

Just Listen by Sarah Dessen

CHAPTER ONE

I taped the commercial back in April, before anything had happened, and promptly forgot about it. A few weeks ago, it had started running, and suddenly, I was everywhere.

On the rows of screens hanging over the ellipticals at the gym. On the monitor they have at the post office that's supposed to distract you from how long you've been waiting in line. And now here, on the TV in my room, as I sat at the edge of my bed, fingers clenched into my palms, trying to make myself get up and leave.

"It's that time of year again. . . ."

I stared at myself on the screen as I was five months earlier, looking for any difference, some visible proof of what had happened to me. First, though, I was struck by the sheer oddness of seeing myself without benefit of a mirror or photograph. I had never gotten used to it, even after all this time.

"Football games," I watched myself say. I was wearing a baby-blue cheerleader uniform, hair pulled back tight into a ponytail, and clutching a huge megaphone, the kind nobody ever used anymore, emblazoned with a K.

"Study hall." Cut to me in a serious plaid skirt and brown cropped sweater, which I remembered feeling itchy and so wrong to be wearing just as it was getting warm, finally.

"And, of course, social life." I leaned in, staring at the me on-screen, now outfitted in jeans and a glittery tee and seated on a bench, turning to speak this line while a group of other girls chattered silently behind me.

The director, fresh-faced and just out of film school, had explained to me the concept of this, his creation. "The girl who has everything," he'd said, moving his hands in a tight, circular motion, as if that was all it took to encompass something so vast, not to mention vague. Clearly, it meant having a megaphone, some smarts, and a big group of friends. Now, I might have dwelled on the explicit irony of this last one, but the on-screen me was already moving on.

"It's all happening this year," I said. Now I was in a pink gown, a sash reading HOMECOMING QUEEN stretched across my midsection as a boy in a tux stepped up beside me, extending his arm. I took it, giving him a wide smile. He was a sophomore at the local university and mostly kept to himself at the shooting, although later, as I was leaving, he'd asked for my number. How had I forgotten that?

"The best times," the me on-screen was saying now. "The best memories. And you'll find the right clothes for them all at Kopf's Department Store."

The camera moved in, closer, closer, until all you could see was my face, the rest dropping away. This had been before that night, before everything that had happened with Sophie, before this long, lonely summer of secrets and silence. I was a mess, but this girl—she was fine. You could tell in the way she stared out at me and the world so confidently as she opened her mouth to speak again.

"Make your new year the best one yet," she said, and I felt my breath catch, anticipating the next line, the last line, the one that only this time was finally true. "It's time to go back to school."

The shot froze, the Kopf's logo appearing beneath me. In moments, it would switch to a frozen waffle commercial or the latest weather, this fifteen seconds folding seamlessly into another, but I didn't wait for that. Instead, I picked up the remote, turned myself off, and headed out the door.

I'd had over three months to get ready to see Sophie. But when it happened, I still wasn't ready.

I was in the parking lot before first bell, trying to muster up what it would take to get out and officially let the year begin. As people streamed past, talking and laughing, en route to the courtyard, I kept working on all the maybes: Maybe she was over it now. Maybe something else had happened over the summer to replace our little drama. Maybe it was never as bad as I thought it was. All of these were long shots, but still possibilities.

I sat there until the very last moment before finally drawing the keys out of the ignition. When I

reached for the door handle, turning to my window, she was right there.

For a second, we just stared at each other, and I instantly noticed the changes in her: Her dark curly hair was shorter, her earrings new. She was skinnier, if that was possible, and had done away with the thick eyeliner she'd taken to wearing the previous spring, replacing it with a more natural look, all bronzes and pinks. I wondered, in her first glance, what was different in me.

Just as I thought this, Sophie opened her perfect mouth, narrowed her eyes at me, and delivered the verdict I'd spent my summer waiting for.

"Bitch."

The glass between us didn't muffle the sound or the reaction of the people passing by. I saw a girl from my English class the year before narrow her eyes, while another girl, a stranger, laughed out loud.

Sophie, though, remained expressionless as she turned her back, hiking her bag over one shoulder and starting down to the courtyard. My face was flushed, and I could feel people staring. I wasn't ready for this, but then I probably never would be, and this year, like so much else, wouldn't wait. I had no choice but to get out of my car, with everyone watching, and begin it in earnest, alone. So I did.

I had first met Sophie four years earlier, at the beginning of the summer after sixth grade. I was at the neighborhood pool, standing in the snack-bar line with two damp dollar bills to buy a Coke, when I felt someone step up behind me. I turned my head, and there was this girl, a total stranger, standing there in a skimpy orange bikini and matching thick platform flip-flops. She had olive skin and thick, curly dark hair pulled up into a high ponytail, and was wearing black sunglasses and a bored, impatient expression. In our neighborhood, where everyone knew everyone, it was like she'd fallen out of the sky. I didn't mean to stare. But apparently, I was.

"What?" she said to me. I could see myself reflected in the lenses of her glasses, small and out of perspective. "What are *you* looking at?"

I felt my face flush, as it did anytime anybody raised their voice at me. I was entirely too sensitive to tone, so much so that even TV court shows could get me upset—I always had to change the channel when the judge ripped into anyone. "Nothing," I said, and turned back around.

A moment later, the high-school guy working the snack bar waved me up with a tired look. While he poured my drink I could feel the girl behind me, her presence like a weight, as I smoothed my two bills out flat on the glass beneath my fingers, concentrating on getting every single crease. After I paid, I walked away, studiously keeping my eyes on the pocked cement of the walkway as I made my way back around the deep end to where my best friend, Clarke Reynolds, was waiting.

"Whitney said to tell you she's going home," she said, blowing her nose as I carefully put the Coke on the pavement beside my chair. "I told her we could walk."

"Okay," I said. My sister Whitney had just gotten her license, which meant that she had to drive me places. Getting home, however, remained my own responsibility, whether from the pool, which was walking distance, or the mall one town over, which wasn't. Whitney was a loner, even then. Any space around her was her *personal* space; just by existing, you were encroaching.

It was only after I sat down that I finally allowed myself to look again at the girl with the orange bikini. She had left the snack bar and was standing across the pool from us, her towel over one arm, a drink in her other hand, surveying the layout of benches and beach chairs.

"Here," Clarke said, handing over the deck of cards she was holding. "It's your deal."

Clarke had been my best friend since we were six years old. There were tons of kids in our neighborhood, but for some reason most of them were in their teens, like my sisters, or four and below, a result of the baby boom a couple of years previously. When Clarke's family moved from Washington, D.C., our moms met at a community-watch meeting. As soon as they realized we were the same age, they put us together, and we'd stayed that way ever since.

Clarke had been born in China, and the Reynoldses had adopted her when she was six months old. We were the same height, but that was about all we had in common. I was blonde-haired and blue-eyed, a typical Greene, while she had the darkest, shiniest hair I'd ever seen and eyes so brown they were almost

black. While I was timid and too eager to please, Clarke was more serious, her tone, personality, and appearance all measured and thoughtful. I'd been modeling since before I could even remember, following my sisters before me; Clarke was a total tomboy, the best soccer player on our block, not to mention a whiz at cards, especially gin rummy, at which she'd been beating me all summer.

"Can I have a sip of your drink?" Clarke asked me. Then she sneezed. "It's hot out here."

I nodded, reaching down to get it for her. Clarke had bad allergies year-round, but in summer they hit fever pitch. She was usually either stuffed up, dripping, or blowing from April to October, and no amount of shots or pills seemed to work. I'd long ago grown used to her adenoidal voice, as well as the omnipresent pack of Kleenex in her pocket or hand.

There was an organized hierarchy to the seating at our pool: The lifeguards got the picnic tables near the snack bar, while the moms and little kids stuck by the shallow end and the baby (i.e., pee) pool. Clarke and I preferred the half-shaded area behind the kiddie slides, while the more popular high-school guys—like Chris Pennington, three years older than me and hands-down the most gorgeous guy in our neighborhood and, I thought then, possibly the world—hung out by the high dive. The prime spot was the stretch of chairs between the snack bar and lap lane, which was usually taken by the most popular high-school girls. This was where my oldest sister, Kirsten, was stretched out in a chaise, wearing a hot-pink bikini and fanning herself with a *Glamour* magazine.

Once I dealt out our cards, I was surprised to see the girl in orange walk over to where Kirsten was sitting, taking the chair next to her. Molly Clayton, Kirsten's best friend, who was on her other side, nudged her, then nodded at the girl. Kirsten looked up and over, then shrugged and lay back down, throwing her arm over her face.

"Annabel?" Clarke had already picked up her cards and was impatient to start beating me. "It's your draw."

"Oh," I said, turning back to face her. "Right."

The next afternoon, the girl was back, this time in a silver bathing suit. When I got there, she was already set up in the same chair my sister had been in the day before, her towel spread out, bottled water beside her, magazine in her lap. Clarke was at a tennis lesson, so I was alone when Kirsten and her friends arrived about an hour later. They came in loud as always, their shoes thwacking down the pavement. When they reached their usual spot and saw the girl sitting there, they slowed, then looked at one another. Molly Clayton looked annoyed, but Kirsten just moved about four chairs down and set up camp as always.

For the next few days, I watched as the new girl kept up her stubborn efforts to infiltrate my sister's group. What began as just taking a chair escalated, by day three, to following them to the snack bar. The next afternoon, she got in the water seconds after they did, staying just about a foot down the wall as they bobbed and talked, splashing one another. By the weekend, she was trailing behind them constantly, a living shadow.

It had to be annoying. I'd seen Molly shoot her a couple of nasty looks, and even Kirsten had asked her to back up, please, when she'd gotten a little too close in the deep end. But the girl didn't seem to care. If anything, she just stepped up her efforts more, as if it didn't matter what they were saying as long as they were talking to her, period.

"So," my mother said one night at dinner, "I heard a new family's moved in to the Daughtrys' house, over on Sycamore."

"The Daughtrys moved?" my father asked.

My mother nodded. "Back in June. To Toledo. Remember?"

My father thought for a second. "Right," he said finally, nodding. "Toledo."

"I also heard," my mom continued, passing the bowl of pasta she was holding to Whitney, who immediately passed it on to me, "that they have a daughter your age, Annabel. I think I saw her the other day when I was over at Margie's."

"Really," I said.

She nodded. "She has dark hair, a bit taller than you. Maybe you've seen her around the neighborhood."

I thought for a second. "I don't know—"

"That's who that is!" Kirsten said suddenly. She put down her fork with a clank. "The stalker from the pool. Oh my God, I *knew* she had to be way younger than us."

"Hold on." Now my father was paying attention. "There's a stalker at the pool?"

"I *hope* not," my mother said, in her worried voice.

"She's not a stalker, really," Kirsten said. "She's just this girl who's been hanging around us. It's so creepy. She, like, sits beside us, and follows us around, and doesn't talk, and she's always listening to what we're saying. I've told her to get lost, but she just ignores me. God! I can't believe she's only *twelve*. That makes it even sicker."

"So dramatic," Whitney muttered, spearing a piece of lettuce with her fork.

She was right, of course. Kirsten was our resident drama queen. Her emotions were always at full throttle, as was her mouth; she never stopped talking, even if she was well aware you weren't listening to her. In contrast, Whitney was the silent type, which meant the few words she uttered always carried that much more meaning.

"Kirsten," my mother said now, "Be nice."

"Mom, I've tried that. But if you saw her, you'd understand. It's strange."

My mother took a sip of her wine. "Moving to a new place is difficult, you know. Maybe she doesn't know how to make friends—"

"She obviously doesn't," Kirsten told her.

"—which means that it might be your job to meet her halfway," my mother finished.

"She's *twelve*," Kirsten said, as if this was on par with being diseased, or on fire.

"So is your sister," my father pointed out.

Kirsten picked up her fork and pointed it at him. "Exactly," she said.

Beside me, Whitney snorted. But my mom, of course, was already turning her attention on me. "Well, Annabel," she said, "maybe you could make an effort, if you do see her. To say hello or something."

I didn't tell my mother I'd already met this new girl, mostly because she would have been horrified she'd been so rude to me. Not that this would have changed her expectations for my behavior. My mother was famously polite, and expected the same of us, regardless of the circumstances. Our whole lives were supposed to be the high road. "Okay," I said. "Maybe I will."

"Good girl," she said. And that, I hoped, was that.

The next afternoon, though, when Clarke and I got to the pool, Kirsten was already there, lying out with Molly on one side and the new girl on the other. I tried to ignore this as we got settled in our spot, but eventually I glanced over to see Kirsten watching me. When she got up a moment later, shooting me a look, then headed toward the snack bar, the new girl immediately following her, I knew what I had to do.

"I'll back in a second," I told Clarke, who was reading a Stephen King novel and blowing her nose.

"Okay," she said.

I got up, then started around by the high dive, crossing my arms over my chest as I passed Chris Pennington. He was lying on a beach chair, a towel over his eyes, while a couple of his buddies wrestled on the pool deck. Now, instead of sneaking glances at him—which, other than swimming and getting beaten at cards, was my main activity at the pool that summer—I'd get bitched out again, all because my mother was insistent we be raised as the best of Good Samaritans. Great.

I could have told Kirsten about my previous run-in with this girl, but I knew better. Unlike me, she did not shy away from confrontation—if anything, she sped toward it, before overtaking it completely. She was the family powder keg, and I had lost track of the number of times I'd stood off to the side, cringing and blushing, while she made her various displeasures clear to salespeople, other drivers, or various ex-boyfriends. I loved her, but the truth was, she made me nervous.

Whitney, in contrast, was a silent fumer. She'd never tell you when she was mad. You just knew, by the expression on her face, the steely narrowing of her eyes, the heavy, enunciated sighs that could be so belittling that words, any words, seemed preferable to them. When she and Kirsten fought—which, with two years between them, was fairly often—it always seemed at first like a one-sided argument, since all you could hear was Kirsten endlessly listing accusations and slights. Pay more attention, though, and you'd notice Whitney's stony, heavy silences, as well as the rebuttals she offered, few as they were, that always cut to the point much more harshly than Kirsten's swirling, whirly commentaries.

One open, one closed. It was no wonder that the first image that came to mind when I thought of either of my sisters was a door. With Kirsten, it was the front one to our house, through which she was always coming in or out, usually in mid-sentence, a gaggle of friends trailing behind her. Whitney's was the one to her bedroom, which she preferred to keep shut between her and the rest of us, always.

As for me, I fell somewhere between my sisters and their strong personalities, the very personification of the vast gray area that separated them. I was not bold and outspoken, or silent and calculating. I had no idea how anyone would describe me, or what would come to mind at the sound of my name. I was just Annabel.

My mother, conflict-adverse herself, hated it when my sisters fought. "Why can't you just be *nice*?" she'd plead with them. They might have rolled their eyes, but a message sank in with me: that being nice was the ideal, the one place where people didn't get loud or so quiet they could scare you. If you could just be nice, then you wouldn't have to worry about arguments at all. But being nice wasn't as easy as it seemed, especially when the rest of the world could be so mean.

By the time I got to the snack bar, Kirsten had disappeared (of course), but the girl was still there, waiting for the guy behind the counter to ring up her candy bar. *Oh well*, I thought, as I walked up to her. *Here goes nothing*.

"Hi," I said. She just looked at me, her expression unreadable. "Um, I'm Annabel. You just moved here, right?"

She didn't say anything for what seemed like a really long while, during which time Kirsten walked out of the ladies' room behind her. She stopped when she saw us talking.

"I," I continued, now even more uncomfortable, "I, um, think we're in the same grade."

The girl reached up, pushing her sunglasses farther up her nose. "So?" she said, in that same sharp, snide voice as the first time she'd addressed me.

"I just thought," I said, "that since, you know, we're the same age, you might want to hang out. Or something."

Another pause. Then the girl said, as if clarifying, "You want me to hang out. With you."

She made it sound so ridiculous I immediately began backtracking. "I mean, you don't have to," I told her. "It was just—"

"No," she cut me off flatly. Then she tilted her head back and laughed. "No way."

The thing is, if it had just been me there, that would have been it. I would have turned around, face flushed, and gone back to Clarke, game over. But it wasn't just me.

"Hold on," Kirsten said, her voice loud. "What did you just say?"

The girl turned around. When she saw my sister, her eyes widened. "What?" she said, and I couldn't help but notice how different this, the first word she'd ever said to me, sounded as she said it now.

"I said," Kirsten repeated, her own voice sharp, "*what* did you just say to her?"

Uh-oh, I thought.

"Nothing," the girl replied. "I just—"

"That's my sister," Kirsten said, pointing at me, "and you were just a total bitch to her."

By this point, I was already both cringing and blushing. Kirsten, however, put her hand on her hip, which meant she was just getting started.

"I wasn't a bitch," the girl said, taking off her sunglasses. "I only—"

"You were, and you know it," Kirsten said, cutting her off. "So you can stop denying it. And stop

following me around, too, okay? You're creeping me out. Come on, Annabel."

I was frozen to the spot, just looking at the girl's face. Without her sunglasses, her expression stricken, she suddenly *looked* twelve, just staring at us as Kirsten grabbed my wrist, tugging me back to where she and her friends were sitting.

"Unbelievable," she kept saying, and as I looked across the pool I could see Clarke watching me, confused, as Kirsten pulled me down onto her chair. Molly sat up, blinking, reaching up to catch the untied straps of her bikini.

"What happened?" she asked, and as Kirsten began to tell her, I glanced back toward the snack bar, but the girl was gone. Then I saw her, through the fence behind me, walking across the parking lot, barefoot, her head ducked down. She'd left all her stuff on the chair beside me—a towel, her shoes, a bag with a magazine and billfold, a pink hairbrush. I kept waiting for her to realize this and turn back for it. She didn't.

Her things stayed there all afternoon: After I'd gone back to sit with Clarke, and told her everything. After we played several hands of rummy, and swam until our fingers were pruny. After Kirsten and Molly left, and other people took their chairs. All the way up until the lifeguard finally blew the whistle, announcing closing time, and Clarke and I packed up and walked around the edge of the pool, sunburned and hungry and ready to go home.

I knew this girl was not my problem. She'd been mean to me, twice, and therefore was not deserving of my pity or help. But as we passed the chair, Clarke stopped. "We can't just leave it," she said, bending over to gather up the shoes and stuff them into the bag. "And it's on our way home."

I could have argued the point, but then I thought again of her walking across the parking lot, barefoot, alone. So I pulled the towel off the chair, folding it over my own. "Yeah," I said. "Okay."

Still, when we got to the Daughtrys' old house, I was relieved to see all the windows were dark and there was no car in the driveway, so we could just leave the girl's stuff and be done with it. But as Clarke bent down to stick the bag against the front door, it opened, and there she was.

She had on cutoff shorts and a red T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. No sunglasses. No high-heeled sandals. When she saw us, her face flushed.

"Hi," Clarke said, after a just-long-enough-to-be-noticed awkward silence. Then she sneezed before adding, "We brought your stuff."

The girl just looked at her for a second, as if she didn't understand what she was saying. Which, with Clarke's congestion, she probably didn't. I leaned over and picked up the bag, holding it out to her. "You left this," I said.

She looked at the bag, then up at me, her expression guarded. "Oh," she said, reaching for it. "Thanks."

Behind us, a bunch of kids coasted past on their bikes, their voices loud as they called out to one another. Then it was quiet again.

"Honey?" I heard a voice call out from the end of the dark hallway behind her. "Is someone there?"

"It's okay," she said over her shoulder. Then she stepped forward, shutting the door behind her, and came out onto the porch. She quickly moved past us, but not before I saw that her eyes were red and swollen—she'd been crying. And suddenly, like so many other times, I heard my mother's voice in my head: *Moving to a new place is tough. Maybe she doesn't know how to make friends.*

"Look," I said, "about what happened. My sister—"

"It's fine," she said, cutting me off. "I'm fine." But as she said it, her voice cracked, just slightly, and she turned her back to us, putting a hand to her mouth. I just stood there, totally unsure what to do, but as I looked at Clarke, I saw she was already digging into the pocket of her shorts to pull out her ever-present pack of Kleenex. She drew one out, then reached around the girl, offering it to her. A second later, the girl took it, silently, and pressed it to her face.

"I'm Clarke," Clarke said. "And this is Annabel."

In the years to come, it would be this moment that I always came back to. Me and Clarke, in the

summer after our sixth-grade year, standing there behind that girl's turned back. So much might have been different for me, for all of us, if something else had happened right then. At the time, though, it was like so many other moments, fleeting and unimportant, as she turned around, now not crying—surprisingly composed, actually—to face us.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Sophie."

CHAPTER TWO

"Sophie!"

Finally it was lunchtime, which meant that this, the first day of school, was now at least half over. All around me, the hallway was packed and noisy, but even with locker doors clanging and the droning of various announcements from the intercom, I could still hear Emily Shuster's voice, clear as day.

I looked down the hall to the main staircase and sure enough, she was coming toward me, her red head bobbing through the crowd. When she finally emerged about two feet from where I was standing, our eyes met, but only fleetingly. Then she was quickly moving on, down the hall to where Sophie was waiting for her.

Since Emily had been my friend first, I'd thought maybe, just maybe, she might still be. Apparently not. The lines had been drawn, and now I knew for sure I was standing outside of them.

I had other friends, of course. People I knew from my classes, and from the Lakeview Models, which I'd been doing for years now. It was becoming clear, though, that my self-imposed isolation during the summer had been more effective than I'd realized. Right after everything happened, I'd cut myself off entirely, figuring this was safer than risking people judging me. I blew off phone calls and avoided people when I saw them out at the mall or the movies. I didn't want to talk about what had happened, so it seemed safest not to talk at all. The result, however, was that now all morning, when I'd stopped to say hello to girls I knew, or walked up to groups of people chatting, I'd felt an instant coolness and distance, one that lingered until I made my excuses and walked away. Back in May, all I'd wanted was to be alone. Now I'd gotten my wish.

My association with Sophie didn't help, of course. Hanging out with her made me a party to all her various social crimes and misdemeanors—and there were many—so there was a wide portion of the student body that was not exactly rushing to embrace me. To the girls Sophie had insulted and isolated while I stood by doing nothing, my own taste of this medicine was nothing short of deserved. If Sophie couldn't be ostracized, I was the next best thing.

Now I headed down to the main lobby, stopping in front of the long row of glass doors that looked out over the courtyard. Outside, the various cliques—jocks, art girls, pols, burnouts—were scattered across the grassy spaces and walkways. Everyone had a place, and once I'd known mine: the long wooden bench to the right of the main walkway, where Sophie and Emily were sitting. Now I was wondering if I should even go out at all.

"It's that time of year again," someone called out in a falsetto voice from behind me. There was a burst of laughter, and as I turned around, I saw a group of football players hanging out by the front office. A tall guy with dreadlocks was imitating the way I'd held out my arm to that guy in the commercial, while the rest of them snickered. I knew they were just goofing around, and maybe another time it wouldn't have bothered me. But now, I felt my face flush as I pushed the doors open in front of me and stepped outside.

There was a long wall to my right, so I headed toward it, looking for a spot, any spot, to sit down. There were only two people sitting on it, the distance between them just big enough to make it clear they weren't together. One was Clarke Reynolds. The other was Owen Armstrong. It wasn't like I had a lot of choices of seating or company, so I sat down between them.

The bricks were warm on my bare legs as I busied myself pulling out the lunch my mother had packed for me that morning: open-faced turkey sandwich, bottled water, and a nectarine. I uncapped the water,

taking a big sip, before I finally allowed myself to take a look around. As soon as I glanced over at the bench, I saw Sophie was watching me. When our eyes met, she smiled a thin-lipped smile, shaking her head before looking away.

Pathetic, I heard her say in my head, then pushed this thought away. It wasn't like I wanted to sit with her, either. Then again, I never would have expected to find myself in my current company, either, with Clarke on one side and the Angriest Boy in School on the other.

At least Clarke I knew, or had once known. All the information I possessed about Owen Armstrong I'd gotten from a distance. Like that he was tall and muscular, with broad shoulders and thick biceps. And he always wore boots with thick rubber soles that made him seem even bigger, his steps heavier. His hair was dark and cut short, spiking up a bit at the top, and I'd never once seen him without his iPod and earphones, which he wore inside, outside, in class, out of class. And while I knew he had to have friends, I'd never seen him talk to anyone.

Then there was the fight. It had happened the previous January, in the parking lot before first bell. I'd just gotten out of my car when I saw Owen, backpack over his shoulder, earphones on as always, heading down to the main building. On the way, he passed Ronnie Waterman, who was leaning up against his car, talking with a bunch of his buddies. Every school has someone like Ronnie—a total jerk, famous for tripping people in the hallways, the kind of guy who yells "Nice ass!" when you walk past him. His older brother, Luke, had been his total opposite, captain of the football team and student-body president, totally nice and well liked, and because of this, people put up with his annoying little brother. But Luke had graduated the year before, and now Ronnie was on his own.

Owen was just walking along, minding his own business, and Ronnie shouted out something to him. When he didn't respond, Ronnie pushed off his car and crossed over to block Owen's path. Even from where I was standing, I could tell this was a bad idea; Ronnie wasn't small, but he was tiny compared to Owen Armstrong, who was a full head taller at least, not to mention much wider. Ronnie, however, didn't seem to notice this. He said something else to Owen, and Owen just looked at him for a second, then stepped around him. As he started walking again, Ronnie hit him in the chin.

Owen stumbled, but only slightly. Then he dropped his bag, pulling back his other arm and letting go in a solid arc, where it connected square in the center of Ronnie's face. I could hear it, that smack of fist against bone, from where I was standing.

Ronnie went down within seconds—his body first, knees buckling, then shoulders, followed by his head, which bounced slightly when it hit the ground. Owen, for his part, dropped his hand, stepped over him calm as you please, then picked up his bag and kept walking, the crowd that had gathered parting quickly, then scattering outright to let him through. Ronnie's friends were already gathering around him, someone was calling for the parking-lot guard, but all I could remember was Owen just walking away—same pace, same stride as before, as if he hadn't even stopped.

At the time, Owen was still relatively new; he had been at our school for a only month. As a result of this incident, he got suspended for another. When he came back, everyone was talking about him. I heard that he'd done time in juvenile hall, been kicked out of his previous school, and was in a gang. There were so many rumors that a few months later, when I heard he'd been arrested for fighting at a club over the weekend, I just assumed it wasn't true. But then he'd just disappeared, never coming back to school. Until now.

Up close, though, Owen didn't really look like a monster. He was just sitting there, in sunglasses and a red T-shirt, drumming his fingers on his knee and listening to his music. Even so, I figured it was best not to get caught staring at him, so after unwrapping my sandwich and taking a bite, I took a breath and turned my attention to my right side, and Clarke.

She was at the far end of the wall, a notebook open in her lap, eating an apple with one hand while scribbling something with the other. Her hair was pulled back at her neck in a simple elastic, and she was wearing a plain white T-shirt, army pants, and flip-flops, the glasses she'd started to wear the year earlier, small and tortoiseshell, perched on her nose. After a moment, she glanced up and over at me.

She had to have heard about what happened the previous May. Everyone had. As the seconds passed and she didn't turn away, I wondered if maybe she might have finally forgiven me. That perhaps, just as a new rift had started, I could mend an old one. It would be only fitting, now that we'd both been shunned by Sophie. It gave us something in common again.

And she was still looking at me. I put down my sandwich, then took in a breath. All I had to do, right now, was say something to her, something great, something that might—

But then, suddenly, she turned away. Pushed her notebook into her bag, zipping it shut, her body language stiff, her elbow extended in a sharp angle in my direction. Then she hopped down off the wall, slid her bag over her shoulders, and walked away.

I looked down at my sandwich, half-eaten, and felt a lump rise in my throat. Which was just so stupid, because Clarke had hated me forever. This, at least, was not new.

For the rest of lunch, I just sat there, making a point of not looking at anyone. When I checked my watch and saw I had only five minutes to go, I figured the worst part was over. I was wrong.

I was stuffing my water bottle into my bag when I heard a car pull into the turnaround at the end of the wall. I glanced over to see a red Jeep pulling up to the curb. The passenger door opened and a dark-haired guy climbed out, sticking a cigarette behind his ear as he ducked down, saying something to the person behind the wheel. As he shut the door and started to walk away, I got a look at the driver. It was Will Cash.

I felt my stomach physically drop, as if from a great height, straight down. Everything narrowed, the sounds around me falling away as my palms sprang into sweat, my heartbeat loud in my ears, *thump thump thump*.

I could not stop staring at him. He was just sitting there, one hand on the wheel, waiting for the car in front of him—a station wagon out of which some girl was unloading a cello or some other big instrument—to move along. After a second, he shook his head, irritated.

Shhh, Annabel. It's just me.

A million red Jeeps must have passed before my eyes in the last few months, and despite myself I'd checked each one for his face, this face. But only now, here, was it actually him. And while I had told myself that in broad daylight I could be strong and fearless, I felt as helpless as that night, as if even in the wide open, the bright light of day, I still wasn't safe.

The girl finally got her case out of the station wagon, then waved to the driver as she shut the door. As the car pulled forward, Will glanced over at the courtyard, and I watched his eyes move across the people there, barely seeming to register anyone in particular. Then he looked at me.

I just stared at him, my heart pounding in my chest. It lasted only a second, and I saw no recognition, nothing on his face but a blank stare, as if I were a stranger, just anyone. Then he was moving forward, the car a red blur, and it was over.

Suddenly, I was aware again of the noise and commotion around me: people bustling past to their next class, calling out to one another, tossing trash into the nearby can. Still, I kept my eyes on the Jeep, watching as it climbed the hill that led toward the main road, creeping away from me, bit by bit. And then, in the midst of all the noise and voices, movement and change, I turned my head, cupped a hand to cover my mouth, and threw up in the grass behind me.

When I turned back around a few moments later, the courtyard was mostly empty. The jocks had vacated the other wall, the grass beneath the trees was bare, Emily and Sophie had left their bench. It wasn't until I had wiped my mouth and glanced to my other side that I saw Owen Armstrong was still there, watching me. His eyes were dark and intense, and I was so startled that I quickly looked away. When I glanced back a minute later, he was gone.

Sophie hated me. Clarke hated me. Everybody hated me. Or, maybe not everybody.

"The Mooshka people *loved* your pictures," my mother was saying, her happy voice a complete contrast to how I felt as I sat in a long line of traffic, trying to get out of the parking lot after seventh

period. "Lindy said they called her and were just raving."

"Really," I said, switching my phone to my other ear. "That's great."

I tried to sound enthusiastic, but the truth was I'd totally forgotten that a few days earlier my mother had told me that Lindy, my agent, was sending my pictures over to a local swimwear company called Mooshka Surfwear that was hiring for their new ad campaign. Suffice to say modeling was not my top concern these days.

"However," she continued, "Lindy says they'd like to see you in person."

"Oh," I said as the line crept another inch or so forward. "Okay. When?"

"Well," she replied, "actually . . . today."

"Today?" I said, as Amanda Cheeker, driving what looked like a brand-new BMW, totally cut me off, not even looking as she pulled out in front of me.

"Yes. Apparently one of their advertising heads is in town, but only until tonight."

"Mom." I inched forward incrementally, then craned my neck, trying to see who was causing the holdup. "I can't. It's been a really crappy day, and—"

"Honey, I know," she said, as if she actually did, which was totally not the case. Having raised three daughters, my mom was well versed in the politics of girls, which had made it easy for me to explain Sophie's sudden and utter disappearance from my life with the standard "She's just acting so weird," and "I have no idea what happened." As far as she knew, Sophie and I had just drifted apart; I couldn't imagine what she would have thought if I told her the real story. Actually, I *could* imagine, which was why I hadn't and had no intention of doing so. "But Lindy says they're *really* interested in you."

I glanced in my side mirror, taking in my flushed face, flat hair, and the flecks of mascara around my eyes, the result of finally breaking down in tears in a bathroom stall after sixth period. I really did look as bad as I felt. "You don't understand," I said as I moved up barely one car length. "I didn't sleep well last night, I look really tired, I'm all sweaty—"

"Oh, Annabel," she said, and I felt a lump rising in my throat, reacting immediately to her soft, understanding tone, so welcome after this long terrible day. "I know, sweetie. But it's just one thing, and then you'll be done."

"Mom." The sun was in my eyes, and all I could smell was exhaust. "I'm just—"

"Listen," she said. "How about this. Come home, you can take a quick shower, I'll make you a sandwich and do your makeup. Then I'll drive you over, we'll get it done, and you won't have to think about it again. Okay?"

That was the thing with my mother. There was always a How About This, some deal she was able to manufacture and sell to you that, while being not very different from the original proposition, at least sounded better. Before, saying no had been my prerogative. Now, doing so would make me unreasonable.

"All right," I said as traffic finally started moving at a decent pace. Up ahead, I could see the security guard waving people around a blue Toyota with a crushed back bumper. "When's the appointment?"

"Four o'clock."

I glanced at my watch. "Mom, it's three thirty right now, and I'm not even out of the parking lot. Where's the office?"

"It's at . . ." she said. I heard paper rustling. "Mayor's Village."

Which was a good twenty minutes away. I'd be lucky to get there on time if I headed straight there, and even then I'd need serious stoplight mercy. "Great," I said. "There's no way."

I knew I was being difficult, not to mention petulant. I also knew I'd go to the meeting and put on my best face, because being difficult and petulant was about as bad as I got when it came to my mother. After all, I was the nice one.

"Well," she said now, in her small voice. "I could call Lindy and tell her you just can't do it, if you like. I'm happy to do that."

"No," I said as I finally reached the top of the parking lot, putting on my blinker. "It's okay. I'll go."

I'd been modeling for as long as I could remember. Actually, it was even before that. I'd done my first shoot when I was nine months old, wearing onesies for a SmartMart Sunday circular, a job I'd gotten when my mother, her sitter having fallen through, had to bring me along to one of my sister Whitney's go-sees. The woman hiring asked her if I was available, my mother said yes, and that was that.

The whole modeling thing had started, though, with Kirsten. She was eight when a talent agent caught up with my mom and dad in the parking lot after her ballet recital, offering them a card and saying they should give him a call. My father had laughed, assuming it was a scam, but my mom was intrigued enough to take Kirsten in for an appointment. The agent had immediately set her up for an audition for a local car-dealership commercial, which she didn't get, followed by a print ad for Easter festivities at the Lakeview Mall, which she did. My modeling career began with onesies, but Kirsten could claim bunnies, or at least one very big one, leaning over to put a shiny egg in her basket as she, in a puffy white dress, smiled into the camera.

Once Kirsten started getting regular work, Whitney wanted to try it as well, and soon they were both making the rounds, often even going up for the same jobs, which only added to the natural friction between them. Their looks, though, were as distinct and different as their temperaments. Whitney was the beauty, with the perfect bone structure and haunting eyes, while Kirsten was somehow able to convey her bubbly personality with just one look. Whitney did better in print, but Kirsten popped on screen. And so on.

Because of this, by the time I started modeling, my family was well known on the local circuit, which consisted mostly of print ads for department and discount stores and regionally cast and shot commercials. While my dad chose to take a hands-off approach to us working—as he did to everything even vaguely girly, from Tampax to broken hearts—my mother thrived on it. She loved ferrying us to jobs, talking business with Lindy on the phone and gathering pictures to update our books. But when she was asked about it, she always pointed out first that it was our choice, not hers. "I would have been happy to have them making mud pies in the backyard," I'd heard her tell people a million times. "But this is what they wanted to do."

In truth, though, my mother loved the modeling, too, even if she didn't want to admit it. But I believed it was even more than that. In some way, I thought that it had saved her.

Not at first, of course. Initially, for her, our modeling was just a fun hobby, something for her to do when she wasn't having to work at my dad's office, which we joked was the most fertile place on the planet, as the secretaries were always getting pregnant, leaving it to my mom to answer the phones until he found a replacement. But then, the year I turned nine, my grandmother died, and something changed.

My own memories of my grandmother are distant, muted, based more on photographs I'd seen than on any real events. My mom was an only child and very close to her own mother, even though they lived on opposite coasts and saw each other only a few times a year. They talked on the phone almost every morning, usually while my mom had her midmorning cup of coffee. Like clockwork, if you came into the kitchen around ten thirty, you'd find her in the chair facing the window, stirring cream into a mug, the phone cocked between her ear and shoulder. To me, it always sounded like the most boring of conversations, solely about people I'd never met, or whatever my mom had cooked the night before, or even my own life, which sounded deadly dull, as well, relayed this way. For my mom, though, it was different. Crucial. How much so, we didn't realize until after my grandmother was gone.

It wasn't like my mom had ever been some pillar of strength. She was a quiet woman, soft-spoken, with a kind face—the sort of person you'd look for if you were out in public somewhere and something bad happened, an instant comfort. I'd always relied on my mom to be just that, exactly as she always had been, which was why the change in her in the weeks following my grandmother's funeral was so strange. She just got . . . quieter. Still. There was suddenly something haunted and tired about her face, so obvious that even I, at nine, could see it. At first, my dad just assured us that it was the normal grief process, that my mother was tired, and she'd be fine. But as time went on, she didn't get better. Instead she started sleeping later, and then later, until she sometimes didn't get out of bed at all. When she was

up, I'd sometimes come into the kitchen midmorning to find her sitting in that same chair, empty mug in her hands, looking out the window.

"Mom," I'd say, and she wouldn't respond, so I'd say it again. Sometimes it took three times before she'd slowly begin to turn her head, but when she did I would suddenly feel scared, like I didn't want to see her face after all. Like in those few moments, she might have changed again, shifting deeper into someone I didn't recognize.

My sisters remembered this time better than I did, as they were older and therefore privy to more information. And in typical fashion, they each had their own way of dealing with it. It fell to Kirsten to take care of things around the house, like cleaning and making our lunches, when my mom wasn't up to it, which she did with her usual bravado, as if nothing was wrong at all. Whitney, on the other hand, I often found outside my mother's half-closed bedroom door, listening or peering in, but she'd always move on when I saw her, not meeting my eyes. As the youngest, I wasn't sure how to react, other than to just try not to make trouble or ask too many questions.

My mother's condition quickly grew to dictate our lives. It was the barometer by which we judged everything. In my mind, it all came down to the first glimpse I had of her each morning. If she was up and dressed at a decent hour and making breakfast, things would be okay. But if she wasn't and I found my dad in the kitchen instead, doing his best with cold cereal and toast, or even worse, if neither of them was in sight, I knew it was not going to be a good day. Maybe it was a rudimentary system, but it worked, more or less. And it wasn't like I had a lot else to go on.

"Your mother isn't feeling well," was all my dad would say when we asked after her as we sat around the dining-room table, my mother's place glaringly empty, or when she didn't emerge from her room all day, the only view of her a lump under the covers, barely visible in a sliver of light from the drawn shades. "We all just need to do the best we can to make things easy for her until she feels better. Okay?"

I remember nodding, and seeing my sisters doing the same. But *how* to do this was another thing entirely. I had no idea how to make things easier, or even if I'd done something to make them difficult in the first place. What I did get was that it was paramount that we protect my mom from anything that might upset her, even if I wasn't sure what those things were. So I learned another system: When in doubt, keep it out—out of earshot, out of the house—even if this meant, really, just keeping it in.

My mother's depression, or episode, or whatever it was—I never got a concrete term, which made it all the more hard to define—had been going on for about three months when my dad convinced her to go see a therapist. At first she went reluctantly, quitting after a couple of sessions, but then she started up again, and this time she stuck with it, continuing for the next year. Still, there wasn't some sudden change—one particular day that I came into the kitchen at ten thirty and there she was, bright and cheerful, like she'd been waiting for me to appear. Instead, it was a slow process, little increments, like moving a half a millimeter a day so that you only really notice progress from a distance. First she stopped sleeping all day, then she began to get up midmorning, then finally she started to cook breakfast every once in a while. Her silences, so noticeable at the dinner table and everywhere else, slowly became less extended, a little conversation here, a comment there.

In the end it was the modeling, though, that convinced me we were over the worst of it. Since my mom had been the one who got us to jobs and dealt with Lindy as far as scheduling and auditions, we'd all been working a lot less while she was sick. My dad had taken Whitney to a couple of jobs, and I'd had one shoot that was booked way in advance, but things had definitely slowed down—enough so that when Lindy called one day during dinner about a go-see, even she was assuming we'd take a pass.

"That's probably best," my dad said, glancing back at all of us at the table before taking the phone farther into the kitchen. "I just don't think the time's right."

Kirsten, who was chewing on a piece of bread, said, "Right for what?"

"A job," Whitney told her, her voice flat. "Why else would Lindy call during dinner?"

My dad was rummaging in the drawer by the phone now, finally digging out a pencil. "Well, okay," he said, grabbing a nearby notepad. "I'll just take down the info, but most likely . . . right. What was that

address, again?"

My sisters were both watching him as he scribbled it down, probably wondering what the job was for, and for whom. But I was looking at my mom, who had her eyes on my dad as well, even as she drew her napkin out of her lap, dabbing the corners of her mouth. When he came back in, settling into his chair and picking up his fork, I waited for my sisters to ask for details. But instead, my mom spoke first.

"So what was that about?"

My dad looked at her. "Oh," he said, "just an audition tomorrow. Lindy thought we might be interested."

"We?" Kirsten said.

"You," my dad told her, scooping some beans onto his fork. "I told her it probably isn't a good time. It's in the morning, and I've got to be at the office. . . ."

He trailed off, not bothering to finish—not that he had to. My dad was an architect and busy enough with his own work, plus taking care of my mom and keeping up the house, without having to deal with running us all over town. Kirsten knew this, even though it was obvious she was disappointed. But then, in the quiet as we all went back to eating, I heard my mom take in a breath.

"I could take her," she said. We all looked at her. "I mean, if she wanted to go."

"Really?" Kirsten asked. "Because that would be—"

"Grace," my dad said, his voice concerned. Kirsten sat back in her chair, now quiet. "You don't have to."

"I know." My mom smiled, a wan smile, but a smile just the same. "It's just one day, though. One thing. I'd like to."

So the next day, my mom was up for breakfast—I remember that, clearly—and when Whitney and I left for school, she and Kirsten headed off to an audition for a local bowling alley commercial. Kirsten got the job. It was by no means her first ad, and not a very big one, as things went. But every time it ran afterwards, and I saw her bowl that perfect strike (edited in, as my sister was a terrible bowler, the queen of the gutter ball), I thought about that night at the table and how, finally, it seemed like things might be getting back to normal.

And they did, more or less. My mom started taking us around to auditions again, and while she wasn't always cheerful and perky, maybe she actually never had been in the first place. Maybe that, like so much else, I'd only imagined, or assumed. Still, as that year went on, I had trouble trusting that things were really getting better. As hopeful as I wanted to be, I always felt like I was holding my breath, sure that it wouldn't last. And even when it did, the fact that what had happened to my mom had come on so suddenly, with no beginning or true end, made it seem that much more likely to reappear in the same fashion. Back then, I always felt like it would take only one bad event, one disappointment, for her to leave us again. Maybe I felt that way still.

This was one reason why I hadn't yet told my mom I wanted to quit modeling. The truth was that all summer, when I went to go-sees, I felt strange, nervous in a way I never had before. I didn't like the scrutiny, having to walk in front of people, strangers staring at me. At one fitting for a swimsuit shoot in June, I'd kept cringing when the stylist tried to adjust my bathing suit, a lump rising in my throat even as I apologized and said I was fine.

Each time I got close to telling my mom about this, though, something would happen to stop me. I was the only one left modeling now. And while it is hard enough to take away something that makes a person happy, it's even more difficult when it seems like it's the *only* thing.

Which was why, when I got to Mayor's Village fifteen minutes later, I was not surprised to find my mother waiting for me. As I turned in, I was struck, as always, by how *small* she was. Then again, my perspective was a bit skewed, as I was five-eight, and even at that the shortest of my sisters: Kirsten had a half inch on me and Whitney was five-ten. My father loomed above all of us at six-two, leaving my mother to always look sort of odd when we were all together, like one of those which-one-of-these-is-not-like-the-other puzzles we used to do in elementary school.

As I pulled in beside her car, I saw Whitney was in the passenger seat, her arms crossed over her chest. She looked irritated, which was neither surprising nor new, so I didn't dwell on it as I grabbed my makeup bag from my purse and went around to meet my mother, who was standing by her bumper, the hatch open.

"You didn't have to come," I said.

"I know," she replied, not looking up as she handed me a Tupperware container with a plastic fork balanced on top of it. "Fruit salad. I didn't have time to make a sandwich. Sit down."

I sat, then opened the container, digging in the fork to take a bite. I realized I was starving, which made sense, considering I'd thrown up the small amount of lunch I'd managed to get down. God, what a crappy day.

My mother took my makeup bag from me and began to rummage through it, taking out an eye-shadow compact and my powder. "Whitney," she called out, "hand those clothes back here, would you?"

Whitney sighed loudly, then turned around, reaching for the shirts that were hanging from the hook on the door behind her. "Here," she said flatly, barely extending them over the backseat. My mother reached for them, her fingertips falling short, so I turned around to get them for her. As my hand closed over the hangers and I tried to pull them toward me, Whitney held on for a second longer, her grip surprisingly strong as our eyes met. Then she let go, suddenly, and turned back around.

I was trying to be patient with my sister. To remember, at times like this, that it wasn't *her* I was upset with, but her eating disorder. But at times like this, it looked a lot like Whitney, and vice versa, so it was hard to tell the difference.

"Have some water," my mother said now, handing me an open bottle as she took the shirts from me. "And look here."

I took a sip, staying still as she dusted powder across my face. Then I closed my eyes, listening to cars go by on the highway behind us, as she applied shadow and liner before beginning to rifle through the shirts, the hangers clanking. I opened my eyes to see her holding a pink suede top out at me.

Shhh, Annabel. It's just me.

"No," I said. It came out harsher than I meant, my voice sharp. I took in a breath, forcing myself to sound more normal as I added, "Not that one."

She looked surprised, glancing at it, then back at me again. "Are you sure? It looks wonderful on you. I thought you loved this shirt."

I shook my head, then looked away quickly, focusing on a minivan that was passing by, one of those MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT stickers on the back window. "No," I told her again. She was still watching me, so I added, "It cuts me weird, or something."

"Oh," I heard her say. She offered me a blue scoop-neck instead. "Here," she said as I looked at it more closely, seeing a price tag hanging from it. "Hop in and change. It's three fifty."

I nodded, then got down off the bumper, walking around to the backseat door and pulling it open. I climbed in, bending down to pull off my tank top, and froze. "Mom," I said.

"Yes?"

"I don't have a bra."

I heard her heels on the pavement as she came around the car. "You don't?"

I shook my head, trying to stay low in the seat. "I had a tank top on; it's got one built in."

My mother thought for a second. "Whitney," she said. "Give—"

Whitney shook her head. "No way."

Now it was my mother's turn to sigh. "Honey, please," she said. "Just help us out, okay?"

And so, as we had for the last nine months or so, we had to wait, and worry, about Whitney. After what felt like a long silence, she finally pulled her arms up under her shirt, fumbled around, then drew a beige bra out of the collar, dropping it back behind her. I grabbed it off the floor, putting it on—we weren't exactly the same size, but it was better than nothing—then pulled the shirt over it. "Thanks," I said, but, of course, she ignored me.

"Three fifty-two," my mother said. "Let's go, honey."

I got out of the car, then walked back around to where she was waiting, holding my purse. She handed it to me, then looked at my face one last time, examining her handiwork. "Close your eyes," she said, reaching forward carefully to draw a clump of mascara off one of my eyelashes. When I opened them, she smiled at me. "You look beautiful."

"Yeah, right," I said, but then she gave me a look, so I added, "Thank you."

She tapped her watch. "Go ahead. We'll wait for you."

"You don't have to. I'll be fine."

The car's engine started suddenly as Whitney turned the key, and then she was rolling down the window, extending her arm outside. She was wearing long sleeves, as always, but you could see a bit of her wrist, pale and so thin, as she tapped her fingers on the side of the car. My mother looked at her, then back at me.

"Well, I'll at least wait for you to get inside," she said. "Okay?"

I nodded, then leaned forward to kiss her just above her cheek, so as not to smudge my lipstick. "Okay."

When I got to the building, I turned around. She lifted her hand, waving, and as I did the same I glanced beyond her at Whitney, whose face I could see framed in the side mirror. She was watching me, too, her face expressionless, and, like so often lately, I felt a twinge, something twisting in my stomach.

"Good luck," my mother called out, and I nodded, then looked back at Whitney. But she'd slid down in her seat and disappeared from view, leaving the mirror empty.

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**Sarah's new title *ALONG FOR THE RIDE* goes on sale
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