

## Along for the Ride by Sarah Dessen

### CHAPTER ONE

The e-mails always began the same way.

*Hi Auden!!*

It was the extra exclamation point that got me. My mother would call it extraneous, overblown, exuberant. To me, it was simply annoying, just like everything else about my stepmother, Heidi.

*I hope you're having a great last few weeks of classes. We are all good here! Just getting the last few things done before your sister-to-be arrives. She's been kicking like crazy lately. It's like she's doing the karate moves in there! I've been busy minding the store (so to speak) and putting a few final touches on the nursery. I've done it all in pink and brown; it's gorgeous. I'll attach a picture so you can see it.*

*Your dad is busy as always, working on his book. I figure I'll see more of him burning the midnight oil when I'm up with the baby!*

*I really hope you'll consider coming to visit us once you're done with school. It would be so much fun, and make this summer that much more special for all of us. Just come anytime. We'd love to see you!*

*Love,  
Heidi (and your dad, and the baby to be!)*

Just reading these missives exhausted me. Partially it was the excited grammar—which was like someone yelling in your ear—but also just Heidi herself. She was just so...extraneous, overblown, exuberant. And annoying. All the things she'd been to me, and more, since she and my dad got involved, pregnant, and married in the last year.

My mother claimed not to be surprised. Ever since the divorce, she'd been predicting it would not be long before my dad, as she put it, "shacked up with some coed." At twenty-six, Heidi was the same age my mother had been when she had my brother Hollis, followed by me two years later, although they could not be more different. Where my mother was an academic scholar with a smart, sharp wit and a nationwide reputation as an expert on women's roles in Renaissance literature, Heidi was...well, Heidi. The kind of woman whose strengths were her constant self-maintenance (pedicures, manicures, hair highlights), knowing everything you never wanted to about hemlines and shoes, and sending entirely too chatty e-mails to people who couldn't care less.

Their courtship was quick, the implantation (as my mother christened it) happening within a couple of months. Just like that, my father went from what he'd been for years—husband of Dr. Victoria West and author of one well-received novel, now more known for his interdepartmental feuds than his long-in-progress follow-up—to a new husband and father to be. Add all this to his also-new position as head of the creative writing department at Weymar College, a small school in a beachfront town, and it was like my dad had a whole new life. And even though they were always inviting me to come, I wasn't sure I wanted to find out if there was still a place for me in it.

Now, from the other room, I heard a sudden burst of laughter, followed by some clinking of glasses. My mother was hosting another of her graduate student get-togethers, which always began as formal dinners ("Culture is so lacking in this culture!" she said) before inevitably deteriorating into loud, drunken debates about literature and theory. I glanced at the clock—ten-thirty—then eased my bedroom door open with my toe, glancing down the long hallway to the kitchen. Sure enough, I could see my mom sitting at the head of our big butcher-block kitchen table, a glass of red wine in one hand. Gathered around her, as usual, were a bunch of male graduate students, looking on adoringly as she went on about, from the little bit I could gather, Marlowe and the culture of women.

This was yet another of the many fascinating contradictions about my mom. She was an expert on women in literature but didn't much like them in practice. Partly, it was because so many of them were jealous: of her intelligence (practically Mensa level), her scholarship (four books, countless articles, one endowed chair), or her looks (tall and curvy with very long jet-black hair she usually wore loose and wild, the only out-of-control thing about her). For these reasons, and others, female students seldom came to these gatherings, and if they did, they rarely returned.

"Dr. West," one of the students—typically scruffy, in a cheap-looking blazer, shaggy hair, and hip-nerdy black eyeglasses—said now, "you should really consider developing that idea into an article. It's fascinating."

I watched my mother take a sip of her wine, pushing her hair back smoothly with one hand. "Oh, God no," she said, in her deep, raspy voice (she sounded like a smoker, although she'd never taken a drag in her life). "I barely even have time to write my book right now, and that at least I'm getting paid for. If you can call it payment."

More complimentary laughter. My mother loved to complain about how little she got paid for her books—all academic, published by university presses—while what she termed "inane housewife stories" pulled in big bucks. In my mother's world, everyone would tote the collected works of Shakespeare to the beach, with maybe a couple of epic poems thrown in on the side.

"Still," Nerdy Eyeglasses said, pushing on, "it's a brilliant idea. I could, um, coauthor it with you, if you like."

My mother lifted her head and her glass, narrowing her eyes at him as a silence fell. "Oh, my," she said, "how very sweet of you. But I don't do coauthorship, for the same reason I don't do office mates or relationships. I'm just too selfish."

I could see Nerdy Eyeglasses gulp, even from my long vantage point, his face flushing as he reached for the wine bottle, trying to cover. Idiot, I thought, nudging the door back shut. As if it was that easy to align yourself with my mom, form some quick and tight bond that would last. I would know.

Ten minutes later, I was slipping out the side door, my shoes tucked under my arm, and getting into my car. I drove down the mostly empty streets, past quiet neighborhoods and dark storefronts, until the lights of Ray's Diner appeared in the distance. Small, with entirely too much neon and tables that were always a bit sticky, Ray's was the only place in town open twenty-four hours, 365 days a year. Since I hadn't been sleeping, I'd spent more nights than not in a booth there, reading or studying, tipping a buck every hour on whatever I ordered until the sun came up.

The insomnia started when my parents' marriage began to fall apart three years earlier. I shouldn't have been surprised: their union had been tumultuous for as long as I could remember, although they were usually arguing more about work than about each other.

They'd originally come to the U straight out of grad school, when my dad was offered an assistant professorship there. At the time, he'd just found a publisher for

his first novel, *The Narwhal Horn*, while my mom was pregnant with my brother and trying to finish her dissertation. Fast-forward four years, to my birth, and my dad, riding a wave of critical and commercial success—*NYT* best seller list, National Book Award nominee—was heading up the creative writing program, while my mom was, as she liked to put it, “lost in a sea of diapers and self-doubt.” When I entered kindergarten, though, my mom came back to academia with a vengeance, scoring a visiting lectureship and a publisher for her dissertation. Over time, she became one of the most popular professors in the department, was hired on for a full-time position, and banged out a second, then a third book, all while my father looked on. He claimed to be proud, always making jokes about her being his meal ticket, the breadwinner of the family. But then my mother got her endowed chair, which was very prestigious, and he got dropped from his publisher, which wasn’t, and things started to get ugly.

The fights always seemed to begin over dinner, with one of them making some small remark and the other taking offense. There would be a small dustup—sharp words, a banged pot lid—but then it would seem resolved...at least until about ten or eleven, when suddenly I’d hear them start in again, about the same issue. After a while I figured out that this time lag occurred because they were waiting for me to fall asleep before really going at it. So I decided, one night, not to. I left my door open, my light on, took pointed, obvious trips to the bathroom, washing my hands as loudly as possible. And for a while, it worked. Until it didn’t, and the fights started up again. But by then my body was used to staying up way late, which meant I was now awake for every single word.

I knew a lot of people whose parents had split up, and everyone seemed to handle it differently: complete surprise, crushing disappointment, total relief. The common denominator, though, was always that there was a lot of discussion about these feelings, either with both parents, or one on one separately, or with a shrink in group or individual therapy. My family, of course, had to be the exception. I did get the sit-down-we-have-to-tell-you-something moment. The news was delivered by my mother, across the kitchen table as my dad leaned against a nearby counter, fiddling with his hands and looking tired. “Your father and I are separating,” she informed me, with the same flat, businesslike tone I’d so often heard her use with students as she critiqued their work. “I’m sure you’ll agree this is the best thing for all of us.”

Hearing this, I wasn’t sure what I felt. Not relief, not crushing disappointment, and again, it wasn’t a surprise. What struck me, as we sat there, the three of us, in that room, was how little I felt. Small, like a child. Which was the weirdest thing. Like it took this huge moment for a sudden wave of childhood to wash over me, long overdue.

I’d been a child, of course. But by the time I came along, my brother—the most colicky of babies, a hyperactive toddler, a “spirited” (read “impossible”) kid—had worn my parents out. He was still exhausting them, albeit from another continent, wandering around Europe and sending only the occasional e-mail detailing yet another epiphany concerning what he should do with his life, followed by a request for more money to put it into action. At least his being abroad made all this seem more nomadic and artistic: now my parents could tell their friends Hollis was hanging out at the Eiffel Tower smoking cigarettes, instead of at the Quik Zip. It just sounded better.

If Hollis was a big kid, I was the little adult, the child who, at three, would sit at the table during grown-up discussions about literature and color my coloring books, not making a peep. Who learned to entertain myself at a very early age, who was obsessive about school and grades from kindergarten, because academia was the one thing that always got my parents’ attention. “Oh, don’t worry,” my mother

would say, when one of their guests would slip with the *F*-word or something equally grown-up in front of me. "Auden's very mature for her age." And I was, whether that age was two or four or seventeen. While Hollis required constant supervision, I was the one who got carted everywhere, constantly flowing in my mom's or dad's wake. They took me to the symphony, art shows, academic conferences, committee meetings, where I was expected to be seen and not heard. There was not a lot of time for playing or toys, although I never wanted for books, which were always in ample supply.

Because of this upbringing, I had kind of a hard time relating to other kids my age. I didn't understand their craziness, their energy, the rambunctious way they tossed around couch cushions, say, or rode their bikes wildly around cul-de-sacs. It did look sort of fun, but at the same time, it was so different from what I was used to that I couldn't imagine how I would ever partake if given the chance. Which I wasn't, as the cushion-tossers and wild bike riders didn't usually attend the highly academic, grade-accelerated private schools my parents favored.

In the past four years, in fact, I'd switched schools three times. I'd only lasted at Jackson High for a couple of weeks before my mom, having spotted a misspelling *and* a grammatical error on my English syllabus, moved me to Perkins Day, a local private school. It was smaller and more academically rigorous, although not nearly as much as Kiffney-Brown, the charter school to which I transferred junior year. Founded by several former local professors, it was elite—a hundred students, max—and emphasized very small classes and a strong connection to the local university, where you could take college-level courses for early credit. While I had a few friends at Kiffney-Brown, the ultra-competitive atmosphere, paired with so much of the curriculum being self-guided, made getting close to them somewhat difficult.

Not that I really cared. School was my solace, and studying let me escape, allowing me to live a thousand vicarious lives. The more my parents bemoaned Hollis's lack of initiative and terrible grades, the harder I worked. And while they were proud of me, my accomplishments never seemed to get me what I really wanted. I was such a smart kid, I should have figured out that the only way to really get my parents' attention was to disappoint them or fail. But by the time I finally realized that, succeeding was already a habit too ingrained to break.

My dad finally moved out at the beginning of my sophomore year, renting a furnished apartment right near campus in a complex mostly populated by students. I was supposed to spend every weekend there, but he was in such a funk—still struggling with his second book, his publication (or lack of it) called into question just as my mom's was getting so much attention—that it wasn't exactly enjoyable. Then again, my mom's house wasn't much better, as she was so busy celebrating her newfound single life, and academic success, that she had people over all the time, students coming and going, dinner parties every weekend. It seemed like there was no middle ground anywhere, except at Ray's Diner.

I'd driven past it a million times but had never thought of stopping until one night when I was heading back to my mom's around two A.M. My dad, like my mom, didn't really keep close tabs on me. Because of my school schedule—one night class, flexible daytime seminar hours, and several independent studies—I came and went as I pleased, with little or no questioning, so neither of them really noticed that I wasn't sleeping. That night, I glanced in at Ray's, and something about it just struck me. It looked warm, safe almost, populated by people who at least I had one thing in common with. So I pulled in, went inside, and ordered a cup of coffee and some apple pie. I stayed until sunrise.

The nice thing about Ray's was that even once I became a regular, I still got to be alone. Nobody was asking for more than I wanted to give, and all the

interactions were short and sweet. If only all relationships could be so simple, with me always knowing my role exactly.

Back in the fall, one of the waitresses, a heavyset older woman whose name-tag said JULIE, had peered down at the application I was working on as she refilled my coffee cup.

"Defriese University," she read out loud. Then she looked at me. "Pretty good school."

"One of the best," I agreed.

"Think you'll get in?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I do."

She smiled, like I was kind of cute, then patted my shoulder. "Ah, to be young and confident," she said, and then she was shuffling away.

I wanted to tell her that I wasn't confident, I just worked really hard. But she had already moved onto the next booth, chatting up the guy sitting there, and I knew she didn't really care anyway. There were worlds where all of this—grades, school, papers, class rank, early admission, weighted GPAs—mattered, and ones where they didn't. I'd spent my entire life squarely in the former, and even at Ray's, which was the latter, I still couldn't shake it.

Being so driven, and attending such an unorthodox school, meant that I'd missed out on making all those senior moments that my old friends from Perkins Day had spent this whole last year talking about. The only thing I'd even considered was prom, and then only because my main competition for highest GPA, Jason Talbot, had asked me as a sort of peace offering. In the end, though, even that hadn't happened, as he canceled last minute after getting invited to participate in some ecology conference. I told myself it didn't matter, that it was the equivalent of those couch cushions and cul-de-sac bike rides all those years ago, frivolous and unnecessary. But I still kind of wondered, that night and so many others, what I was missing.

I'd be sitting at Ray's, at two or three or four in the morning, and feel this weird twinge. When I looked up from my books to the people around me—truckers, people who'd come off the interstate for coffee to make another mile, the occasional crazy—I'd have that same feeling that I did the day my mother announced the separation. Like I didn't belong there, and should have been at home, asleep in my bed, like everyone else I'd see at school in a few hours. But just as quickly, it would pass, everything settling back into place around me. And when Julie came back around with her coffeepot, I'd push my cup to the edge of the table, saying without words what we both knew well—that I'd be staying for a while.

My stepsister, Thisbe Caroline West, was born the day before my graduation, weighing in at six pounds, fifteen ounces. My father called the next morning, exhausted.

"I'm so sorry, Auden," he said, "I hate to miss your speech."

"It's all right," I told him as my mother came into the kitchen, in her robe, and headed for the coffeemaker. "How's Heidi?"

"Good," he replied. "Tired. It was a long haul, and she ended up having a Caesarean, which she wasn't so happy about. But I'm sure she'll feel better after she gets some rest."

"Tell her I said congratulations," I told him.

"I will. And you go out there and give 'em hell, kid." This was typical: for my dad, who was famously combative, anything relating to academia was a battle. "I'll be thinking about you."

I smiled, thanked him, then hung up the phone as my mother poured milk into her coffee. She stirred her cup, the spoon clanking softly, for a moment before saying, "Let me guess. He's not coming."

"Heidi had the baby," I said. "They named her Thisbe."

My mother snorted. "Oh, good Lord," she said. "All the names from Shakespeare to choose from, and your father picks *that* one? The poor girl. She'll be having to explain herself her entire life."

My mom didn't really have room to talk, considering she'd let my dad name me and my brother: Detram Hollis was a professor my dad greatly admired, while W. H. Auden was his favorite poet. I'd spent some time as a kid wishing my name was Ashley or Katherine, if only because it would have made life simpler, but my mom liked to tell me that my name was actually a kind of litmus test. Auden wasn't like Frost, she'd say, or Whitman. He was a bit more obscure, and if someone knew of him, then I could be at least somewhat sure they were worth my time and energy, capable of being my intellectual equal. I figured this might be even more true for Thisbe, but instead of saying so I just sat down with my speech notes, flipping through them again. After a moment, she pulled out a chair, joining me.

"So Heidi survived the childbirth, I assume?" she asked, taking a sip off her coffee.

"She had to have a Caesarean."

"She's lucky," my mom said. "Hollis was eleven pounds, and the epidural didn't take. He almost killed me."

I flipped through another couple of cards, waiting for one of the stories that inevitably followed this one. There was how Hollis was a ravenous child, sucking my mother's milk supply dry. The craziness that was his colic, how he had to be walked constantly, and even then screamed for hours on end. Or there was the one about my dad, and how he...

"I just hope she's not expecting your father to be of much help," she said, reaching over for a couple of my cards and scanning them, her eyes narrowed. "I was lucky if he changed a diaper every once in a while. And forget about him getting up for night feedings. He claimed that he had sleep issues and had to get his nine hours in order to teach. Awfully convenient, that."

She was still reading my cards as she said this, and I felt the familiar twinge I always experienced whenever anything I did was suddenly under her scrutiny. A moment later, though, she put them aside without comment.

"Well," I said as she took another sip of coffee, "that was a long time ago. Maybe he's changed."

"People don't change. If anything, you get more set in your ways as you get older, not less." She shook her head. "I remember I used to sit in our bedroom, with Hollis screaming, and just wish that once the door would open, and your father would come in and say 'Here, give him to me. You go rest.' Eventually, it wasn't even your dad I wanted, just anybody. Anybody at all."

She was looking out the window as she said this, her fingers wrapped around her mug, which was not on the table or at her lips but instead hovering just between. I picked up my cards, carefully arranging them back in order. "I should go get ready," I said, pushing my chair back.

My mother didn't move as I got up and walked behind her. It was like she was frozen, still back in that old bedroom, still waiting, at least until I got down the hallway. Then, suddenly, she spoke.

"You should rethink that Faulkner quote," she said. "It's too much for an opening. You'll sound pretentious."

I looked down at my top card, where the words—"The past isn't dead. It isn't even past"—were written in my neat block print. "Okay," I said. She was right, of course. She always was. "Thanks."

I'd been so focused on my last year of high school and beginning college that I hadn't really thought about the time in between. Suddenly, though, it was summer, and there was nothing to do but wait for my real life to begin again.

I spent a couple of weeks getting all the stuff I needed for Defriese, and tried to pick up a few shifts at my tutoring job at Huntsinger Test Prep, although it was pretty slow. I seemed to be the only one thinking about school, a fact made more obvious by the various invitations I received from my old friends at Perkins to dinners or trips to the lake. I wanted to see everyone, but whenever we did get together, I felt like the odd person out. I'd only been at Kiffney-Brown for two years, but it was so different, so entirely academic, that I found I couldn't really relate to their talk about summer jobs and boyfriends. After a few awkward outings, I began to beg off, saying I was busy, and after a while, they got the message.

Home was kind of weird as well, as my mom had gotten some research grant and was working all the time, and when she wasn't, her graduate assistants were always showing up for impromptu dinners and cocktail hours. When they got too noisy, and the house too crowded, I'd head out to the front porch with a book and read until it was dark enough to go to Ray's.

One night, I was deeply into a book about Buddhism when I saw a green Mercedes coming down our street. It slowed as it neared our mailbox, then slid to a stop by the curb. After a moment, a very pretty blonde girl wearing low-slung jeans, a red tank top, and wedge sandals got out, a package in one hand. She peered at the house, then down at it, then back at the house again before starting up the driveway. She was almost to the front steps when she saw me.

"Hi!" she called out, entirely friendly, which was sort of alarming. I barely had time to respond before she was heading right to me, a big smile on her face. "You must be Auden."

"Yes," I said slowly.

"I'm Tara!" Clearly, this name was supposed to be familiar to me. When it became obvious it wasn't, she added, "Hollis's girlfriend?"

Oh, dear, I thought. Out loud I said, "Oh, right. Of course."

"It's so nice to meet you!" she said, moving closer and putting her arms around me. She smelled like gardenias and dryer sheets. "Hollis knew I'd be passing through on my way home, and he asked me to bring you this. Straight from Greece!"

She handed over the package, which was in a plain brown wrapper, my name and address written across the front in my brother's slanted, sloppy hand. There was an awkward moment, during which I realized she was waiting for me to open the package, so I did. It was a small glass picture frame, dotted with colorful stones: along the bottom were etched the words THE BEST OF TIMES. Inside was a picture of Hollis standing in front of the Taj Mahal. He was smiling one of his lazy smiles, in cargo shorts and a T-shirt, a backpack over one shoulder.

"It's great, right?" Tara said. "We got it at a flea market in Athens."

Since I couldn't say what I really felt, which was that you had to be a pretty serious narcissist to give a picture of yourself as a gift, I told her, "It's beautiful."

"I knew you'd like it!" She clapped her hands. "I told him, everyone needs picture frames. They make a memory even more special, you know?"

I looked down at the frame again, the pretty stones, my brother's easy expression. THE BEST OF TIMES, indeed. "Yeah," I said. "Absolutely."

Tara shot me another million-watt smile, then peered through the window behind me. "So is your mom around? I would love to meet her. Hollis adores her, talks about her all the time."

"It's mutual," I said. She glanced at me, and I smiled. "She's in the kitchen. Long black hair, in the green dress. You can't miss her."

"Great!" Too quick to prevent, she was hugging me again. "Thanks so much."

I nodded. This confidence was a hallmark of all my brother's girlfriends, at least while they still considered themselves as such. It was only later, when the e-mails and calls stopped, when he seemingly vanished off the face of the earth, that we saw the other side: the red eyes, the weepy messages on our answering machine, the occasional angry peel-out on the road outside our house. Tara didn't seem like the angry drive-by type. But you never knew.

By eleven, my mother's admirers were still hanging around, their voices loud as always. I sat in my room, idly checking my Ume.com page (no messages, not that I'd expected any) and e-mail (just one from my dad, asking how everything was going). I thought about calling one of my friends to see if anything was going on, but after remembering the awkwardness of my last few social outings, I sat down on my bed instead. Hollis's picture frame was on the bedside table, and I picked it up, looking over the tacky blue beads. THE BEST OF TIMES. Something in these words, and his easy, smiling face, reminded me of the chatter of my old friends as they traded stories from the school year. Not about classes, or GPAs, but other stuff, things that were as foreign to me as the Taj Mahal itself, gossip and boys and getting your heart broken. They probably had a million pictures that belonged in this frame, but I didn't have a single one.

I looked at my brother again, backpack over his shoulder. Travel certainly did provide some kind of opportunity, as well as a change of scenery. Maybe I couldn't take off to Greece or India. But I could still go somewhere.

I went over to my laptop, opening my e-mail account, then scrolled down to my dad's message. Without letting myself think too much, I typed a quick reply, as well as a question. Within a half hour, he had written me back.

*Absolutely you should come! Stay as long as you like. We'd love the company!*

And just like that, my summer changed.

The next morning, I packed my car with a small duffel bag of clothes, my laptop, and a big suitcase of books. Earlier in the summer, I'd found the syllabi to a couple of the courses I was taking at Defriese in the fall, and I'd hunted down a few of the texts at the U bookstore, figuring it couldn't hurt to acquaint myself with the material. Not exactly how Hollis would pack, but it wasn't like there'd be much else to do there anyway, other than go to the beach and hang out with Heidi, neither of which was very appealing.

I'd said good-bye to my mom the night before, figuring she'd be asleep when I left. But as I came into the kitchen, I found her clearing the table of a bevy of wineglasses and crumpled napkins from another of her get-togethers, a tired look on her face.

"Late night?" I asked, although I knew from my own nocturnal habits that it had been. The last car had pulled out of the driveway around one thirty.

"Not really," she said, running some water into the sink. She looked over her shoulder at my bags, piled by the garage door. "You're getting an early start. Are you that eager to get away from me?"

"No," I said. "Just want to beat traffic."

In truth, I hadn't expected my mom to care whether I was around for the summer or not. And maybe she wouldn't have, if I'd been going anywhere else. Factor my dad into the equation, though, and things changed. They always did.

"I can only imagine what kind of situation you're about to walk into," she said, smiling. "Your father with a newborn! At his age! It's comic."

"I'll let you know," I told her.

"Oh, you must. I will require regular updates."

I watched as she stuck her hands into the water, soaping up a glass. "So," I said, "what did you think of Hollis's girlfriend?"

My mother sighed, wearily. "What was she doing here, again?"

"Hollis sent her back with a gift for me."

"Really," she said, depositing a couple of glasses into the dish rack. "What was it?"

"A picture frame. From Greece. With a picture of Hollis in it."

"Ah." She turned off the water, using the back of her wrist to brush her hair from her face. "Did you tell her she should have kept it for herself, since it's probably the only way she'll ever see him again?"

Even though I'd had this exact same thought, after hearing my mom say it aloud I felt sorry for Tara, with her open, friendly face, the confident way she'd headed into the house, so secure in her standing as Hollis's one and only. "You never know," I said. "Maybe Hollis has changed, and they'll get engaged."

My mom turned around and narrowed her eyes at me. "Now, Auden," she said. "What have I told you about people changing?"

"That they don't?"

"Exactly."

She directed her attention back to the sink, dunking a plate, and as she did I caught sight of the pair of black, hip-nerdy eyeglasses sitting on the counter by the door. Suddenly, it all made sense: the voices I'd heard so late, her being up early, uncharacteristically eager to clean out everything from the night before. I considered picking the glasses up, making sure she saw me, just to make a point of my own. But instead, I ignored them as we said our good-byes, her pulling me in for a tight hug—she always held you close, like she'd never let you go—before doing just that and sending me on my way.

## CHAPTER TWO

My dad and Heidi's house was just what I expected. Cute, painted white with green shutters, it had a wide front porch dotted with rocking chairs and potted flowers and a friendly yellow ceramic pineapple hanging from the door that said WELCOME! All that was missing was a white picket fence.

I pulled in, spotting my dad's beat-up Volvo in the open garage, with a newer-looking Prius parked beside it. As soon as I cut my engine I could hear the ocean, loud enough that it had to be very close. Sure enough, as I peered around the side of the house, all I could see was beach grass and a wide swath of blue, stretching all the way to the horizon.

The view aside, I had my doubts. I was never one for spontaneity, and the farther I got from my mom's, the more I started to consider the reality of a full summer of Heidi. Would there be group manicures for me, her, and the baby? Or maybe she'd insist I go tanning with her, sporting matching retro I LOVE UNICORNS tees? But I kept thinking of Hollis, in front of the Taj Mahal, and how I'd found myself so bored all alone at home. Plus, I'd hardly seen my dad since he got married, and this—eight full weeks when he wasn't teaching, and I wasn't in school—seemed like my last chance to catch up with him before college, and real life, began.

I took a deep breath, then got out. As I started up to the front porch, I told myself that no matter what Heidi said or did, I would just smile and roll with it. At least until I could get to whatever room I'd be staying in and shut the door behind me.

I rang the doorbell, then stepped back, arranging my face into an appropriately friendly expression. There was no response from inside, so I rang it again, then leaned in closer, listening for the inevitable sound of clattering heels, Heidi's happy voice calling out, "Just a minute!" But again, nothing.

Reaching down, I tried the knob: it turned easily, the door opening, and I leaned my head inside. "Hello?" I called out, my voice bouncing down a nearby empty hallway painted yellow and dotted with framed prints. "Anyone here?"

Silence. I stepped inside, shutting the door behind me. It was only then that I heard it: the sound of the ocean again, although it sounded a little different, and much closer by, like just around the corner. I followed it down the hallway, as it got louder and louder, expecting to see an open window or back door. Instead, I found myself in the living room, where the noise was deafening, and Heidi was sitting on the couch, holding the baby in her arms.

At least, I *thought* it was Heidi. It was hard to say for sure, as she looked nothing like the last time I'd seen her. Her hair was pulled up into a messy, lopsided ponytail, with some strands stuck to her face, and she had on a ratty pair of sweatpants and an oversize U T-shirt, which had some kind of damp stain on one shoulder. Her eyes were closed, her head tipped back slightly. In fact, I thought she was asleep until, without even moving her lips, she hissed, "If you wake her up, I will *kill* you."

I froze, alarmed, then took a careful step backward. "Sorry," I said. "I just—" Her eyes snapped open, and she whipped her head around, her eyes narrowing into little slits. When she spotted me, though, her expression changed to surprise. And then, just like that, she was crying.

"Oh, God, Auden," she said, her voice tight, "I am so, so sorry. I forgot you were...and then I thought...but it's no excuse..." She trailed off, her shoulders heaving as, in her arms, the baby—who was tiny, so small she looked too delicate to even exist—slept on, completely unaware.

I took a panicked look around the room, wondering where my dad was. Only then did I realize that the incredibly loud ocean sound I was hearing was not coming from outside but instead from a small white noise machine sitting on the coffee table. Who listens to a fake ocean when the real one is in earshot? It was one of many things that, at that moment, made absolutely no sense.

"Um," I said as Heidi continued to cry, her sobs punctuated by an occasional loud snuffle, as well as the fake pounding waves, "can I...do you need some help, or something?"

She drew in a shaky breath, then looked up at me. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles: there was a pimply red rash on her chin. "No," she said as fresh tears filled her eyes. "I'm okay. It's just...I'm fine."

This seemed highly unlikely, even to my untrained eye. Not that I had time to dispute it, as right then my dad walked in, carrying a tray of coffees and a small brown paper bag. He was in his typical outfit of rumpled khakis and an untucked button-down, his glasses sort of askew on his face. When he taught, he usually added a tie and tweedy sport jacket. His sneakers, though, were a constant, no matter what else he was wearing.

"There she is!" he said when he spotted me, then headed over to give me a hug. As he pulled me close, I looked over his shoulder at Heidi, who was biting her lip, staring out the window at the ocean. "How was the trip?"

"Good," I said slowly as he pulled back and took a coffee out of the carrier, offering it to me. I took it, then watched as he helped himself to one before sticking the last on the table in front of Heidi, who just stared at it like she didn't know what it was.

"Did you meet your sister?"

"Uh, no," I said. "Not yet."

"Oh, well!" He put down the paper bag, then reached over Heidi—who stiffened, not that he seemed to notice—taking the baby from her arms. "Here she is. This is Thisbe."

I looked down at the baby's face, which was so small and delicate it didn't even seem real. Her eyes were shut, and she had tiny, spiky eyelashes. One of her hands was sticking out of her blanket, and the fingers were so little, curled slightly around one another. "She's beautiful," I said, because that is what you say.

"Isn't she?" My dad grinned, bouncing her slightly in his arms, and her eyes slid open. She looked up at us, blinked, and then, just like her mom, suddenly began to cry. "Whoops," he said, jiggling her a bit. Thisbe cried a little louder. "Honey?" my dad said, turning back to Heidi, who was still sitting in the exact same place and position, her arms now limp at her sides. "I think she's hungry."

Heidi swallowed, then turned to him wordlessly. When my father handed Thisbe over, she swiveled back to the windows, almost robotlike as the crying grew louder, then louder still.

"Let's step outside," my dad suggested, grabbing the paper bag off the end table and gesturing for me to follow him as he walked to a pair of sliding glass doors, opening one and leading me outside to the deck. Normally, the view would have left me momentarily speechless—the house was right on the beach, a walkway leading directly to the sand—but instead I found myself looking back at Heidi, only to realize she'd disappeared, leaving her coffee untouched on the table.

"Is she all right?" I asked.

He opened the paper bag, pulling out a muffin and then offering it to me. I shook my head. "She's tired," he said, taking a bite, a few crumbs falling onto his shirt. He brushed them off with one hand, then kept eating. "The baby's up a lot at night, you know, and I'm not much help because I have this sleep condition and have to get my nine hours, or else. I keep trying to get her to get in some help, but she won't do it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, you know Heidi," he said, as if I did. "She's got to do everything herself, and do it perfectly. But don't worry, she'll be fine. The first couple of months are just hard. I remember with Hollis, your mom was just about to go out of her mind. Of course, he was incredibly colicky. We used to walk him all night long, and he'd still scream. And his appetite! Good Lord. He'd suck your mom dry and still be ravenous..."

He kept talking, but I'd heard this song before, knew all the words, so I just sipped my coffee. Looking left, I could see a few more houses, then what appeared to be some sort of boardwalk lined with businesses, as well as a public beach, already crowded with umbrellas and sunbathers.

"Anyway," my father was saying now as he crumpled up his muffin wrapper, tossing it back in the bag, "I've got to get back to work, so let me show you your room. We can catch up over dinner, later. That sound good?"

"Sure," I said as we headed back inside, where the sound machine was still blasting. My dad shook his head, then reached down, turning it off with a click: the sudden silence was jarring. "So you're writing?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm on a real roll, definitely going to finish the book soon," he replied. "It's just a matter of organizing, really, getting the last little bits down on the

page." We went back to the foyer, then went up the staircase. As we walked down the hallway, we passed an open door, through which I could see a pink wall with a brown polka-dot border. Inside, it was silent, no crying, at least that I could hear.

My dad pushed open the next door down, then waved me in with one hand. "Sorry for the small quarters," he said as I stepped over the threshold. "But you have the best view."

He wasn't kidding. Though the room was tiny, with a twin bed, a bureau, and not much room for anything else, the lone window looked out over an undeveloped area of land, nothing but sea grass and sand and water. "This is great," I said.

"Isn't it? It was originally my office. But then we had to put the baby's room next door, so I moved to the other side of the house. I didn't want to keep her up, you know, with the noises of my creative process." He chuckled, like this was a joke I was supposed to get. "Speaking of which, I'd better get to it. The mornings have been really productive for me lately. I'll catch up with you at dinner, all right?"

"Oh," I said, glancing at my watch. It was 11:05. "Sure."

"Great." He squeezed my arm, then started down the hallway, humming to himself, as I watched him go. A moment after he passed the door to the pink and brown room, I heard the door click shut.

I woke up at six thirty that evening to the sound of a baby crying.

Crying, actually, was too tepid a word. Thisbe was *screaming*, her lungs clearly getting a serious workout. And while it was merely audible in my room, with just a thin wall between us, when I went out in the hallway in search of a bathroom to brush my teeth, the noise was deafening.

I stood for a second in the dimness outside the door to the pink room, listening to the cries as they rose, rose, rose, then fell sharply, only to spike again, even louder. I was wondering if I was the only one aware of it until, during a rare and short moment of silence, I heard someone saying, "Shh, shh," before quickly being drowned out again.

There was something so familiar about this, it was like a tug on my subconscious. When my parents had first started to fight at night, this had been part of what I'd repeated—*shh, shh, everything's all right*—to myself, again and again, as I tried to ignore them and fall asleep. Hearing it now, though, felt strange, as I was used to the sound being private, only in my head and the dark around me, so I moved on.

"Dad?"

My father, sitting in front of his laptop at a desk facing the wall, didn't move as he said, "Hmmm?"

I looked back down the hallway to the pink room, then at him again. He wasn't typing, just studying the screen, a yellow legal pad with some scribbles on the desk beside him. I wondered if he'd been there the whole time I'd been sleeping, over seven hours. "Should I," I said, "um, start dinner, or something?"

"Isn't Heidi doing that?" he asked, still facing the screen.

"I think she's with the baby," I said.

"Oh." Now, he turned his head, looking at me. "Well, if you're hungry, there's a great burger place just a block away. Their onion rings are legendary."

I smiled. "Sounds great," I said. "Should I find out if Heidi wants anything?"

"Absolutely. And get me a cheeseburger and some of those onion rings." He reached into his back pocket, pulling out a couple of bills and handing them out to me. "Thanks a lot, Auden. I really appreciate it."

I took the bills, feeling like an idiot. Of course he couldn't go out with me: he had a new baby at home, a wife to take care of. "No problem," I said, even though

he was already turning back to his screen, not really listening. "I'll just be back in a little bit."

I walked back to the pink room, where Thisbe was still going full blast. Figuring at least this time I didn't have to worry about waking her up, I knocked twice. After a second, it opened a crack, and Heidi looked out at me.

She looked more haggard than before, if that was even possible: the ponytail was gone, her hair now hanging limp in her face. "Hi," I said, or rather shouted, over the screaming. "I'm going to get dinner. What would you like?"

"Dinner?" she repeated, her voice also raised. I nodded. "Is it dinnertime already?"

I looked at my watch, as if I needed to confirm this. "It's about quarter to seven."

"Oh, dear God." She closed her eyes. "I was going to fix a big welcome dinner for you. I had it all planned, chicken and vegetables, and everything. But the baby's been so fussy, and...."

"It's fine," I said. "I'm going to get burgers. Dad says there's a good place right down the street."

"Your father is here?" she asked, shifting Thisbe in her arms and peering over my shoulder, down the hallway. "I thought he went down to campus."

"He's working in his office," I said. She leaned closer, clearly not having heard this. "He's writing," I repeated, more loudly. "So I'm going. What would you like?"

Heidi just stood there, the baby screaming between us, looking down the hallway at the light spilling out from my dad's barely open office door. She started to speak, then stopped herself, taking a deep breath. "Whatever you're having is fine," she said after a moment. "Thank you."

I nodded, then stepped back as she pushed the door back shut between us. The last thing I saw was the baby's red face, still howling.

Thankfully, outside the house it was much quieter. I could hear only the ocean and various neighborhood sounds—kids yelling, an occasional car radio, someone's TV blaring out a back door—as I walked down the street to where the neighborhood ended and the business district began.

There was a narrow boardwalk, lined with various shops: a smoothie place, one of those beach-crap joints that sells cheap towels and shell clocks, a pizzeria. About halfway down, I passed a small boutique called Clementine's, which had a bright orange awning. Taped to the front door was a piece of paper which read, in big block print, IT'S A GIRL! THISBE CAROLINE WEST, BORN JUNE 1, 6 LBS, 15 OZ. So this was Heidi's store, I thought. There were racks of T-shirts and jeans, a makeup and body lotion section, and a dark-haired girl in a pink dress examining her fingernails behind the register, a cell phone clamped to her ear.

Up ahead, I could see what had to be the burger joint my dad mentioned—LAST CHANCE CAFÉ, BEST O RINGS ON THE BEACH!, said the sign. Just before it, there was one last store, a bike shop. A bunch of guys around my age were gathered on a battered wooden bench outside, talking and watching people pass by.

"The thing is," one of them, who was stocky and sporting shorts and a chain wallet said, "the name has to have punch. Energy, you know?"

"It's more important that it be clever," another, who was taller and thinner with curly hair, a little dorky-looking, said. "Which is why you should go with my choice, The Crankshaft. It's perfect."

"It sounds like a car shop, not a bike place," the short guy told him.

"Bikes have cranks," his friend pointed out.

"And cars have shafts."

"So do mines," the skinny guy said.

"You want to call it the Mine Shaft now?"

"No," his friend said as the other two laughed. "I'm just making the point that the context doesn't have to be exclusive."

"Who cares about context?" The short guy sighed. "What we need is a name that jumps out and sells product. Like, say, Zoom Bikes. Or Redline Bikes."

"How do you redline on a bike?" another guy, who had his back to me, asked. "That's stupid."

"It is not," the guy with the wallet muttered. "Besides, I don't see you offering up any suggestions."

I stepped away from Clementine's and starting walking again. Just as I did, the third guy suddenly turned, and our eyes met. He had dark hair, cut short, incredibly tanned skin and a broad, confident smile, which he now flashed at me. "How about," he said slowly, his gaze still locked with mine, "I just saw the hottest girl in Colby walking by?"

"Oh, Jesus," the dorky one said shaking his head, as the other one laughed out loud. "You're pathetic."

I felt my face flush, hot, even as I ignored him and kept walking. I could feel him looking at me, still smiling, as I put more and more distance between us. "Just stating the obvious," he called out, just as I was about out of earshot. "You could say thank you, you know."

But I didn't. I didn't say anything, if only because I had no idea how to respond to such an overture. If my experience with friends was sparse, what I knew about boys—other than as competitors for grades or class rank—was nonexistent.

Not that I hadn't had crushes. Back at Jackson, there was a guy in my science class, hopeless at equations, who always made my palms sweat whenever we got paired for experiments. And at Perkins Day, I'd awkwardly flirted with Nate Cross, who sat next to me in calculus, but everyone was in love with Nate, so that hardly made me special. It wasn't until Kiffney-Brown, when I met Jason Talbot, that I really thought I might actually have one of those boyfriend kind of stories to tell the next time I got together with my old friends. Jason was smart, good-looking, and seriously on the rebound after his girlfriend at Jackson dumped him for, in his words, "a juvenile delinquent welder with a tattoo." Because of Kiffney-Brown's small seminar size, we spent a fair amount of time together, battling it out for valedictorian, and when he'd asked me to prom I'd been more excited than I ever would have admitted. Until he backed out, citing the "great opportunity" of the ecology conference. "I knew you'd be okay with this," he'd said to me as I nodded, dumbly, hearing this news. "You understand what's really important."

Okay, so it wasn't like he called me beautiful. But it was a compliment, in its own way.

It was crowded at Last Chance Café, with a line of people waiting to be seated and two cooks visible through a small kitchen window, racing around as orders piled up on the spindle in front of them. I gave my order to a dark-haired, pretty girl with a lip ring, then took a seat by the window to wait for it. Glancing down the boardwalk, I could see the guys still gathered around the bench: the one who'd talked to me was now sitting down, his arms stretched behind his head, laughing as his short, stocky friend rode a bike back and forth in front of him, doing little hops here and there.

It took a while for the food to be ready, but I soon realized my dad was right. It was worth the wait. I was digging into the onion rings before I even got out the door to the boardwalk, which by then was crowded with families eating ice-cream cones, couples on dates, and tons of little kids running along the sand. In the distance, there was a gorgeous sunset, all oranges and pinks, and I kept my eyes on it as I walked, not even looking over at the bike shop until I was almost past it. The

guy was still there, although now he was talking to a tall girl with red hair who was wearing a massive pair of sunglasses.

"Hey," he called out to me, "if you're looking for something to do tonight, there's a bonfire at the Tip. I'll save you a seat."

I glanced over at him. The redhead was now giving me the stink eye, an annoyed look on her face, so I didn't say anything.

"Ah, she's a heartbreaker!" he said, then laughed. I kept walking, now feeling the redhead's gaze boring in somewhere between my shoulder blades. "Just keep it in mind. I'll wait for you."

Back at the house, I found three plates and some silverware, then set the table and put out the food. I was shaking ketchup packets out into a pile when my dad came downstairs.

"I thought I smelled onion rings," he said, rubbing his hands together. "This looks great."

"Is Heidi coming down?" I asked, sliding his burger onto a plate.

"Not sure," he replied, helping himself to an onion ring. Mouth full, he added, "The baby's having a hard night. She probably wants to get her to sleep first."

I glanced up the stairs, wondering if it was possible that Thisbe was still crying, as I'd been gone at least an hour. "Maybe I'll, um, just ask her if she wants me to bring it up to her."

"Sure, great," he said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. I stood there for a second, watching as he ate another ring, tugging a nearby newspaper over with his free hand. I'd wanted to have dinner with my dad, sure, but I felt kind of bad about it happening this way.

Thisbe was still crying: I could hear her as soon as I got to the top of the stairs, Heidi's dinner on a plate in one hand. When I got to the pink room, the door was ajar, and inside I could see her sitting in a rocking chair, her eyes closed, moving back and forth, back and forth. I was understandably hesitant to bother her, but she must have smelled the food, because a beat later, she opened her eyes.

"I thought you might be hungry," I called out. "Do you—should I bring this to you?"

She blinked at me, then looked down at Thisbe, who was still howling. "You can just put it down," she said, nodding at a nearby white bureau. "I'll get to it in a second."

I walked over, moving aside a stuffed giraffe and a book called *Your Baby: The Basics*, which was opened to a page with the heading "Fussiness: What Causes It, and What You Can Do." Either she hadn't had time to read it, or that book didn't know jack, I thought as I slid the plate over.

"Thanks," Heidi said. She was still rocking, the motion almost hypnotic, although clearly not to Thisbe, who continued to cry at full volume. "I just...I don't know what I'm doing wrong. She's fed, she's changed, I'm holding her, and it's like...she hates me, or something."

"She's probably just colicky," I said.

"But what does that mean, exactly?" She swallowed, hard, then looked back down at her daughter's face. "It just doesn't make sense, and I'm doing all I can...."

She trailed off, her voice getting tight, and I thought of my dad downstairs, eating his onion rings and reading the paper. Why wasn't *he* up here? I didn't know jack about babies either. Just as I thought this, though, Heidi looked up at me again.

"Oh, God, Auden, I'm so sorry." She shook her head. "I'm sure this is the last thing you want to hear about. You're young, you should be out having fun!" She sniffled, reaching up to rub her eyes with one hand. "You know, there's a place called the Tip, just down the road from here. All the girls at my shop hang out there at night. You should go check it out. It has to be better than this, right?"

Agreed, I thought, but it seemed rude to actually say that. "Maybe I will," I said.

She nodded, like we'd made a deal, then looked back at Thisbe. "Thanks for the food," she said. "I really...I appreciate it."

"No problem," I told her. But she was still looking at the baby, her face weary, so I took this as a dismissal and left, shutting the door behind me.

Downstairs, my dad was finishing his dinner, perusing the sports section. When I slid into a chair opposite him, he looked up at me and smiled. "So how's she doing? Baby asleep?"

"Not really," I told him, unwrapping my burger. "She's still screaming."

"Yikes." He pushed his chair back, standing up. "I better go check in."

Finally, I thought as he disappeared up the stairs. I picked up my burger, taking a bite: it was cold, but still good. I'd only eaten about half of it when he reappeared, walking to the fridge and grabbing a beer. I sat there, chewing as he popped the top, took a sip, and looked out at the water.

"Everything okay up there?"

"Oh, sure," he said easily, moving the bottle to his other hand. "She's just colicky, like Hollis was. Not much you can do except wait it out."

The thing was, I loved my dad. He might have been a little moody, and definitely more than a little selfish, but he'd always been good to me, and I admired him. Right at that moment, though, I could see why someone might not *like* him that much. "Does Heidi...is her mom coming to help out, or anything?"

"Her mom died a couple of years ago," he said, taking another sip off his beer. "She has a brother, but he's older, lives in Cincinnati with kids of his own."

"What about a nanny, or something?"

Now he looked at me. "She doesn't want help," he said. "It's like I told you, she wants to do this on her own."

I had a flash of Heidi craning her neck, looking down at my dad's office, the grateful look on her face when I brought her dinner. "Maybe," I said, "you should, you know, insist, though. She seems pretty tired."

He just looked at me for a moment, a flat expression on his face. "Auden," he said finally, "this isn't something you need to worry about, all right? Heidi and I will work it out."

In other words, back off. And he was right. This was his house, I was a guest here. It was presumptuous to show up and just assume I knew better, based on only a few hours. "Right," I said, balling up my napkin. "Of course."

"All right," he said, his voice relaxed again. "So...I'm going to head upstairs, get back to it. I'd like to finish this chapter tonight. You'll be okay on your own?"

It wasn't even really a question, only phrased to sound like one. Funny how intonation could do so much, change even what something was at its core. "Sure," I said. "Go ahead. I'll be fine."

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