

## Lock and Key by Sarah Dessen

### CHAPTER ONE

"And finally," Jamie said as he pushed the door open, "we come to the main event. Your room."

I was braced for pink. Ruffles or quilting, or maybe even appliqué. Which was probably kind of unfair, but then again, I didn't know my sister anymore, much less her decorating style. With total strangers, it had always been my policy to expect the worst. Usually they—and those that you knew best, for that matter—did not disappoint.

Instead, the first thing I saw was green. A large, high window, on the other side of which were tall trees, separating the huge backyard from that of the house that backed up to it. Everything was big about where my sister and her husband, Jamie, lived—from the homes to the cars to the stone fence you saw first thing when you pulled into the neighborhood itself, made up of boulders that looked too enormous to ever be moved. It was like Stonehenge, but suburban. So weird.

It was only as I thought this that I realized we were all still standing there in the hallway, backed up like a traffic jam. At some point Jamie, who had been leading this little tour, had stepped aside, leaving me in the doorway. Clearly, they wanted me to step in first. So I did.

The room was, yes, big, with cream-colored walls. There were three other windows beneath the big one I'd first seen, although they each were covered with thin venetian blinds. To the right, I saw a double bed with a yellow comforter and matching pillows, a white blanket folded over the foot. There was a small desk, too, a chair tucked under it. The ceiling slanted on either side, meeting in a flat strip in the middle, where there was a square skylight, also covered with a venetian blind—a little square one, clearly custom made to fit. It was so matchy-matchy and odd that for a moment, I found myself just staring up at it, as if this was actually the weirdest thing about that day.

"So, you've got your own bathroom," Jamie said, stepping around me, his feet making soft thuds on the carpet, which was of course spotless. In fact, the whole room smelled like paint and new carpet, just like the rest of the house. I wondered how long ago they had moved in—a month, six months? "Right through this door. And the closet is in here, too. Weird, right? Ours is the same way. When we were building, Cora claimed it meant she would get ready faster. A theory which has yet to be proved out, I might add."

Then he smiled at me, and again I tried to force a smile back. Who was this odd creature, my brother-in-law—a term that seemed oddly fitting, considering the circumstances—in his mountain-bike T-shirt, jeans and funky expensive sneakers, cracking jokes in an obvious effort to ease the tension of an incredibly awkward situation? I had no idea, other than he had to be the very last person I would have expected to end up with my sister, who was so uptight she wasn't even pretending to smile at his attempts. At least I was trying.

Not Cora. She was just standing in the doorway, barely over the threshold, arms crossed over her chest. She had on a sleeveless sweater—even though it was mid-October, the house was beyond cozy, almost hot—and I could see the definition of her biceps and triceps, every muscle seemingly tensed, the same way they had been when she'd walked into the meeting room at Poplar House two hours earlier. Then, too, it seemed like Jamie had done all the talking, both to Shayna, the head counselor, and to me while Cora remained quiet. Still, every now and again, I could feel her eyes on me, steady, as if she was studying my features, committing me to memory, or maybe just trying to figure out if there was any part of me she recognized at all.

So Cora had a husband, I'd thought, staring at them as we'd sat across from each other, Shayna shuffling papers between us. I wondered if they'd had a fancy wedding, with her in a big white dress, or if they'd just eloped after she'd told him she had no family to

speak of. Left to her own devices, this was the story I was sure she preferred— that she'd just sprouted, all on her own, neither connected nor indebted to anyone else at all.

"Thermostat's out in the hallway if you need to adjust it," Jamie was saying now. "Personally, I like a bit of a chill to the air, but your sister prefers it to be sweltering. So even if you turn it down, she'll most likely jack it back up within moments."

Again he smiled, and I did the same. God, this was exhausting. I felt Cora shift in the doorway, but again she didn't say anything.

"Oh!" Jamie said, clapping his hands. "Almost forgot. The best part." He walked over to the window in the center of the wall, reaching down beneath the blind. It wasn't until he was stepping back and it was opening that I realized it was, in fact, a door. Within moments, I smelled cold air. "Come check this out."

I fought the urge to look back at Cora again as I took a step, then one more, feeling my feet sink into the carpet, following him over the threshold onto a small balcony. He was standing by the railing, and I joined him, both of us looking down at the backyard. When I'd first seen it from the kitchen, I'd noticed just the basics: grass, a shed, the big patio with a grill at one end. Now, though, I could see there were rocks laid out in the grass in an oval shape, obviously deliberately, and again, I thought of Stonehenge. What was it with these rich people, a druid fixation?

"It's gonna be a pond," Jamie told me, as if I'd said this out loud.

"A pond?" I said.

"Total ecosystem," he said. "Thirty-by-twenty and lined, all natural, with a waterfall. And fish. Cool, huh?"

Again, I felt him look at me, expectant. "Yeah," I said, because I was a guest here. "Sounds great."

He laughed. "Hear that, Cor? *She* doesn't think I'm crazy."

I looked down at the circle again, then back at my sister. She'd come into the room, although not that far, and still had her arms crossed over her chest as she stood there, watching us. For a moment, our eyes met, and I wondered how on earth I'd ended up here, the last place I knew either one of us wanted me to be. Then she opened her mouth to speak for the first time since we'd pulled up in the driveway and all this, whatever it was, began.

"It's cold," she said. "You should come inside."

Before one o'clock that afternoon, when she showed up to claim me, I hadn't seen my sister in ten years. I didn't know where she lived, what she was doing, or even who she was. I didn't care, either. There had been a time when Cora was part of my life, but that time was over, simple as that. Or so I'd thought, until the Honeycutts showed up one random Tuesday and everything changed.

The Honeycutts owned the little yellow farmhouse where my mom and I had been living for about a year. Before that, we'd had an apartment at the Lakeview Chalets, the run-down complex just behind the mall. There, we'd shared a one-bedroom, our only window looking out over the back entrance to the J&K Cafeteria, where there was always at least one employee in a hairnet sitting outside smoking, perched on an overturned milk crate. Running alongside the complex was a stream that you didn't even notice until there was a big rain and it rose, overflowing its nonexistent banks and flooding everything, which happened at least two or three times a year. Since we were on the top floor, we were spared the water itself, but the smell of the mildew from the lower apartments permeated everything, and God only knew what kind of mold was in the walls. Suffice to say I had a cold for two years straight. That was the first thing I noticed about the yellow house: I could breathe there.

It was different in other ways, too. Like the fact that it was a *house*, and not an apartment in a complex or over someone's garage. I'd grown used to the sound of neighbors on the other side of a wall, but the yellow house sat in the center of a big field, framed by two oak trees. There was another house, off to the left, but it was visible only by

flashes of roof you glimpsed through the trees—for all intents and purposes, we were alone. Which was just the way we liked it.

My mom wasn't much of a people person. In certain situations—say, if you were buying, for instance—she could be very friendly. And if you put her within five hundred feet of a man who would treat her like shit, she'd find him and be making nice before you could stop her, and I knew, because I had tried. But interacting with the majority of the population (cashiers, school administrators, bosses, ex-boyfriends) was not something she engaged in unless absolutely necessary, and then, with great reluctance.

Which was why it was lucky that she had me. For as long as I could remember, I'd been the buffer system. The go-between, my mother's ambassador to the world. Whenever we pulled up at the store and she needed a Diet Coke but was too hungover to go in herself, or she spied a neighbor coming who wanted to complain about her late-night banging around *again*, or the Jehovah's Witnesses came to the door, it was always the same. "Ruby," she'd say, in her tired voice, pressing either her glass or her hand to her forehead. "Talk to the people, would you?"

And I would. I'd chat with the girl behind the counter as I waited for my change, nod as the neighbor again threatened to call the super, ignored the proffered literature as I firmly shut the door in the Jehovah's faces. I was the first line of defense, always ready with an explanation or a bit of spin. "She's at the bank right now," I'd tell the landlord, even as she snored on the couch on the other side of the half-closed door. "She's just outside, talking to a delivery," I'd assure her boss so he'd release her bags for the day to me, while she smoked a much-needed cigarette in the freight area and tried to calm her shaking hands. And finally, the biggest lie of all: "Of course she's still living here. She's just working a lot," which is what I'd told the sheriff that day when I'd been called out of fourth period and found him waiting for me. That time, though, all the spin in the world didn't work. I talked to the people, just like she'd always asked, but they weren't listening.

That first day, though, when my mom and I pulled up in front of the yellow house, things were okay. Sure, we'd left our apartment with the usual drama—owing back rent, the super lurking around, watching us so carefully that we had to pack the car over a series of days, adding a few things each time we went to the store or to work. I'd gotten used to this, though, the same way I'd adjusted to us rarely if ever having a phone, and if we did, having it listed under another name. Ditto with my school paperwork, which my mom often filled out with a fake address, as she was convinced that creditors and old landlords would track us down that way. For a long time, I thought this was the way everyone lived. When I got old enough to realize otherwise, it was already habit, and anything else would have felt strange.

Inside, the yellow house was sort of odd. The kitchen was the biggest room, and everything was lined up against one wall: cabinets, appliances, shelves. Against another wall was a huge propane heater, which in cold weather worked hard to heat the whole house, whooshing to life with a heavy sigh. The only bathroom was off the kitchen, poking out with no insulated walls—my mom said it must have been added on; there'd probably been an outhouse, initially—which made for some cold mornings until you got the hot water blasting and the steam heated things up. The living room was small, the walls covered with dark fake-wood paneling. Even at high noon, you needed a light on to see your hand in front of your face. My mother, of course, loved the dimness and usually pulled the shades shut, as well. I'd come home to find her on the couch, cigarette dangling from one hand, the glow from the TV flashing across her face in bursts. Outside, the sun might be shining, the entire world bright, but in our house, it could always be late night, my mother's favorite time of day.

In the old one-bedroom apartment, I was accustomed to sometimes being awoken from a dead sleep, her lips close to my ear as she asked me to move out onto the couch, please, honey. As I went, groggy and discombobulated, I'd do my best not to notice whoever slipped back in the door behind her. At the yellow house, though, I got my own room. It was small, with a tiny closet and only one window, as well as orange carpet and

those same dark walls, but I had a door to shut, and it was all mine. It made me feel like we'd stay longer than a couple of months, that things would be better here. In the end, though, only one of these things turned out to be true.

I first met the Honeycutts three days after we moved in. It was early afternoon, and we were getting ready to leave for work when a green pickup truck came up the driveway. A man was driving, a woman in the passenger seat beside him.

"Mom," I called out to my mother, who was in the bedroom getting dressed. "Someone's here."

She sighed, sounding annoyed. My mother was at her worst just before going to work, petulant like a child. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," I said, watching as the couple—he in jeans and a denim work shirt, she wearing slacks and a printed top—started to make their way to the house. "But they're about to knock on the door."

"Oh, Ruby." She sighed again. "Just talk to them, would you?"

The first thing I noticed about the Honeycutts was that they were instantly friendly, the kind of people my mother couldn't *stand*. They were both beaming when I opened the door, and when they saw me, they smiled even wider.

"Well, look at you!" the woman said, as if I'd done something precious just by existing. She herself resembled a gnome, with her small features and halo of white curls, like something made to put on a shelf. "Hello there!"

I nodded, my standard response to all door knockers. Unnecessary verbals only encouraged them, or so I'd learned. "Can I help you?"

The man blinked. "Ronnie Honeycutt," he said, extending his hand. "This is my wife, Alice. And you are?"

I glanced in the direction of my mother's room. While usually she banged around a lot while getting ready—drawers slamming, grumbling to herself—now, of course, she was dead silent. Looking back at the couple, I decided they probably weren't Jehovah's but were definitely peddling something. "Sorry," I said, beginning my patented firm shut of the door, "but we're not—"

"Oh, honey, it's okay!" Alice said. She looked at her husband. "Stranger danger," she explained. "They teach it in school."

"Stranger what?" Ronnie said.

"We're your landlords," she told me. "We just dropped by to say hello and make sure you got moved in all right."

*Landlords*, I thought. That was even worse than Witnesses. Instinctively, I eased the door shut a bit more, wedging my foot against it. "We're fine," I told them.

"Is your mom around?" Ronnie asked as Alice shifted her weight, trying to see into the kitchen behind me.

I adjusted myself accordingly, blocking her view, before saying, "Actually, she's—"

"Right here," I heard my mother say, and then she was crossing the living room toward us, pulling her hair back with one hand. She had on jeans, her boots, and a white tank top, and despite the fact that she'd just woken up about twenty minutes earlier, I had to admit she looked pretty good. Once, my mother had been a great beauty, and occasionally you could still get a glimpse of the girl she had been—if the light was right, or she'd had a decent night's sleep, or, like me, you were just wistful enough to look for it.

She smiled at me, then eased a hand over my shoulder as she came to the door and offered them her other one. "Ruby Cooper," she said. "And this is my daughter. Her name's Ruby, as well."

"Well, isn't that something!" Alice Honeycutt said. "And she looks just like you."

"That's what they say," my mom replied, and I felt her hand move down the back of my head, smoothing my red hair, which we did have in common, although hers was now streaked with an early gray. We also shared our pale skin—the redhead curse or gift, depending on how you looked at it—as well as our tall, wiry frames. I'd been told more than

once that from a distance, we could almost be identical, and although I knew this was meant as a compliment, I didn't always take it that way.

I knew that my mother's sudden reaching out for me was just an act, making nice for the landlords, in order to buy some bargaining time or leverage later. Still, though, I noticed how easy it was for me to fold into her hip, resting my head against her. Like some part of me I couldn't even control had been waiting for this chance all along and hadn't even known it.

"It's our standard practice to just drop by and check in on folks," Ronnie was saying now, as my mother idly twisted a piece of my hair through her fingers. "I know the rental agency handles the paperwork, but we like to say hello face-to-face."

"Well, that's awfully nice of you," my mom said. She dropped my hair, letting her hand fall onto the doorknob so casually you almost would think she wasn't aware of it, or the inch or so she shut it just after, narrowing even farther the space between us and them. "But as Ruby was saying, I'm actually going to work right now. So . . ."

"Oh, of course!" Alice said. "Well, you all just let us know if there's anything you need. Ronnie, give Ruby our number."

We all watched as he pulled a scrap of paper and a pen out of his shirt pocket, writing down the digits slowly. "Here you go," he said, handing it over. "Don't hesitate to call."

"Oh, I won't," my mom said. "Thanks so much."

After a few more pleasantries, the Honeycutts finally left the porch, Ronnie's arm locked around his wife's shoulders. He deposited her in the truck first, shutting the door securely behind her, before going around to get behind the wheel. Then he backed out of the driveway with the utmost caution, doing what I counted to be at least an eight-point turn to avoid driving on the grass.

By then, though, my mother had long left the door and returned to her room, discarding their number in an ashtray along the way. "Hello face-to-face my ass," she said, as a drawer banged. "Checking up is more like it. Busybodies."

She was right, of course. The Honeycutts were always dropping by unexpectedly with some small, seemingly unnecessary domestic project: replacing the garden hose we never used, cutting back the crepe myrtles in the fall, or installing a birdbath in the front yard. They were over so much, I grew to recognize the distinct rattle of their truck muffler as it came up the driveway. As for my mom, her niceties had clearly ended with that first day. Thereafter, if they came to the door, she ignored their knocks, not even flinching when Alice's face appeared in the tiny crack the living-room window shade didn't cover, white and ghostly with the bright light behind it, peering in.

It was because the Honeycutts saw my mother so rarely that it took almost two months for them to realize she was gone. In fact, if the dryer hadn't busted, I believed they might have never found out, and I could have stayed in the yellow house all the way until the end. Sure, I was behind on the rent and the power was close to getting cut off. But I would have handled all that one way or another, just like I had everything else. The fact was, I was doing just fine on my own, or at least as well as I'd ever done with my mom. Which wasn't saying much, I know. Still, in a weird way, I was proud of myself. Like I'd finally proven that I didn't need her, either.

As it was, though, the dryer *did* die, with a pop and a burning smell, late one October night while I was making macaroni and cheese in the microwave. I had no option but to stretch a clothesline across the kitchen in front of the space heater I'd been using since the propane ran out, hang everything up—jeans, shirts, and socks—and hope for the best. The next morning, my stuff was barely dry, so I pulled on the least damp of it and left the rest, figuring I'd deal with it that evening when I got home from work. But then Ronnie and Alice showed up to replace some supposedly broken front-porch slats. When they saw the clothesline, they came inside, and then they found everything else.

It wasn't until the day they took me to Poplar House that I actually saw the report that the person from social services had filed that day. When Shayna, the director, read it

out loud, it was clear to me that whoever had written it had embellished, for some reason needing to make it sound worse than it actually was.

*Minor child is apparently living without running water or heat in rental home abandoned by parent. Kitchen area was found to be filthy and overrun with vermin. Heat is non-functioning. Evidence of drug and alcohol use was discovered. Minor child appears to have been living alone for some time.*

First of all, I had running water. Just not in the kitchen, where the pipes had busted. This was why the dishes tended to pile up, as it was hard to truck in water from the bathroom just to wash a few plates. As for the “vermin,” we’d always had roaches; they’d just grown a bit more in number with the lack of sink water, although I’d been spraying them on a regular basis. And I did have a heater; it just wasn’t on. The drug and alcohol stuff—which I took to mean the bottles on the coffee table and the roach in one of the ashtrays—I couldn’t exactly deny, but it hardly seemed grounds for uprooting a person from their entire life with no notice.

The entire time Shayna was reading the report aloud, her voice flat and toneless, I still thought I could talk my way out of this. That if I explained myself correctly, with the proper detail and emphasis, they’d just let me go home. After all, I had only seven months before I turned eighteen, when all of this would be a moot point anyway. But the minute I opened my mouth to start in about topic one, the water thing, she stopped me.

“Ruby,” she said, “where is your mother?”

It was only then that I began to realize what would later seem obvious. That it didn’t matter what I said, how carefully I crafted my arguments, even if I used every tool of evasion and persuasion I’d mastered over the years. There was only one thing that really counted, now and always, and this was it.

“I don’t know,” I said. “She’s just gone.”

After the tour, the pond reveal, and a few more awkward moments, Jamie and Cora finally left me alone to go downstairs and start dinner. It was barely five thirty, but already it was getting dark outside, the last of the light sinking behind the trees. I imagined the phone ringing in the empty yellow house as Richard, my mother’s boss at Commercial Courier, realized we were not just late but blowing off our shift. Later, the phone would probably ring again, followed by a car rolling up the drive, pausing by the front window. They’d wait for a few moments for me to come out, maybe even send someone to bang on the door. When I didn’t, they’d turn around hastily, spitting the Honeycutts’ neat grass and the mud beneath it out from behind their back wheels.

And then what? The night would pass, without me there, the house settling into itself in the dark and quiet. I wondered if the Honeycutts had already been in to clean things up, or if my clothes were still stretched across the kitchen, ghostlike. Sitting there, in this strange place, it was like I could feel the house pulling me back to it, a visceral tug on my heart, the same way that, in the early days of the fall, I’d hoped it would do to my mom. But she hadn’t come back, either. And now, if she did, I wouldn’t be there.

Thinking this, I felt my stomach clench, a sudden panic settling over me, and stood up, walking to the balcony door and pushing it open, then stepping outside into the cold air. It was almost fully dark now, lights coming on in the nearby houses as people came home and settled in for the night in the places they called home. But standing there, with Cora’s huge house rising up behind me and that vast yard beneath, I felt so small, as if to someone looking up I’d be unrecognizable, already lost.

Back inside, I opened up the duffel that had been delivered to me at Poplar House; Jamie had brought it up from the car. It was a cheap bag, some promo my mom had gotten through work, the last thing I would have used to pack up my worldly possessions, not that this was what was in it anyway. Instead, it was mostly clothes I never wore—the good stuff had all been on the clothesline—as well as a few textbooks, a hairbrush, and two packs of cotton underwear I’d never seen in my life, courtesy of the state. I tried to imagine some person I’d never met before going through my room, picking these things for me. How

ballsy it was to just assume you could know, with one glance, the things another person could not live without. As if it was the same for everyone, that simple.

There was only one thing I really needed, and I knew enough to keep it close at all times. I reached up, running my finger down the thin silver chain around my neck until my fingers hit the familiar shape there at its center. All day long I'd been pressing it against my chest as I traced the outline I knew by heart: the rounded top, the smooth edge on one side, the series of jagged bumps on the other. The night before, as I'd stood in the bathroom at Poplar House, it had been all that was familiar, the one thing I focused on as I faced the mirror. I could not look at the dark hollows under my eyes, or the strange surroundings and how strange I felt in them. Instead, like now, I'd just lifted it up gently, reassured to see that the outline of that key remained on my skin, the one that fit the door to everything I'd left behind.

By the time Jamie called up the stairs that dinner was ready, I'd decided to leave that night. It just made sense—there was no need to contaminate their pristine home any further, or the pretty bed in my room. Once everyone was asleep, I'd just grab my stuff, slip out the back door, and be on a main road within a few minutes. The first pay phone I found, I'd call one of my friends to come get me. I knew I couldn't stay at the yellow house—it would be the obvious place anyone would come looking—but at least if I got there, I could pick through my stuff for the things I needed. I wasn't stupid. I knew things had already changed, irrevocably and totally. But at least I could walk through the rooms and say good-bye, as well as try to leave some message behind, in case anyone came looking for me.

Then it was just a matter of laying low. After a few days of searching and paperwork, Cora and Jamie would write me off as unsaveable, getting their brownie points for trying *and* escaping relatively unscathed. That was what most people wanted anyway.

Now, I walked into the bathroom, my hairbrush in hand. I knew I looked rough, the result of two pretty much sleepless nights and then this long day, but the lighting in the bathroom, clearly designed to be flattering, made me look better than I knew I actually did, which was unsettling. Mirrors, if nothing else, were supposed to be honest above all things. I turned off the lights and brushed my hair in the dark.

Just before I left my room, I glanced down at my watch, noting the time: 5:45. If Cora and Jamie were asleep by, say, midnight at the latest, that meant I only had to endure six hours and fifteen minutes more. Knowing this gave me a sense of calm, of control, as well as the fortitude I needed to go downstairs to dinner and whatever else was waiting for me.

Even with this wary attitude, however, I could never have been prepared for what I found at the bottom of the stairs. There, in the dark entryway, just before the arch that led into the kitchen, I stepped in something wet. And, judging by the splash against my ankle, cold.

"Whoa," I said, drawing my foot back and looking around me. Whatever the liquid was had now spread, propelled by my shoe, and I froze, so as not to send it any farther. Barely a half hour in, and already I'd managed to violate Cora's perfect palace. I was looking around me, wondering what I could possibly find to wipe it up with—the tapestry on the nearby wall? something in the umbrella stand?—when the light clicked on over my head.

"Hey," Jamie said, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "I thought I heard something. Come on in, we're just about—" Suddenly, he stopped talking, having spotted the puddle and my proximity to it. "Oh, shit," he said.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"Quick," he said, cutting me off and tossing me the dishtowel. "Get it up, would you? Before she—"

I caught the towel and was about to bend over when I realized it was too late. Cora was now standing in the archway behind him, peering around his shoulder. "Jamie," she said, and he jumped, startled. "Is that—?"

"No," he said flatly. "It's not."

My sister, clearly not convinced, stepped around him and walked over for a closer look. "It is," she said, turning back to look at her husband, who had slunk back farther into the kitchen. "It's pee."

"Cor—"

"It's pee, *again*," she said, whirling around to face him. "Isn't this why we put in that dog door?"

*Dog?* I thought, although I supposed this was a relief, considering I'd been worried I was about to find out something really disturbing about my brother-in-law. "You have a dog?" I asked. Cora sighed in response.

"Mastery of a dog door takes time," Jamie told her, grabbing a roll of paper towels off a nearby counter and walking over to us. Cora stepped aside as he ripped off a few sheets, then squatted down, tossing them over the puddle and adjacent splashes. "You know that expression. You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

Cora shook her head, then walked back into the kitchen without further comment. Jamie, still down on the floor, ripped off a few more paper towels and then dabbed at my shoe, glancing up at me. "Sorry about that," he said. "It's an issue."

I nodded, not sure what to say to this. So I just folded the dishtowel and followed him into the kitchen, where he tossed the paper towels into a stainless-steel trash can. Cora was by the windows that looked out over the deck, setting the wide, white table there. I watched as she folded cloth napkins, setting one by each of three plates, before laying out silverware: fork, knife, spoon. There were also placemats, water glasses, and a big glass pitcher with sliced lemons floating in it. Like the rest of the house, it looked like something out of a magazine, too perfect to even be real.

Just as I thought this, I heard a loud, rattling sound. It was like a noise your grandfather would make, once he passed out in his recliner after dinner, but it was coming from behind me, in the laundry room. When I turned around, I saw the dog.

Actually first, I saw everything else: the large bed, covered in what looked like sheepskin, the pile of toys—plastic rings, fake newspapers, rope bones—and, most noticeable of all, a stuffed orange chicken, sitting upright. Only once I'd processed all these accoutrements did I actually make out the dog itself, which was small, black and white, and lying on its back, eyes closed and feet in the air, snoring. Loudly.

"That's Roscoe," Jamie said to me as he pulled open the fridge. "Normally, he'd be up and greeting you. But our dog walker came for the first time today, and I think it wore him out. In fact, that's probably why he had that accident in the foyer. He's exhausted."

"What would be *out* of the ordinary," Cora said, "is if he actually went outside."

From the laundry room, I heard Roscoe let out another loud snore. It sounded like his nasal passages were exploding.

"Let's just eat," Cora said. Then she pulled out a chair and sat down.

I waited for Jamie to take his place at the head of the table before claiming the other chair. It wasn't until I was seated and got a whiff of the pot of spaghetti sauce to my left that I realized I was starving. Jamie picked up Cora's plate, putting it over his own, then served her some spaghetti, sauce, and salad before passing it back to her. Then he gestured for mine, and did the same before filling his own plate. It was all so formal, and *normal*, that I felt strangely nervous, so much so that I found myself watching my sister, picking up my fork only when she did. Which was so weird, considering how long it had been since I'd taken any cues from Cora. Still, there had been a time when she had taught me everything, so maybe, like so much else, this was just instinct.

"So tomorrow," Jamie said, his voice loud and cheerful, "we're going to get you registered for school. Cora's got a meeting, so I'll be taking you over to my old stomping ground."

I glanced up. "I'm not going to Jackson?"

"Out of district," Cora replied, spearing a cucumber with her fork. "And even if we got an exception, the commute is too long."

"But it's mid-semester," I said. I had a flash of my locker, the bio project I'd just dropped off the week before, all of it, like my stuff in the yellow house, just abandoned. I swallowed, taking a breath. "I can't just leave everything."

"It's okay," Jamie said. "We'll get it all settled tomorrow."

"I don't mind a long bus ride," I said, ashamed at how tight my voice sounded, betraying the lump that had risen in my throat. So ridiculous that after everything that had happened, I was crying about *school*. "I can get up early, I'm used to it."

"Ruby." Cora leveled her eyes at me. "This is for the best. Perkins Day is an excellent school."

"Perkins Day?" I said. "Are you *serious*?"

"What's wrong with the Day?" Jamie asked.

"Everything," I told him. He looked surprised, then hurt. Great. Now I was alienating the one person who I actually had on my side in this house. "It's not a bad school," I told him. "It's just . . . I won't fit in with anyone there."

This was a massive understatement. For the last two years, I'd gone to Jackson High, the biggest high school in the county. Overcrowded, underfunded, and with half your classes in trailers, just surviving a year there was considered a badge of honor, especially if you were like me and did not exactly run with the most academic of crowds. After moving around so much with my mom, Jackson was the first place I'd spent consecutive years in a long time, so even if it was a total shithole, it was still familiar. Unlike Perkins Day, the elite private school known for its lacrosse team, stellar SAT scores, and the fact that the student parking lot featured more luxury automobiles than a European car dealership. The only contact we ever had with Perkins Day kids was when they felt like slumming at parties. Even then, often their girls stayed in the car, engine running and radio on, cigarettes dangling out the window, too good to even come inside.

Just as I thought this, Jamie suddenly pushed his chair back, jumping to his feet. "Roscoe!" he said. "Hold on! The dog door!"

But it was too late. Roscoe, having at some point roused himself from his bed, was already lifting his leg against the dishwasher. I tried to get a better look at him but only caught a fleeting glimpse before Jamie bolted across the floor, grabbing him in mid-stream, and then carried him, still dripping, and chucked him out the small flap at the bottom of the French doors facing us. Then he looked at Cora and, seeing her stony expression, stepped outside himself, the door falling shut with a click behind him.

Cora put a hand to her head, closing her eyes, and I wondered if I should say something. Before I could, though, she pushed back her chair and walked over to pick up the roll of paper towels, then disappeared behind the kitchen island, where I could hear her cleaning up what Roscoe had left behind.

I knew I should probably offer to help. But sitting alone at the table, I was still bent out of shape about the idea of me at Perkins Day. Like all it would take was dropping me in a fancy house and a fancy school and somehow I'd just be fixed, the same way Cora had clearly fixed herself when she'd left me and my mom behind all those years ago. But we were not the same, not then and especially not now.

I felt my stomach clench, and I reached up, pressing my fingers over the key around my neck. As I did so, I caught a glimpse of my watch, the overhead light glinting off the face, and felt myself relax. *Five hours, fifteen minutes*, I thought. Then I picked up my fork and finished my dinner.

Six hours and fifty long minutes later, I was beginning to worry that my brother-in-law—The Nicest Guy in the World and Lover of Incontinent Creatures—was also an insomniac. Figuring they were the early-to-bed types, I'd gone up to my room to "go to sleep" at nine thirty. Sure enough, I heard Cora come up about forty minutes later, padding

past my bedroom to her own, which was at the opposite end of the floor. Her light cut off at eleven, at which point I started counting down, waiting for Jamie to join her. He didn't. In fact, if anything, there were more lights on downstairs now than there had been earlier, slanting across the backyard, even as the houses around us went dark, one by one.

Now, I'd been sitting there for almost four hours. I didn't want to turn a light on, since I was supposed to be long asleep, so I'd spent the time lying on the bed, my hands clasped on my stomach, staring at the ceiling and wondering what the hell Jamie was doing. Truth be told, it wasn't that different from the nights a few weeks back, when the power had been cut off temporarily at the yellow house. At least there, though, I could smoke a bowl or drink a few beers to keep things interesting. Here, there was nothing but the dark, the heat cutting off and on at what—after timing them—I'd decided were random intervals, and coming up with possible explanations for the weird, shimmering light that was visible at the far end of the backyard. I was just narrowing it down to either aliens or some sort of celestial neo-suburban phenomenon when suddenly, the windows downstairs went dark. Finally, Jamie was coming to bed.

I sat up, brushing my hair back with my fingers, and listened. Unlike the yellow house, which was so small and thin-walled you could hear someone rolling over in a bed two rooms away, Cora's palace was hard to monitor in terms of activity and movement. I walked over to my door, easing it open slightly. Distantly, I heard footsteps and a door opening and shutting. Perfect. He was in.

Reaching down, I grabbed my bag, then slowly drew the door open, stepping out into the hallway and sticking close to the wall until I got to the stairs. Downstairs in the foyer I got my first lucky break in days: the alarm wasn't set. Thank God.

I reached for the knob, then eased the door open, sliding my hand with the bag through first. I was just about to step over the threshold when I heard the whistling.

It was cheery, and a tune I recognized—some jingle from a commercial. Detergent, maybe. I looked around me, wondering what kind of company I would have on a subdivision street at one thirty in the morning. Soon enough, I got my answer.

"Good boy, Roscoe! Good boy!"

I froze. It was Jamie. Now I could see him, coming up the other side of the street, with Roscoe, who had just lifted his leg on a mailbox, walking in front of him on a leash. *Shit*, I thought, wondering whether he was far enough away not to see if I bolted in the opposite direction, dodging the streetlights. After a quick calculation, I decided to go around the house instead.

I could hear him whistling again as I vaulted off the front steps, then ran through the grass, dodging a sprinkler spigot and heading for the backyard. There, I headed for that light I'd been studying earlier, now hoping that it was aliens, or some kind of black hole, anything to get me away.

Instead, I found a fence. I tossed my bag over and was wondering what my chances were of following, not to mention what I'd find there, when I heard a thwacking noise from behind me. When I turned around, I saw Roscoe emerging from his dog door.

At first, he was just sniffing the patio, his nose low to the ground, going in circles. But then he suddenly stopped, his nose in the air. *Uh-oh*, I thought. I was already reaching up, grabbing the top of the fence and scrambling to try and pull myself over, when he started yapping and shot like a bullet right toward me.

Say what you will about little dogs, but they can *move*. In mere seconds, he'd covered the huge yard between us and was at my feet, barking up at me as I dangled from the fence, my triceps and biceps already burning. "Shhh," I hissed at him, but of course this only made him bark more. Behind us, in the house, a light came on, and I could see Jamie in the kitchen window, looking out.

I tried to pull myself up farther, working to get more leverage. I managed to get one elbow over, hoisting myself up over it enough to see that the source of the light I'd been watching was not otherworldly at all, but a swimming pool. It was big and lit up and, I noticed, occupied, a figure cutting through the water doing laps.

Meanwhile, Roscoe was still yapping, and my bag was already in this strange person's yard, meaning I had little choice but to join it or risk being busted by Jamie. Straining, I pulled myself up so I was hanging over the fence, and tried to throw a leg to the other side. No luck.

"Roscoe?" I heard Jamie call out from the patio. "Whatcha got there, boy?"

I turned my head, looking back at him, wondering if he could see me. I figured I had about five seconds, if Roscoe didn't shut up, before he headed out to see what his dog had treed. Or fenced. Another fifteen while he crossed the yard, then maybe a full minute before he'd put it all together.

"Hello?"

I was so busy doing all these calculations that I hadn't noticed that the person who'd been swimming laps had, at some point, stopped. Not only that, but he was now at the edge of the pool, looking up at me. It was hard to make out his features, but whoever it was was clearly male and sounded awfully friendly, considering the circumstances.

"Hi," I muttered back.

"Roscoe?" Jamie called out again, and this time, without even turning around, I could hear he was moving, coming closer. Unless I had a burst of superhuman strength or a black hole opened up and swallowed me whole, I needed a Plan B, and fast.

"Do you—?" the guy in the pool said, raising his voice to be heard over Roscoe, who was still barking.

"No," I told him as I relaxed my grip. His face disappeared as I slid down my side of the fence, landing on my feet with mere seconds to spare before Jamie ducked under the small row of trees at the edge of the yard and saw me.

"Ruby?" he said. "What are you doing out here?"

He looked so concerned that for a moment, I actually felt a pang of guilt. Like I'd let him down or something. Which was just ridiculous; we didn't even know each other.

"Nothing," I said.

"Is everything okay?" He looked up at the fence, then back at me, as Roscoe, who'd finally shut up, sniffed around his feet, making snorting noises.

"Yeah," I said. I was making a point to speak slowly. Calmly. Tone was everything. "I was just . . ."

Truth was, at that moment, I didn't know what I was planning to say. I was just hoping for some plausible excuse to pop out of my mouth, which, considering my luck so far, was admittedly kind of a long shot. Still, I was going to go for it. But before I could even open my mouth, there was a thunk from the other side of the fence, and a face appeared above us. It was the guy from the pool, who, in this better light, I could now see was about my age. His hair was blond and wet, and there was a towel around his neck.

"Jamie," he said. "Hey. What's up?"

Jamie looked up at him. "Hey," he replied. To me he said, "So . . . you met Nate?"

I shot a glance at the guy. *Oh, well*, I thought. *It's better than what I had planned.* "Yeah." I nodded. "I was just—"

"She came to tell me my music was too loud," the guy—Nate?—told Jamie. Unlike me, he didn't seem to be straining in the least, holding himself over the top of the fence. I wondered if he was standing on something. To me he added, "Sorry about that. I crank it up so I can hear it under the water."

"Right," I said. "I just . . . I couldn't sleep."

At my feet, Roscoe suddenly coughed, hacking up something. We all looked at him, and then Jamie said slowly, "Well . . . it's late. We've got an early day tomorrow, so . . ."

"Yeah. I should get to bed, too," Nate said, reaching down to pull up one edge of his towel and wiping it across his face. He had to be on a deck chair or something, I thought. No one has that kind of upper-body strength. "Nice meeting you, Ruby."

"You, too," I replied.

He waved at Jamie, then dropped out of sight. Jamie looked at me for a moment, as if still trying to decipher what had happened. I tried not to flinch as he continued to study

my face, only relaxing once he'd slid his hands in his pockets and started across the lawn, Roscoe tagging along at his heels.

I'd just reached the line of trees, following him, when I heard a "*Pssst!*" from behind me. When I turned around, Nate had pushed open part of the fence and was passing my bag through. "Might need this," he said.

*Like I was supposed to be grateful. Unbelievable,* I thought as I walked over, picking up the bag.

"So what's it to?"

I glanced up at him. He had his hand on the gate and had pulled on a dark-colored T-shirt, and his hair was starting to dry now, sticking up slightly. In the flickering light from the nearby pool I could finally make out his face enough to see that he was kind of cute, but in a rich-boy way, all jocky and smooth edges, not my type at all. "What?" I said.

"The key." He pointed to my neck. "What's it to?"

Jamie was going into the house now, leaving the door open for me behind him. I reached up, twining my fingers around the chain hanging there. "Nothing," I told him.

I shifted my bag behind me, keeping it in my shadow as I headed across the lawn to the back door. *So close,* I thought. *A shorter fence, a fatter dog, and everything would be different.* But wasn't that always the way. It's never something huge that changes everything, but instead the tiniest of details, irrevocably tweaking the balance of the universe while you're busy focusing on the big picture.

When I got to the house, there was no sign of Jamie or Roscoe. Still, I figured it wasn't worth risking bringing my bag inside, and since the balcony was too high to toss it up, I decided to just stow it someplace and come back down for it in a couple of hours when the coast was clear. So I stuck it beside the grill, then slipped inside just as the shimmering lights from Nate's pool cut off, leaving everything dark between his house and ours.

I didn't see Jamie again as I climbed the stairs to my room. If I had, I wasn't sure what I would have said to him. Maybe he had fallen for my flimsy excuse, aided and abetted by a pool boy who happened to be in the right place at what, for me anyway, turned out to be the wrong time. It was possible he was just that gullible. Unlike my sister, who knew from disappearing and could spot a lie, even a good one, a mile off. She also probably would have happily provided the boost I needed up and over that fence, or at least pointed the way to the gate, if only to be rid of me, once and for all.

I waited a full hour to slip back downstairs. When I eased open my door, though, there was my bag, sitting right there at my feet. It seemed impossible I hadn't heard Jamie leave it there, but he had. For some reason, seeing it made me feel the worst I had all day, ashamed in a way I couldn't even explain as I reached down, pulling it inside with me.

## CHAPTER TWO

My mom hated to work. Far from a model employee, she had never had a job, at least in my recollection, that she actually enjoyed. Instead, in our house, work was a four-letter word, the official end of good times, something to be dreaded and bitched about and, whenever possible, avoided.

Things might have been different if she was qualified for a glamorous occupation, like travel agent or fashion designer. Instead, due to choices she'd made, as well as a few circumstances beyond her control, she'd always had low-level, minimum-wage, benefits-only-if-you're-really-lucky kind of jobs: waitress, retail, telemarketer, temp. Which was why, when she got hired on at Commercial Courier, it seemed like such a good thing. Sure, it wasn't glamorous. But at least it was different.

Commercial Courier called itself an "all-purpose delivery service," but their primary business came from lost luggage. They had a small office at the airport where bags that had been routed to the wrong city or put onto the wrong plane would eventually end up, at which point one of their couriers would deliver them to their proper destination, whether it be a hotel or the bag owner's home.

Before Commercial, my mom had been working as a receptionist in an insurance office, a job she hated because it required the two things she hated above all else: getting up early and dealing with people. When her bosses let her go after six months, she'd spent a couple of weeks sleeping in and grumbling before finally hauling out the classifieds, where she spotted the ad for Commercial. DELIVERY DRIVERS NEEDED, it said. WORK INDEPENDENTLY, DAYS OR NIGHTS. She never would have called any job perfect, but just at a glance, it seemed pretty close. So she called and set up an interview. Two days later, she had a job.

Or, we did. The truth was, my mom was not a very good navigator. I'd always suspected she was slightly dyslexic, as she was always mixing up her right and left, something that definitely would have been a problem for a job that relied almost entirely on following written driving directions. Luckily, though, her shift didn't start until five p.m., which meant that I could ride along with her, an arrangement that I'd assumed at first would only last for the initial few days, until she got the hang of things. Instead, we became coworkers, eight hours a day, five days a week, just her and me in her banged-up Subaru, reuniting people with their possessions.

Our night always started at the airport. Once the bags were stacked and packed in the car, she'd hand over the sheet of addresses and directions, and we'd set off, hitting the nearby hotels first before venturing farther to neighborhoods and individual homes.

People had one of two reactions when we arrived with their lost luggage. Either they were really happy and grateful, or chose to literally blame the messenger, taking out their ire at the entire airline industry on us. The best tactic, we learned, was empathy. "Don't I know it," my mom would say, holding her clipboard for the person's signature as they ranted on about having to buy new toiletries or clothes in a strange city. "It's an outrage." Usually, this was enough, since it was often more than the airlines had offered up, but occasionally someone would go above and beyond, being a total asshole, at which point my mom would just drop the bag at their feet, turn and walk back to the car, ignoring whatever they shouted after her. "It's karma," she'd say to me as we pulled away. "Watch. I bet we're here again before we know it."

Hotels were better, because we only had to deal with the bellmen or front-desk staff. They'd offer us some kind of perk for fitting them in early on our route, and we became regulars at all the hotel bars, grabbing a quick burger between deliveries.

By the end of the shift, the highways had usually cleared, and we were often the only car cresting silent hills in dark subdivisions. That late, people often didn't want to be bothered by us ringing the bell, so they'd leave a note on their front door asking us to drop the bag on the porch, or tell us, when we called to confirm the delivery, to just pop the trunk of their car and leave it in there. These were always the weirdest trips for me, when it was midnight or even later, and we pulled up to a dark house, trying to be quiet. Like a robbery in reverse, creeping around to leave something rather than take it.

Still, there was also something reassuring about working for Commercial, almost hopeful. Like things that were lost could be found again. As we drove away, I always tried to imagine what it would be like to open your door to find something you had given up on. Maybe it had seen places you never had, been rerouted and passed through so many strange hands, but still somehow found its way back to you, all before the day even began.

I'd expected to sleep the same way I had at Poplar House—barely and badly—but instead woke with a start the next morning when Jamie knocked on my door, saying we'd be leaving in an hour. I'd been so out of it that at first I wasn't even sure where I was. Once I made out the skylight over my head, though, with its little venetian blind, it all came back to me: Cora's. My near-escape. And now, Perkins Day. Just three days earlier, I'd been managing as best I could at the yellow house, working for Commercial, and going to Jackson. Now, here, everything had changed again. But I was kind of getting used to that now.

When my mom first took off, I didn't think it was for good. I figured she was just out on one of her escapades, which usually lasted only as long as it took her to run out of money or welcome, a few days at most. The first couple of times she'd done this, I'd been so worried, then overwhelmingly relieved when she returned, peppering her with questions about where she'd been, which irritated her to no end. "I just needed some space, okay?" she'd tell me, annoyed, before stalking off to her room to sleep—something that, by the looks of it, she hadn't done much of during the time she'd been gone.

It took me another couple of her disappearances—each a few days longer than the last—before I realized that this was exactly how I *shouldn't* react, making a big deal of it. Instead, I adopted a more blasé attitude, like I hadn't even really noticed she was gone. My mother had always been about independence—hers, mine, and ours. She was a lot of things, but clingy had never been one of them. By taking off, I decided, she was teaching me about taking care of myself. Only a weak person needed someone else around all the time. With every disappearance, she was proving herself stronger; it was up to me, in how I behaved, to do the same.

After two weeks with no word from her, though, I'd finally forced myself to go into her room and look through her stuff. Sure enough, her emergency stash—three hundred bucks in cash, last I'd checked—was gone, as were her saving-bonds certificates, her makeup, and, most telling, her bathing suit and favorite summer robe. Wherever she was headed, it was warm.

I had no idea when she'd really left, since we hadn't exactly been getting along. We hadn't exactly *not* been, either. But that fall, the hands-off approach we'd both cultivated had spilled over from just a few days here and there to all the time. Also, she'd stopped going to work—sleeping when I left for school in the morning, sleeping when I returned and headed out to Commercial, and usually out once I returned after all the deliveries were done—so it wasn't like we had a lot of chances to talk. Plus, the rare occasions she was home and awake, she wasn't alone.

Most times, when I saw her boyfriend Warner's beat-up old Cadillac in the driveway, I'd park and then walk around to my bedroom window, which I kept unlocked, and let myself in that way. It meant I had to brush my teeth with bottled water, and made washing my face out of the question, but these were small prices to pay to avoid Warner, who filled the house with pipe smoke and always seemed to be sweating out whatever he'd drunk the day before. He'd park himself on the couch, beer in hand, his eyes silently following me whenever I did have to cross in front of him. He'd never done anything I could point to specifically, but I believed this was due not to innocence but to lack of opportunity. I did not intend to provide him with one.

My mother, however, loved Warner, or so she said. They'd met at Halloran's, the small bar just down the street from the yellow house where she went sometimes to drink beer and sing karaoke. Unlike my mother's other boyfriends, Warner wasn't the meaty, rough-around-the-edges type. Instead, in his standard outfit of dark pants, cheap shirt, deck shoes, hat with captain's insignia, he looked like he'd just stepped off a boat, albeit not necessarily a nice one. I wasn't sure whether he had a nautical past and was pining for it, or hoping for one still ahead. Either way, he liked to drink and seemed to have some money from somewhere, so for my mom he was perfect.

These days, when I thought about my mom, I sometimes pictured her on the water. Maybe she and Warner had gotten that old Cadillac all the way to Florida, like they'd always talked about doing, and were now on the deck of some boat, bobbing on the open sea. This was at least a prettier picture than the one I actually suspected, the little bit of denial I allowed myself. It wasn't like I had a lot of time for fantasies anyway.

When she left, it was mid-August, and I still had nine months before I turned eighteen and could live alone legally. I knew I had a challenge ahead of me. But I was a smart girl, and I thought I could handle it. My plan was to keep the job at Commercial until Robert, the owner, caught on to my mom's absence, at which point I'd have to find something else. As far as the bills went, because our names were identical I could access

my mom's account for whatever paychecks—which were direct-deposited—I was able to earn. I figured I was good, at least for the time being. As long as I kept out of trouble at school, the one thing that I knew for sure would blow my cover, no one had to know anything was different.

And who knew? It could even have worked out if the dryer hadn't broken. But while my short-term plans might have changed, the long-term goal remained the same as it had been for as long as I could remember: to be free. No longer dependent or a dependent, subject to the whim or whimsy of my mother, the system, or anyone else, the albatross always weighing down someone's neck. It didn't really matter whether I served out the time at the yellow house or in Cora's world. Once I turned eighteen, I could cut myself off from everyone and finally get what I wanted, which was to be on my own, once and for all.

Now, I did the best I could with my appearance, considering I was stuck with the same pair of jeans I'd had on for two days and a sweater I hadn't worn in years. Still, I thought, tugging down the hem of the sweater, which was about two sizes too small, it wasn't like I cared about impressing the people at Perkins Day. Even my best stuff would be their worst.

I grabbed my backpack off the bed, then started down the hall. Cora and Jamie's bedroom door was slightly ajar, and as I got closer, I could hear a soft, tinny beeping, too quiet to be an alarm clock but similar in sound and tone. As I passed, I glanced inside and saw my sister lying on her back, a thermometer poking out of her mouth. After a moment, she pulled it out, squinting at it as the beeping stopped.

I wondered if she was sick. Cora had always been like the canary in the coalmine, the first to catch anything. My mother said this was because she worried too much, that anxiety affected the immune system. She herself, she claimed, hadn't "had a cold in fifteen years," although I ventured to think this was because her own system was pickled rather than calm. At any rate, my memories of growing up with Cora were always colored with her various ailments: ear infections, allergies, tonsillitis, unexplained rashes and fevers. If my mother was right, and it was stress related, I was sure I could blame myself for this latest malady, whatever it was.

Down in the kitchen, I found Jamie sitting at the island, a laptop open in front of him, cell phone pressed to his ear. When he saw me, he smiled, then covered it with one hand. "Hey," he said. "I'll be off in a sec. There's cereal and stuff on the table—help yourself."

I glanced over, expecting to see a single box and some milk. Instead, there were several different boxes, most of them unopened, as well as a plate of muffins, a pitcher of orange juice, and a big glass bowl of fruit salad. "Coffee?" I asked, and he nodded, gesturing toward the opposite counter, where I saw a pot, some mugs laid out in front of it.

". . . yeah, but that's just the point," Jamie was saying as he cocked his head to one side, typing something on the keyboard. "If we're serious about considering this offer, we need to at least set some parameters for the negotiations. It's important."

I walked over to the coffeepot, picking up a mug and filling it. On Jamie's laptop, I could see the familiar front page of UMe.com, the networking site that it seemed like everyone from your favorite band to your grandmother had gotten on in the last year or so. I had a page myself, although due to the fact that I didn't have regular access to a computer, I hadn't checked it in a while.

"But that's just the point," Jamie said, clicking onto another page. "They say they want to preserve the integrity and the basic intention, but they've got corporate mindsets. Look, just talk to Glen, see what he says. No, not this morning, I've got something going. I'll be in by noon, though. Okay. Later."

There was a beep, and he put down the phone, picking up a muffin from beside him and taking a bite just as there was a ping! on the screen, the familiar sound of a new message in the UMe inbox. "You have a UMe page?" I asked him as I sat down at the table with my coffee. My sweater rode up again, and I gave it another tug.

He looked at me for a second. "Uh . . . yeah. I do." He nodded at my mug. "You're not eating?"

"I don't like breakfast," I told him.

"That's crazy talk." He pushed back his chair, walking over to grab two bowls out of a nearby cabinet, then stopped at the fridge, pulling it open and getting out some milk.

"When I was a kid," he said, coming over and plopping everything onto the table beside me, "my mom fixed us eggs or pancakes every morning. With sausage or bacon, and toast. You gotta have it. It's brain food."

I looked at him over my coffee cup as he grabbed one of the cereal boxes, ripping it open and filling a bowl. Then he added milk, filling it practically to the top, and plopped it on a plate before adding a muffin and a heaping serving of fruit salad. I was about to say something about being impressed with his appetite when he pushed the whole thing across to me. "Oh, no," I said. "I can't—"

"You don't have to eat it all," he said, shaking cereal into his own bowl. "Just some. You'll need it, trust me."

I shot him a wary look, then put down my mug, picking up the spoon and taking a bite. Across the table, his own mouth full of muffin, he grinned at me. "Good, right?"

I nodded just as there was another *ping!* from the laptop, followed immediately by one more. Jamie didn't seem to notice, instead spearing a piece of pineapple with his fork. "So," he said, "big day today."

"I guess," I said, taking another bite of cereal. I hated to admit it, but now I was starving, and had to work not to shovel the food in nonstop. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had breakfast.

"I know a new school is tough," he told me, as there were three more pings in quick succession. God, he was popular. "My dad was in the military. Eight schools in twelve years. It sucked. I was always the new kid."

"So how long did you go to Perkins Day?" I asked, figuring maybe a short stint would explain him actually liking it.

*Ping. Ping.* "I started as a junior. Best two years of my life."

"Really."

He raised an eyebrow at me, picking up a glass and helping himself to some orange juice. "You know," he said, "I understand it's not what you're used to. But it's also not as bad you think."

I withheld comment as four more messages hit his page, followed by a thwacking noise behind me. I turned around just in time to see Roscoe wriggling through his dog door.

"Hey, buddy," Jamie said to him as he trotted past us to his water bowl, "how's the outside world?"

Roscoe's only response was a prolonged period of slurping, his tags banging against the bowl. Now that I finally had a real chance to study him, I saw he was kind of cute, if you liked little dogs, which I did not. He had to be under twenty pounds, and was stocky, black with a white belly and feet, his ears poking straight up. Plus he had one of those pug noses, all smooshed up, which I supposed explained the adenoidal sounds I'd already come to see as his trademark. Once he was done drinking, he burped, then headed over toward us, stopping en route to lick up some stray muffin crumbs.

As I watched Roscoe, Jamie's laptop kept pinging: he had to have gotten at least twenty messages in the last five minutes. "Should you . . . check that or something?" I asked.

"Check what?"

"Your page," I said, nodding at the laptop. "You keep getting messages."

"Nah, it can wait." His face suddenly brightened. "Hey, sleepyhead! You're running late."

"Somebody kept hitting the snooze bar," my sister grumbled as she came in, hair wet and dressed in black pants and a white blouse, her feet bare.

"The same somebody," Jamie said, getting to his feet and meeting her at the island, "who was down here a full half hour ahead of you."

Cora rolled her eyes, kissing him on the cheek and pouring herself a cup of coffee. Then she bent down, mug in her hand, to pet Roscoe, who was circling her feet. "You guys should get going soon," she said. "There'll be traffic."

"Back roads," Jamie said confidently as I pushed back my chair, tugging down my sweater again before carrying my now empty bowl and plate to the sink. "I used to be able to get to the Day in ten minutes flat, including any necessary stoplights."

"That was ten years ago," Cora told him. "Times have changed."

"Not that much," he said.

His laptop pinged again, but Cora, like him, didn't seem to notice. Instead, she was watching me as I bent down, sliding my plate into the dishwasher. "Do you . . .?" she said, then stopped. When I glanced up at her, she said, "Maybe you should borrow something of mine to wear."

"I'm fine," I said.

She bit her lip, looking right at the strip of exposed stomach between the hem of my sweater and the buckle on my jeans I'd been trying to cover all morning. "Just come on," she said.

We climbed the stairs silently, her leading the way up and into her room, which was enormous, the walls a pale, cool blue. I was not surprised to see that it was neat as a pin, the bed made with pillows arranged so precisely you just knew there was a diagram in a nearby drawer somewhere. Like my room, there were also lots of windows and a skylight, as well as a much bigger balcony that led down to a series of decks below.

Cora crossed the room, taking a sip from the mug in her hands as she headed into the bathroom. We passed the shower, double sinks, and sunken bath into a room beyond, which turned out not to be a room at all but a closet. A *huge* closet, with racks of clothes on two walls and floor-to-ceiling shelves on the other. From what I could tell, Jamie's things—jeans, a couple of suits, and lots of T-shirts and sneakers—took up a fraction of the space. The rest was all Cora's. I watched from the doorway as she walked over to one rack, pushing some stuff aside.

"You probably need a shirt and a sweater, right?" she said, studying a few cardigans. "You have a jacket, I'm assuming."

"Cora."

She pulled out a sweater, examining it. "Yes?"

"Why am I here?"

Maybe it was the confined space, or this extended period without Jamie to buffer us. But whatever the reason, this question had just somehow emerged, as unexpected to me as I knew it was to her. Now that it was out, though, I was surprised how much I wanted to hear the answer.

She dropped her hand from the rack, then turned to face me. "Because you're a minor," she said, "and your mother abandoned you."

"I'm almost eighteen," I told her. "And I was doing just fine on my own."

"Fine," she repeated, her expression flat. Looking at her, I was reminded how really different we were, me a redhead with pale freckled skin, such a contrast to her black hair and blue eyes. I was taller, with my mother's thin frame, while she was a couple of inches shorter and curvier. "You call that *fine*?"

"You don't know," I said. "You weren't there."

"I know what I read in the report," she replied. "I know what the social worker told me. Are you saying those accounts were inaccurate?"

"Yes," I said.

"So you weren't living without heat or water in a filthy house."

"Nope."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Where's Mom, Ruby?"

I swallowed, then turned my head as I reached up, pressing the key around my neck into my skin. "I don't care," I said.

"Neither do I," she replied. "But the fact of the matter is, she's gone and you can't be by yourself. Does that answer your question?"

I didn't say anything, and she turned back to the clothes, pushing through them. "I told you, I don't need to borrow anything," I said. My voice sounded high and tight.

"Ruby, come on," she said, sounding tired. She pulled a black sweater off a hanger, tossing it over her shoulder before moving over to another shelf and grabbing a green T-shirt. Then she walked over, pushing them both at me as she passed. "And hurry. It takes at least fifteen minutes to get there."

Then she walked back through the bathroom, leaving me behind. For a moment, I just stood there, taking in the neat rows of clothes, how her shirts were all folded just so, stacked by color. As I looked down at the clothes she'd given me, I told myself I didn't care what the people at Perkins Day thought about me or my stupid sweater. Everything was just temporary anyway. Me being there, or here. Or anywhere, for that matter.

A moment later, though, when Jamie yelled up that it was time to go, I suddenly found myself pulling on Cora's T-shirt, which was clearly expensive and fit me perfectly, and then her sweater, soft and warm, over it. On my way downstairs, in clothes that weren't mine, to go to a school I'd never claim, I stopped and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. You couldn't see the key around my neck: it hung too low under both collars. But if I leaned in close, I could make it out, buried deep beneath. Out of sight, hard to recognize, but still able to be found, even if I was the only one to ever look for it.

Cora was right. We got stuck in traffic. After hitting every red light between the house and Perkins Day, we finally pulled into the parking lot just as a bell was ringing.

All the visitor spaces were taken, so Jamie swung his car—a sporty little Audi with all-leather interior—into one in the student lot. I looked to my left—sure enough, parked there was a Mercedes sedan that looked brand-new. On our other side was another Audi, this one a bright red convertible.

My stomach, which had for most of the ride been pretty much working on rejecting my breakfast, now turned in on itself with an audible clench. According to the dashboard clock, it was 8:10, which meant that in a run-down classroom about twenty miles away, Mr. Barrett-Hahn, my homeroom teacher, was beginning his slow, flat-toned read of the day's announcements. This would be roundly ignored by my classmates, who five minutes from now would shuffle out, voices rising, to fight their way through a corridor designed for a student body a fraction the size of the current one to first period. I wondered if my English teacher, Ms. Valhalla—she of the high-waisted jeans and endless array of oversized polo shirts—knew what had happened to me, or if she just assumed I'd dropped out, like a fair amount of her students did during the course of a year. We'd been just about to start *Wuthering Heights*, a novel she'd promised would be a vast improvement over David Copperfield, which she'd dragged us through like a death march for the last few weeks. I'd been wondering if this was just talk or the truth. Now I'd never know.

"Ready to face the firing squad?"

I jumped, suddenly jerked back to the present and Jamie, who'd pulled his keys from the ignition and was now just sitting there expectantly, hand on the door handle.

"Oops. Bad choice of words," he said. "Sorry."

He pushed his door open and, feeling my stomach twist again, I forced myself to do the same. As soon as I stepped out of the car, I heard another bell sound.

"Office is this way," Jamie said as we started walking along the line of cars. He pointed to a covered walkway to our right, beyond which was a big green space, more buildings visible on the other side. "That's the quad," he said. "Classrooms are all around it. Auditorium and gym are those two big buildings you see over there. And the caf is here, closest to us. Or at least it used to be. It's been a while since I had a sloppy joe here."

We stepped up on a curb, heading toward a long, flat building with a bunch of windows. I'd just followed him, ducking under an overhang, when I heard a familiar rat-a-tat-tat sound. At first, I couldn't place it, but then I turned and saw an old model Toyota bumping into the parking lot, engine backfiring. My mom's car did the same thing, usually at stoplights or when I was trying to quietly drop a bag off at someone's house late at night.

The Toyota, which was white with a sagging bumper, zoomed past us, brake lights flashing as it entered the student parking lot and whipped into a space. I heard a door slam and then footsteps slapping across the pavement. A moment later, a black girl with long braids emerged, running, a backpack over one shoulder. She had a cell phone pressed to one ear and seemed to be carrying on a spirited conversation, even as she jumped the curb, went under the covered walkway, and began to sprint across the green.

"Ah, tardiness. Brings back memories," Jamie said.

"I thought you could get here in ten minutes."

"I could. But there was usually only five until the bell."

As we reached the front entrance and he pulled the glass door open for me, I was aware not of the stale mix of mildew and disinfectant Jackson was famous for, but a clean, fresh-paint smell. It was actually very similar to Cora's house, which was a little unsettling.

"Mr. Hunter!" A man in a suit was standing just inside. As soon as he saw us, he strode right over, extending his hand. "The prodigal student returns home. How's life in the big leagues?"

"Big," Jamie said, smiling. They shook hands. "Mr. Thackray, this is my sister-in-law, Ruby Cooper. Ruby, this is Principal Thackray."

"Nice to meet you," Mr. Thackray said. His hand was large and cool, totally enveloping mine. "Welcome to Perkins Day."

I nodded, noting that my mouth had gone bone dry. My experience with principals—and teachers and landlords and policemen—being as it was, this wasn't surprising. Even without a transgression, that same fight-or-flight instinct set in.

"Let's go ahead and get you settled in, shall we?" Mr. Thackray said, leading the way down the hallway and around the corner to a large office. Inside, he took a seat behind a big wooden desk, while Jamie and I sat in the two chairs opposite. Through the window behind him, I could see a huge expanse of soccer fields lined with bleachers. There was a guy on a riding mower driving slowly down one side, his breath visible in the cold air.

Mr. Thackray turned around, looking out the window, as well. "Looks good, doesn't it? All we're missing is a plaque honoring our generous benefactor."

"No need for that," Jamie said, running a hand through his hair. He sat back, crossing one leg over the other. In his sneakers, jeans, and zip-up hoodie, he didn't look ten years out of high school. Two or three, sure. But not ten.

"Can you believe this guy?" Mr. Thackray said to me, shaking his head. "Donates an entirely new soccer complex and won't even let us give him credit."

I looked at Jamie. "You did that?"

"It's not that big a deal," he said, looking embarrassed.

"Yes, it is," Mr. Thackray said. "Which is why I wish you'd reconsider and let us make your involvement public. Plus, it's a great story. Our students waste more time on UMe.com than any other site, and its founder donates some of the proceeds from that procrastination back into education. It's priceless!"

"Soccer," Jamie said, "isn't exactly education."

"Sports are crucial to student development," Mr. Thackray said. "It counts."

I turned my head, looking at my brother-in-law, suddenly remembering all those pings in his UMe inbox. *You could say that*, he'd said, when I'd asked if he had a page. Clearly, this was an understatement.

". . . grab a few forms, and we'll get a schedule set up for you," Mr. Thackray was saying. "Sound good?"

I realized, a beat too late, he'd been talking to me. "Yeah," I said. Then I swallowed. "I mean, yes."

He nodded, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet. As he left the room, Jamie sat back, examining the tread of one sneaker. Outside, the guy on the mower had finished one side of the field and was now moving slowly up the other.

"Do you . . . ?" I said to Jamie. He glanced up at me. "You own UMe?"

He let his foot drop. "Well . . . not exactly. It's me and a few other guys."

"But he said you were the owner," I pointed out.

Jamie sighed. "I started it up originally," he said. "When I was just out of college. But now I'm in more of an overseeing position."

I just looked at him.

"CEO," he admitted. "Which is really just a big word, or a really small acronym, actually, for overseer."

"I can't believe Cora didn't tell me," I said.

"Ah, you know Cora." He smiled. "Unless you work eighty hours a week saving the world like she does, she's tough to impress."

I looked out at the guy on the mower again, watching as he pattered past. "Cora saves the world?"

"She tries to," he said. "Hasn't she told you about her work? Down at the public defender's office?"

I shook my head. In fact, I hadn't even known Cora had gone to law school until the day before, when the social worker at Poplar House had asked her what she did for a living. The last I knew, she'd been about to graduate from college, and that was five years ago. And we only knew that because somehow, an announcement of the ceremony had made its way to us. It was on thick paper, a card with her name on it tucked inside. I remembered studying the envelope, wondering why it had turned up after all this time with no contact. When I'd asked my mom, she'd just shrugged, saying the school sent them out automatically. Which made sense, since by then, Cora had made it clear she wanted no part of us in her new life, and we'd been more than happy to oblige.

"Well," Jamie said as a palpable awkwardness settled over us, and I wondered what exactly he knew about our family, if perhaps my very existence had come as a surprise. Talk about baggage. "I guess you two have a lot of catching up to do, huh?"

I looked down at my hands, not saying anything. A moment later, Mr. Thackray walked back in, a sheaf of papers in his hand, and started talking about transcripts and credit hours, and this exchange was quickly forgotten. Later, though, I wished I had spoken up, or at least tried to explain that once I knew Cora better than anyone. But that was a long time ago, back when she wasn't trying to save the whole world. Only me.

When I was a kid, my mom used to sing to me. It was always at bedtime, when she'd come in to say good night. She'd sit on the edge of my bed, brushing my hair back with her fingers, her breath sweet smelling (a "civilized glass" or two of wine was her norm then) as she kissed my forehead and told me she'd see me in the morning. When she tried to leave, I'd protest, and beg for a song. Usually, if she wasn't in too bad a mood, she'd oblige.

Back then, I'd thought my mother made up all the songs she sang to me, which was why it was so weird the first time I heard one of them on the radio. It was like discovering that some part of you wasn't yours at all, and it made me wonder what else I couldn't claim. But that was later. At the time, there were only the songs, and they were still all ours, no one else's.

My mother's songs fell into three categories: love songs, sad songs, or sad love songs. Not for her, the uplifting ending. Instead, I fell asleep to "Frankie and Johnny" and a love affair gone very wrong, "Don't Think Twice It's All Right" and a bad breakup, and "Precious Time" and someone looking back, full of regret. But it was "Angels from Montgomery," the Bonnie Raitt version, that made me think of her most, then and now.

It had everything my mother liked in a song—heartbreak, disillusionment, and death— all told in the voice of an old woman, now alone, looking back over all the things

she'd had and lost. Not that I knew this; to me they were just words set to a pretty melody and sung by a voice I loved. It was only later, when I'd lie in a different bed, hearing her sing late into the night through the wall, that they kept me awake worrying. Funny how a beautiful song could tell such an ugly story. It seemed unfair, like a trick.

If you asked her, my mother would say that nothing in her life turned out the way she planned it. She was *supposed* to go to college and then marry her high-school sweetheart, Ronald Brown, the tailback for the football team, but his parents decided they were getting too serious and made him break up with her, right before Christmas of her junior year. Heartbroken, she'd allowed her friends to drag her to a party where she knew absolutely no one and ended up stuck talking to a guy who was in his freshman year at Middletown Tech, studying to be an engineer. In a kitchen cluttered with beer bottles, he'd talked to her about suspension bridges and skyscrapers, "the miracle of buildings," all of which bored her to tears. Which never explained, at least to me, why she ended up agreeing to go out with him, then sleeping with him, thereby producing my sister, who was born nine months later.

So at eighteen, while her classmates graduated, my mom was at home with an infant daughter and a new husband. Still, if the photo albums are any indication, those early years weren't so bad. There are tons of pictures of Cora: in a sunsuit, holding a shovel, riding a tricycle up a front walk. My parents appear as well, although not as often, and rarely together. Every once in a while, though, there's a shot of them—my mom looking young and gorgeous with her long red hair and pale skin, my dad, dark-haired with those bright blue eyes, his arm thrown over her shoulder or around her waist.

Because there was a ten-year gap between Cora and me, I'd always wondered if I was a mistake, or maybe a last-gasp attempt to save a marriage that was already going downhill. Whatever the reason, my dad left when I was five and my sister fifteen. We were living in an actual house in an actual neighborhood then, and we came home from the pool one afternoon to find my mom sitting on the couch, glass in hand. By themselves, neither of these things were noteworthy. Back then, she didn't work, and while she usually waited until my dad got home to pour herself a drink, occasionally she did start without him. The thing that we did notice, though, right off, was that there was music playing, and my mom was singing along. For the first time, it wasn't soothing or pretty to me. Instead, I felt nervous, unsettled, as if the cumulative weight of all those sad songs was hitting me at once. From then on, her singing was always a bad sign.

I had vague memories of seeing my dad after the divorce. He'd take us for breakfast on the weekends, or a dinner during the week. He never came inside or up to the door to get us, instead just pulling up to the mailbox and sitting there behind the wheel, looking straight ahead. As if he was waiting not for us but for anyone, like a stranger could have slid in beside him and it would have been fine. Maybe it was because of this distance that whenever I tried to remember him now, it was hard to picture him. There were a couple of memories, like of him reading to me, and watching him grilling steaks on the patio. But even with these few things, it was as if even when he was around, he was already distant, a kind of ghost.

I don't remember how or why the visits ceased. I couldn't recall an argument or incident. It was like they happened, and then they didn't. In sixth grade, due to a family-tree project, I went through a period where the mystery of his disappearance was all I could think about, and eventually I did manage to get out of my mom that he'd moved out of state, to Illinois. He'd kept in touch for a little while, but after remarrying and a couple of changes of address he'd vanished, leaving no way for her to collect child support, or any support. Beyond that, whenever I bugged her about it, she made it clear it was not a subject she wanted to discuss. With my mom, when someone was gone, they were gone. She didn't waste another minute thinking about them, and neither should you.

When my dad left, my mom slowly began to withdraw from my daily routine—waking me up in the morning, getting me ready for school, walking me to the bus stop, telling me to brush my teeth—and Cora stepped in to take her place. This, too, was never decided

officially or announced. It just happened, the same way my mom just happened to start sleeping more and smiling less and singing late at night, her voice wavering and haunting and always finding a way to reach my ears, even when I rolled myself against the wall tight and tried to think of something, anything else.

Cora became my one constant, the single thing I could depend on to be there and to remain relatively unchanged, day in and day out. At night in our shared room, I'd often have to lie awake, listening to her breathing for a long time before I could fall asleep myself.

"Shhh," I remembered her saying as we stood in our nightgowns in our bedroom. She'd press her ear against the door, and I'd watch her face, cautious, as she listened to my mom moving around downstairs. From what she heard—a lighter clicking open, then shut, cubes rattling in a glass, the phone being picked up or put down—she always gauged whether it was safe for us to venture out to brush our teeth or eat something when my mom had forgotten about dinner. If my mom was sleeping, Cora would hold my hand as we tiptoed past her to the kitchen. There, I'd hold an old acrylic tray while she quickly piled it with cereal and milk—or, my favorite, English-muffin pizzas she made in the toaster oven, moving stealthily around the kitchen as my mother's breath rose and fell in the next room. When things went well, we'd get back upstairs without her stirring. When they didn't, she'd jerk awake, sitting up with creases on her face, her voice thick as she said, "What are you two doing?"

"It's okay," Cora would say. "We're just getting something to eat."

Sometimes, if she'd been out deeply enough, this was enough. More often, though, I'd hear the couch springs squeak, her feet hitting the hardwood floor, and it was then that Cora always stopped whatever she was in the midst of—sandwich making, picking through my mom's purse for lunch money, pushing the wine bottle, open and sweaty, farther back on the counter—and do the one thing I associated with her more than anything else. As my mother approached, annoyed and usually spoiling for a fight, my sister would always step in front of me. Back then, she was at least a head taller, and I remembered this so well, the sudden shift in my perspective, the view going from something scary to something not. Of course, I knew my mother was still coming toward me, but it was always Cora I kept my eyes on: her dark hair, the sharp angles of her shoulder blades, the way, when things were really bad, she'd reach her hand back to find mine, closing her fingers around it. Then she'd just stand there, as my mother appeared, ready to take the brunt of whatever came next, like the bow of a boat crashing right into a huge wave and breaking it into nothing but water.

Because of this, it was Cora who got the bulk of the stinging slaps, the two-hand pushes that sent her stumbling backwards, the sudden, rough tugs on the arm that left red twisty welts and, later, bruises in the shape of fingertips. The transgressions were always hard to understand, and therefore even more difficult to avoid: we were up when we shouldn't have been, we were making too much noise, we provided the wrong answers to questions that seemed to have no right ones. When it was over, my mother would shake her head and leave us, returning to the couch or her bedroom, and I'd always look at Cora, waiting for her to decide what we should do next. More often than not, she'd just leave the room herself, wiping her eyes, and I'd fall in behind her, not talking but sticking very close, feeling safer if she was not just between me and my mom, but between me and the world in general.

Later, I'd develop my own system for dealing with my mom, learning to gauge her mood by the number of glasses or bottles already on the table when I came home, or the inflection in her tone when she said the two syllables that made up my name. I took a few knocks as well, although this became more rare when I hit middle school. But it was always the singing that was the greatest indicator, the one thing that made me hesitate outside a doorway, hanging back from the light. As beautiful as her voice sounded, working its way along the melodies I knew by heart, I knew there was a potential ugliness underneath.

And by then, there were only two, because Cora was gone. A great student, she'd spent high school working shifts at Exclamation Taco! for college money and studying nonstop, to better her chances of receiving any one of the several scholarships she'd applied for. My sister was nothing if not driven and had always balanced the chaos that was our lives with a strict personal focus on order and organization. While the rest of the house was constantly dusty and in disarray, Cora's side of our shared room was neat as a pin, everything folded and in its place. Her books were alphabetized, her shoes lined up in a row, her bed always made, the pillow at a perfect right angle to the wall. Sometimes, sitting on my own bed, I'd look across and be amazed at the contrast: it was like a before-and-after shot, or a reverse mirror image, the best becoming the worst, and back again.

In the end, she received a partial scholarship to the U, the state university one town over, and applied for student loans to cover the rest. During the spring and summer of senior year, after she'd gotten her acceptance, there was a weird shift in the house. I could feel it. My sister, who'd spent most of the last year avoiding my mother entirely—going from school to work to bed and back again—suddenly seemed to loosen up, grow lighter. People came to pick her up on weekend nights, their voices rising up to our open windows as she got into their cars and sped away. Girls with easy, friendly voices called up asking for Cora, who'd then take the phone into the bathroom where, even through the door, I could hear her voice sounded different speaking back to them.

Meanwhile my mother grew quieter, not saying anything as Cora brought home boxes to pack for school, or cleaned out her side of the room. Instead, she just sat on the side porch during those long summer twilights, smoking cigarettes and staring off into the side yard. We never talked about Cora leaving, but as the day grew closer, that shift in the air was more and more palpable, until it was as if I could see my sister extracting herself from us, twisting loose and breaking free, minute by minute. Sometimes at night, I'd wake up with a start, looking over at her sleeping form across the room and feel reassured only fleetingly, knowing that the day would come soon when there would be nothing there at all.

The day she moved out, I woke up with a sore throat. It was a Saturday morning and I helped her carry her boxes and a couple of suitcases downstairs. My mother stayed in the kitchen, chain-smoking and silent, not watching as we carted out my sister's few possessions, loading them into the trunk of a Jetta that belonged to a girl named Leslie who I'd never met before that day and never saw again.

"Well," Cora had said, when she pushed the hatchback shut, "I guess that's everything."

I looked up at the house, where I could see my mom through the front window, moving through the kitchen to the den, then back again. And even with everything that had happened, I remember thinking that of course she wouldn't let Cora just go with no good-bye. But as the time passed, she got no closer to the door or to us, and after a while, even when I looked hard, I couldn't see her at all.

Cora, for her part, was just standing there, staring up at the house, her hands in her pockets, and I wondered if she was waiting, too. But then she dropped her hands, letting out a breath. "I'll be back in a sec," she said, and Leslie nodded. Then we both watched her slowly go up the walk and into the house.

She didn't stay long—maybe a minute, or even two. And when she came out, her face looked no different. "I'll call you tonight," she said to me. Then she stepped forward, pulling me into a tight hug. I remembered thinking, as she drove away, that my throat was so sore I'd surely be totally sick within hours. But I wasn't. By the next morning it was gone.

Cora called that first night, as promised, and the following weekend, checking in and asking how I was doing. Both times I could hear chatter in the background, voices and music, as she reported that she liked her roommate and her classes, that everything was going well. When she asked how I was, I wanted to tell her how much I missed her, and that my mom had been drinking a lot since she'd left. Since we'd hardly discussed this aloud face-to-face, though, bringing it up over the phone seemed impossible.

She never asked to speak to my mother, and my mom never once picked up when she called. It was as if their relationship had been a business arrangement, bound by contract, and now that contract had expired. At least that was the way I looked at it, until we moved a few weeks later and my sister stopped calling altogether. Then I realized that deep down, in the fine print, my name had been on it, as well.

For a long time, I blamed myself for Cora cutting ties with us. Maybe because I hadn't told her I wanted to keep in touch, she didn't know or something. Then I thought that maybe she couldn't find our new number. But whenever I asked my mom about this, she just sighed, shaking her head. "She's got her own life now, she doesn't need us anymore," she explained, reaching out to ruffle my hair. "It's just you and me now, baby. Just you and me."

Looking back, it seemed like it should have been harder to lose someone, or have them lose you, especially when they were in the same state, only a few towns over. It would have been so easy to drive to the U and find her dorm, walk up to her door and announce ourselves. Instead, as the time passed and it became clear Cora wanted nothing to do with me and my mother, it made sense to wipe our hands of her, as well. This, like the alliance between me and my sister all those years ago, was never officially decided. It just happened.

It wasn't like it was so shocking, anyway. My sister had made a break for it, gotten over the wall and escaped. It was what we both wanted. Which was why I understood, even appreciated, why she didn't want to return for a day or even an hour. It wasn't worth the risk.

There were so many times during those years, though, as we moved from one house to another, that I would find myself thinking about my sister. Usually it was late at night, when I couldn't sleep, and I'd try to picture her in her dorm room forty-odd miles and a world away. I wondered if she was happy, what it was like out there. And if maybe, just maybe, she ever thought of me.

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