. “It’s different now. We’re different.” He reached down and lowered the radio.

“Are you gonna get divorced?” I asked, in between bites of my sandwich. Coach held out his cup and offered me a sip of the wine. My heart sped up and I got a weird feeling in my stomach. I liked that he saw me as mature enough to drink with him. I liked how he talked to me; even how he looked at me.

That’s how it was when it all started. We’d get together and just talk a lot. He really cared about what I had to say. Like he wanted my opinion on things. I told him about how Jack was always fighting with Dad over his grades and how he didn’t want Harrison to tutor him anymore because he was embarrassed that he needed help. I told him how it hurt that Dayana never invited me over to her new house. I even

gave him one of my favorite drawings from Archie, the one of me in my softball uniform.

Whenever I wanted to see Coach, he was there. If I needed a ride, he'd leave work to pick me up. I could text him in the middle of the night about the dumbest things and he'd write back in like seconds.

*You awake?*

*IM now*

*Yankees won ☺*

*Yanks suk. Go Mets*

He didn't need me to take care of him like Jack did. And he didn't treat me like I needed to be taken care of either. Jack blamed Dad for always working and not being around. When he told me he hated that I relied on Coach to take me to games and practice, I accused Jack of being jealous. I said he liked it better when he was the only guy I could talk to. And all of that was before anything was even going on.

I did feel bad that I wasn't around for Jack. He was getting into even more trouble at school, ignoring his homework and not even studying for tests. He talked back to teachers and sometimes just walked out of class. Dad was on him all the time. There was so much yelling in the house. But that just made me love the days I spent with Coach even more. I loved the sound of Shirley's engine pulling up the driveway, the shiny blue exterior and the smell of the leather seats. When Coach was driving, I'd rest my hand on top of his. We'd go out to the diner and our knees would secretly touch under the table. It was confusing, but it was exciting,

too. I knew we were more than friends, but I told myself there was nothing wrong with it. We were just close. And that could happen at any age. He cared about me. I think I could've stayed like that forever.

During the winter of my eighth-grade year, stuff started changing. Coach said things were getting worse at home, that Christine was being really mean to him. Always criticizing everything he did or said. He'd pick me up and he'd already smell like beer or wine. He didn't want to talk as much, but he was cutting practices short so that we could have more alone time before he dropped me off at home.

In the car one day he watched me put on lip balm and he asked if he could try it. I started to hand it over, but instead he leaned over into me and pressed his lips against mine. I was scared. I knew it didn't feel right, but he was my coach. He went in a second time, pressing his weight against me and this time using his tongue to open my mouth.

After that, kissing became a part of the car rides. Then touching. By the spring he was whispering he loved me. He talked about what it would be like when I was older and we could be together for real. All I ever wanted was to make Coach Murph proud of me. So I kept getting in that blue Mustang, even after the sound of the engine made me want to cry and the smell of the leather seats made me sick to my stomach. I never told him to stop. Not when he reached under my shirt or undid my belt. Not when he took my hand and showed me what to do with it. Not at the overnight tournament in Maryland when he asked me to wait for the other

girls to fall asleep so I could sneak into his hotel room. Not even when he took my hand and told me he couldn't wait any longer to be with me.

Everything in my body was screaming to get out of that hotel room. But the screams stayed inside as he led me over to the king-size bed and pulled back the dingy covers. And as Coach lay down on top of me I figured out how to sink to the bottom of the pool.



I worked hard every day to never again be that girl who had to go underwater because she felt helpless and afraid. And I did it all on my own. I didn't ask for help. Not even from Daddy. I knew I could fight my way up again. Because I had to. So I forced myself to surface in the funeral home and I treaded water as hard as I could.

I didn't sink when Jack guided me out of the limo and into a sea of black. Even with all those people surrounding me, hugging me, touching me. When Cody came up from behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, I resisted the urge to scream and to push him away until Jack finally pried him off. When the service was over, I followed Jack into the small lobby, where too many people were crammed in. A man in a wrinkled suit with a bunch of little Band-Aids on his neck touched my arm. This set off Jack, who spun around to face him. It was Nelson, Dayana's father. Dayana stood behind him, her purple hair covering most of her face.

"Jack, Josie, I'm so very sorry for your loss," Nelson said.

“They were wonderful people, your parents. If I could have traded places with them—”

“Papi!” Dayana looked like she was going to say something more, but I turned away. I turned away and that’s when I saw *him*.

In the back corner of the lobby, reading a program, was Coach Murph. He’d grown a beard and his hair was shorter. I recognized the brown corduroy blazer he’d worn for every end-of-season softball awards night.

“... And the MVP trophy goes to . . . Josie Clay. Shocker, huh? Come on up and grab another, JC.”

Maybe Coach Murph felt me notice him, or maybe he was only pretending to read the program in the first place. He looked at me. Looked. At. Me. He put his hand on his heart, smiled sadly and mouthed, “Hi, JC.”

Suddenly, I was sinking faster than I ever had, rocketing to the bottom, the breath flying from my lungs. I reached for Jack, for anything that might slow me down. I was drowning, watching the world disappear maybe forever this time. And just as I was about to crash, I felt a hand grab mine. It was smooth and clammy, so unlike Jack’s rough, beefy paws. I blinked and saw that the hand belonged to Archie.

He leaned in, his breath smelling of mint. “You need to get outside?”

“Yeah.”

Behind his thick lenses, his eyes grew wide. “You said something.”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Archie wasn’t as good at opening holes in a crowd as Jack, but he made up for it with a complete willingness to knock into any man, woman, or child between us and the door. He used his sketchbook like a shield, battering people out of our way. He led me through group after group, with each step pulling me farther and farther away from Coach Murph.

Finally, we arrived at the twin poster boards near the entrance. The way the photos were placed, Mom and Daddy appeared to be looking at you as you walked in between them.

Daddy flashed his half smile like he’d just told a joke. He told the best jokes. They always cheered me up when I was sad or upset, and when I laughed, he’d hug me and tell me I was his girl.

Mom had this way of making a photo look as if she were caught in the middle of having the best time of her life. Her friends said she could always make the best of any situation. Her giant funeral headshot was no different. *Can you believe our plane crashed? I mean, how crazy is that?!*

Archie must’ve sensed me falling into the vortex between the photos. He tugged hard on my hand, yanking me through the door and into the blinding sunlight. “You okay?” he asked. “Sorry, stupid question. Of course you’re not. But you’re talking again?”

“I guess so.” I was as surprised as he was.

He handed me a mint from his pocket. “How come?”

“You talked to me and I wanted to answer.”

“Is that the first thing you said? Since the party?”

I nodded. “I was sitting underwater. Even if I said something, even if I tried to yell, I don’t think it would’ve come out. Nobody would’ve heard it.”

“Like *Alien*,” said Archie. “In space, no one can hear you scream.” He took off his glasses and used his jacket to wipe away a bead of sweat as it rolled down his nose. His brown eyes had glints of yellow that bounced around in the light. Like the reflections of the sun at the bottom of the pool. “Josie? Just so you know . . . I would’ve heard it.”