

Someone Like You by Sarah Dessen

CHAPTER ONE

Scarlett Thomas has been my best friend for as long as I can remember. That's why I knew when she called me at Sisterhood Camp, during the worst week of my life, that something was wrong even before she said it. Just by her voice on the other end of the line. I knew.

"It's Michael," she said quietly. Her words crackled over distance. "Michael Sherwood."

"What about him?" The camp director, a woman named Ruth with short hair and Birkenstocks, shifted impatiently beside me. At Sisterhood camp, we were supposed to be Isolated from the Pressures of Society in order to Improve Ourselves as Women. We weren't supposed to get phone calls. Especially not at midnight on a Tuesday, rousing you out of your creaky camp bed and through the woods to a room too bright and a phone that weighed heavily in your hand.

Scarlett sighed. Something was up. "What about him?" I repeated. The camp director rolled her eyes this time, thinking, I was sure, that this was no emergency.

"He's dead." Scarlett's voice was flat, even, as if she were reciting multiplication tables. I could hear clinking and splashing in the background.

"Dead?" I said. The camp director looked up, suddenly concerned, and I turned away. "How?"

"A motorcycle accident. This afternoon. He got hit by a car on Shortcrest." More splashing, and suddenly I realized she was washing dishes. Scarlett, always capable, would do housework during a nuclear holocaust.

"He's dead," I repeated, and the room seemed very small suddenly, cramped, and as the camp director put her arm around me I shook her off, stepping away. I pictured Scarlett at the sink in cutoffs and a T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, phone cocked between her ear and shoulder. "Oh, my God."

"I know," Scarlett said, and there was a great gurgling noise as water whooshed down her sink. She wasn't crying. "I know."

We sat there on the line for what seemed like the longest time, the buzzing in the background the only sound. I wanted to crawl through the phone right then, popping out on the other side in her kitchen, beside her. Michael Sherwood, a boy

we'd grown up with, a boy one of us had loved. Gone.

"Halley?" she said softly, suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"Can you come home?"

I looked out the window at the dark and the lake beyond, the moon shimmering off of it. It was the end of August, the end of summer, School started in one week; we'd be juniors this year.

"Halley?" she said again, and I knew it was hard for her to even ask. She'd never been the one who needed me.

"Hold on," I said to her in that bright room, the night it all began. "I'm on my way."

Michael Alex Sherwood died at 8:55 p.m. on August thirteenth. He was turning left onto Morrisville Avenue from Shortcrest Drive when a businessman in a BMW hit him dead on, knocking him off the motorcycle he'd only had since June and sending him flying twenty feet. The paper said he died on impact, the bike a total loss. It wasn't his fault. Michael Sherwood was sixteen years old.

He was also the only boy Scarlett had ever truly loved. We'd known him since we were kids, almost as long as we'd known each other. Lakeview, our neighborhood, sprawled across several streets and cul-de-sacs, bracketed only by wooden posts and hand-carved signs, lined in yellow paint: *Welcome to Lake view—A neighborhood of Friends*. One year some high-school students had gone around and crossed out the rs in Friends, leaving us a Neighborhood of Fiends, something my father found absolutely hysterical. It tickled him so much, my mother often wondered aloud if he'd done it himself.

The other distinguishing characteristic of Lakeview was the new airport three miles away, which meant a constant stream of airplanes taking off and landing. My father loved this, too; he spent most evenings out on the back porch, looking up excitedly at the sky as the distant rumblings got louder and louder, closer and closer and closer, until the white nose of a plane would burst out overhead, lights blinking, seeming powerful and loud enough to sweep us all along with it. It drove our neighbor Mr. Kramer to high blood pressure, but my father reveled in it. To me, it was something normal. I hardly stirred, even when I slept, as the glass in my windows shook with the house.

The first time I saw Scarlett was the day she and her mother, Marion, moved in. I was eleven. I was sitting by my window, watching the movers, when I saw a girl just my age, with red hair and blue tennis shoes. She was sitting on the front steps of her new house, watching them cart furniture in, her elbows propped on her knees, chin in her hands, wearing heart-shaped sunglasses with white plastic frames. And she completely ignored me as I came up her front walk, stood in the

thrown shade of the awning, and waited for her to say something. I'd never been good at friendships; I was too quiet, too mousy, and tended to choose bossy, mean girls who pushed me around and sent me home crying to my mother. *Lakeview, A Neighborhood of Fiends*, was full of little fiendettes on pink bicycles with Barbie carrying cases in their white, flower-appliquéd baskets. I'd never had a best friend.

So I walked up to this new girl, her sunglasses sending my own reflection back at me: white T-shirt, blue shorts, scuffed keds with pink socks. And I waited for her to laugh at me or send me away or maybe just ignore me like all the bigger girls did.

"Scarlett?" a woman's voice came from inside the screen door, sounding tired and flustered. "What did I do with my checkbook?"

The girl on the steps turned her head. "On the kitchen counter," she called out in a clear voice. "In the box with the realtor's stuff."

"The box with—"The voice came back, uneven, as if its owner was moving around. "—the realtor's stuff, hmmm, honey I don't think it's here. Oh, wait. Yes. Here it is!" The woman sounded triumphant, as if she'd discovered the Northwest Passage, which we'd just learned about at the end of the school year.

The girl turned back and looked at me, kind of shaking her head. I remember thinking for the first time how she seemed old for her age, older than me. And I got that familiar fiendette pink-bicycle feeling.

"Hey," she said to me suddenly, just as I was planning to turn back and head home. "My name's Scarlett."

"I'm Halley," I said, trying to sound as bold as she had. I'd never had a friend with an unusual name; all the girls in my classes were Lisas and Tammys, Carolines and Kimberlys. "I live over there." I pointed across the street, right to my bedroom window.

She nodded, then picked up her purse and scooted down a bit on the steps, brushing it off with her hand and leaving just enough space for someone else about the same size. And then she looked at me and smiled, and I crossed that short expanse of summer grass and sat beside her, facing my house. We didn't talk right away, but that was okay; we had a whole lifetime of talking ahead of us. I just sat there with her, staring across the street at my house, my garage, my father pushing the mower past the rosebushes. All the things I'd spent my life learning by heart. But now, I had Scarlett. And from that day on, nothing

ever looked the same.

The minute I hung up with Scarlett, I called my mother. She was a therapist, and expert on adolescent behavior. But even with her two books, dozens of seminars, and appearances on local talk shows advising parents on how to handle *The Difficult Years*, my mother hadn't quite found the solution for dealing with me.

It was 1:15 a.m. when I called.

"Hello?" Strangely, my mother sounded wide awake. It was all part of that professional manner she cultivated: *I'm capable I'm strong. I'm awake.*

"Mom?"

"Halley? What's wrong?" There was some mumbling in the background; my father, rousing himself.

"It's Michael Sherwood, Mom."

"Who?"

"He's dead."

"Who's dead?" More mumbling, this time louder. My father saying *Who's dead? Who?*

"Michael Sherwood," I said. "My friend."

"Oh, goodness." She sighed, and I heard her telling my father to go back to sleep, her hand cupping the receiver. "Honey, I know, it's horrible. It's awfully late—where are you calling from?"

"The camp office," I said. "I need you to come get me."

"Get you?" she said. She sounded surprised. "You've still got another week, Halley."

"I know, but I want to come home."

"Honey, you're tired, it's late—and now she was lapsing into her therapist voice, a change I could recognize after all these years—"why don't you call me back tomorrow, when? you've had a chance to calm down. You don't want to leave camp early."

"Mom, he's dead," I said again. Each time I said the word Ruth, the camp director who was still standing beside me, put on her soothing face.

"I know, sweetie. It's awful. But coming home isn't going to change that. It will just disrupt your summer, and there's no point—"

"I want to come home," I said, talking over her. "I need to come home. Scarlett called to tell me. She needs me." My

throat was swelling up now, hurting with its ache. She didn't understand. She never understood.

"Scarlett has her mother, Halley. She'll be fine. Honey, it's so late. Are you with someone? Is your counselor there?"

I took a deep breath, and all I could see in my mind was Michael, a boy I hardly knew, whose death now seemed to mean everything. I thought of Scarlett in her bright kitchen, waiting for me. This was crucial.

"Please," I whispered over the line, hiding my face from Ruth, not wanting this strange woman to feel any sorrier for me. "Please come get me."

"Halley." She sounded tired now, almost irritated. "Go to sleep and I'll call you tomorrow. We can discuss it then."

"Say you'll come," I said not wanting her to hang up. "Just say you'll come. He was our friend, Mom."

She was quiet then, and I could picture her sitting in bed next to the sleeping form of my father, probably in her blue nightgown, the light from Scarlett's kitchen visible from the window over her shoulder. "Oh, Halley," she said as if I always caused these kinds of problems; as if my friends died every day.

"All right. I'll come."

"You will?"

"I just said I would," she told me, and I knew this would strain us even further, a battle hard-won. "Let me talk to your counselor."

"Ok." I looked over at Ruth, who was close to dozing off.

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Thanks."

Silence. I would pay for this one for a while, I could tell. "It's all right. Let me talk to her."

So I handed the phone over to Ruth, then stood outside the door listening as she reassured my mother that it was fine, I'd be packed and ready, and what a shame, how awful, so young. Then I went back to my cabin, creeping onto my cot in the dark, and closed my eyes.

I couldn't sleep for a long time. I thought only of Michael Sherwood's face, the one I'd cast sideways glances at through middle school, the one Scarlett and I had studied in yearbook after yearbook. And later, the one in the picture that was tucked in the mirror in her bedroom, of Scarlett and Michael at

the lake just weeks earlier, water glittering behind them. The way her head rested on his shoulder, his hand on her knee. The way he looked at her, and not at the camera, when I pushed the red button, the flash lighting them up in front of me.

My mother didn't look very happy when she pulled up at the front office the next afternoon. It was clear by this point that my experience at Sisterhood Camp had been a complete and utter disaster. Which was just what I'd predicted when I was dragged off against my will to spend the last two weeks of summer in the middle of the mountains with a bunch of other girls who had no say in the matter either. Sisterhood Camp, which was really called Camp Believe (my father coined the nickname), was something my mother had heard about at one of her seminars. She had come home with a brochure she tucked under my breakfast plate one morning, a yellow sticky note on it saying *What do you think?* My first reaction was not much, thank you, as I stared down at the picture of two girls about my age running through a field together hand in hand. The basic gist was this: a camp with the usual swimming and horseback riding and lanyard making, but in the afternoons seminars and self-help groups on "Like Mother, Like Me" and "Peer Pressure: Where Do I Fit In?" There was a whole paragraph on self-esteem and values maintenance and other words I recognized only from the blurbs on the back of my mother's own books. All I knew was that at fifteen, with my driver's license less than three months away, I was too old from camp or values maintenance, not to mention lanyards.

"It will be such a valuable experience," she said to me that evening over dinner. "Much more so than sitting around the pool at Scarlett's getting a tan and talking about boys."

"Mom, it's summer," I said. "And anyway it's almost over. School starts in two weeks."

"You'll be back just in time for school," she said, flipping through the brochure again.

"I have a job," I told her, my last-ditch attempt at an excuse. Scarlett and I were both cashiers at Milton's Market, the grocery store at the mall down the street from our neighborhood. "I can't just take two weeks off."

"Mr. Averby says it's slow enough that he can get your shifts covered," she said simply.

"You called Mr. Averby?" I put down my fork. My father, who up until this point had been eating quietly and staying out of it, shot her a look. Even he knew how uncool it was for your mother to call your boss. "God, Mom"

"I just wanted to know if it was possible," she said, more to my father than me, but he just shook his head mildly and kept

eating. "I knew she'd think of every reason not to go."

"Why should I go waste the last two weeks of summer with a bunch of people I don't know?" I said. "Scarlett and I have plans, Mom. We're working extra shifts to make money for the beach, and we—"

"Halley." She was getting irritated now. "Scarlett will be here when you get back. And I don't ask very much of you, right? This is something I really want you to do. For me, and also, I think you'll find, for yourself. It's only for two weeks."

"I don't want to go," I said, looking at my father for some kind of support, but he just smiled at me apologetically and said nothing, helping himself to more bread. He never got involved anymore; his job was to placate, to smooth, once it was all over. My father was always the one who crept to my doorway after I'd been grounded, sneaking me one of his special Brain Freeze Chocolate Milkshakes, which he believed could solve any problem. After the yelling and slamming of doors, after my mother and I stalked to our separate corners, I could always count on hearing the whirring of the blender in the kitchen, and then him appearing at my doorway presenting me with the thickest, coldest milkshakes as a peace offering. But all the milkshakes in the world weren't going to get me out of this.

So, just like that, I lost the end of my summer. By that Sunday I was packed and riding three hours into the mountains with my mother, who spend the entire ride reminiscing about her own golden camp years and promising me I'd thank her when it was over. She dropped me at the registration desk, kissed me on the forehead and told me she loved me, then drove off waving into the sunset. I stood there with my duffel bag and glowed after her, surrounded by a bunch of other girls who clearly didn't want to spend two weeks "bonding" either.

I was on what they called "scholarship" at Sisterhood Camp, which meant I had my way paid free, just like the four other girls I met whose parents just happened to be therapists. I made friends with my cabinmates, and we complained to each other, mocked all the seminar leaders, and worked on our tans, talking about boys.

But now I was leaving early, drawn home by the loss of a boy I'd hardly known. I put my stuff in the trunk of the car and climbed in beside my mother, who said hello and then not much else for the first fifteen minutes of the drive. As far as I was concerned, we'd come to a draw: I hadn't wanted to come, and she didn't want me to leave. We were even. But I knew my mother wouldn't see it that way. Lately, we didn't seem to see anything the same.

"So how was it?" she asked me once we got on the highway. She'd set the cruise control, adjusted the air-conditioning, and now seemed ready to make peace. "Or what you saw of it,

"It was ok," I said. "The seminars were kind of boring."

"Hmm," she said, and I figured that I was pushing it. I knew my mother, though. She'd push back. "Well, maybe if you'd stayed the whole time you might have gotten more out of it."

"Maybe," I said. In the side mirror, I could see the mountains retreating behind us, bit by bit.

I knew there were a lot of things she probably wanted to say to me. Maybe she wanted to ask me why I cared about Michael Sherwood, since she'd hardly heard me mention him. Or why I'd hated the idea of camp right from the start, without even giving it a chance. Or maybe it was more, like why in just the last few months even the sight of her coming toward me was enough to get my guard up. Why we'd gone from best friends to something neither of us could rightly define. But she didn't say anything.

"Mom?"

She turned to look at me, and I could almost hear her take a breath, reading herself for whatever I might try next. "Yes?"

"Thanks for letting me come home,"

She turned back to the road. "It's alright, Halley," she said to me softly as I leaned back in my seat. "It's all right."

My mother and I had always been close. She knew everything about me, from the boys I liked to the girls I envied; after school I always sat in the kitchen eating my snack and doing homework while I listened for her car to pull up. I always had something to tell her. After my first school dance she sat with me eating ice cream out of the carton while I detailed every single thing that had happened from first song to last. On Saturdays, when my dad pulled morning shift at the radio station, we had Girls' Lunch Out so we could keep up with each other. She loved fancy pasta places, and I only liked fast food and pizza, so we alternated. She made me eat snails, and I watched her gulp down (enjoying it more than she ever would admit) countless Big Macs. We had one rule: we always ordered two desserts and shared. Afterwards we'd hit the mall looking for sales, competing to see who could find the best bargain. She usually won.

She wrote articles in journals and magazines about our successful relationship and how we'd weathered my first year of high school together, and spoke at schools and parents' meetings about Staying in Touch with Your Teen. Whenever her friends came over for coffee and complained about their kids running wild or doing drugs, she'd say. "Halley and I are just so close. We talk about *everything*."

But suddenly, at the beginning of that summer, something changed. I can't say when it started exactly. But it happened after the Grand Canyon.

Each summer, my parents and I took a vacation. It was our big splurge of the year, and we always went someplace cool like Mexico or Europe. This year, we took a cross-country road trip to California and then the Grand Canyon, stopping here and there, sucking up scenery and visiting relatives. My mother and I had a great time; my father did most of the driving, and the two of us hung out, talking and listening to the radio, sharing clothes, making up songs and jokes as state lines and landmarks passed by: My father and I forced her to eat fast food almost every day as payback for a year's worth of arugula salad and prosciutto tortellini. We spent two weeks together, bickering sometimes but mostly just having fun, me and my parents on the road.

As soon as I got home, though, three very big things happened. First, I started my job at Milton's. Scarlett and I had spent the end of the school year going around filling out applications, and it was the only place with enough positions to hire us both. By the time I got home from the trip, Scarlett had already been there two weeks, so she taught me the ropes. Second, she introduced me to Ginny Tabor, whom she'd met at the pool while I'd been gone. Ginny was a cheerleader with a wild streak a mile wide and a reputation among the football team for more than her cheers and famous midair splits. She lived a few miles away in the Arbors, a fancy development of Tudor houses with a country club, pool, and golf course. Ginny Tabor's father was a dentist, and her mother weighed about eighty pounds, chain-smoked Benson and Hedges 100's, and had skin that was as leathery as the ottoman in our living room. She threw money at Ginny and left us alone to prowl the streets of the Arbors on our way to the pool, or sneak out across the golf course at night to meet boys. Which, in turn, led to the third big event that summer, when two weeks after coming home I broke off my dull, one-year romance with Noah Vaughn.

Noah was my first "boyfriend," which meant we called each other on the phone and kissed sometimes. He was tall and skinny, with thick black hair and a bit of acne. His parents were best friends with mine, and we'd spent Friday night together, at our house or theirs, for most of my lifetime. He'd been all right for a start. But when I was inducted into the new crazy world of Ginny Tabor, he had to go.

He didn't take it well. He sulked around, glowered at me, and still came over every Friday with his little sister and his parents, sitting stony-faced on the couch as I slipped out the door, yelling good-bye. I always said I was going to Scarlett's, but instead we were usually meeting boys at the pool or hanging out with Ginny. My mother was more sad about our breakup

than anyone; I think she'd half expected I'd marry him. But this was the New Me, someone I was evolving into with every hot and humid long summer day. I learned to smoke cigarettes, drank my first beer, got a deep tan, and doubled-pierced my ears as I began to drift, almost imperceptibly at first, from my mother.

There's a picture on my mantel that always reminds me of what my mother and I were then. We're at the Grand Canyon, at one of those overlook sites, with it spread out huge and gaping behind us. We have on matching T-shirts, sunglasses, and big smiles as we pose, arms around each other. We have never in any picture before or since, looked more alike. We have the small nose, the same stance, the same goofy smile. We look happy, standing there in the sunshine, the sky spread out blue and forever in the distance. My mother framed that picture, when we got home, sticking it front and center on the mantel where you couldn't help but see it. It was like she knew, somehow, that it would be a relic just months later, proof of another time and place neither of us could imagine had existed: my mother and I, best friends, posing at the Grand Canyon

Scarlett was sitting on her front steps when we pulled up. It was early evening, just getting dark, and all up and down our street, lights were on in the houses, people out walking their dogs or children. Someone a few streets over was barbecuing, the smell mingling in the air with cut grass and recent rain.

I got out of the car and put my bag on the front walk, looking across the street at Scarlett's house, the only light coming from her kitchen and spilling out into the empty carport. She lifted one hand and waved at me from the stoop.

"Mom, I'm going to Scarlett's," I said.

"Fine." I still wasn't totally forgiven for this, not yet. But it was late, she was tired, and those days, we had to pick our battles.

I knew the way across the street and up Scarlet's walk by heart; I could have done it with every sense lost. The dip in the street halfway across the two prickly bushes on either end of her walk that left tiny scratches on your skin when you brushed against them. It was eighteen steps from the beginning of the walk to the front stoop; we'd measured it when we were in sixth grade and obsessed with facts and details. We'd spent months calculating distances and counting steps, trying to organize the world into manageable bits and pieces.

Now I just walk toward her in the half-darkness, aware only of the sound of my own footfalls and the air conditioner humming softly under the side window.

"Hey," I said, and she scooted over to make room for me. "How's it going?"

It seemed like the stupidest thing to ask once I'd said it, but there really weren't any right words. I looked over at her as she sat beside me, barefoot, her hair pulled away from her face in a loose ponytail. She'd been crying

I wasn't used to seeing her this way. Scarlett had always been the stronger, the livelier, the braver. The girl who punched out Missy Lassiter, the meanest, most fiendish of the pink-bike girls that first summer she moved in, on a day when they surrounded us and tried to make us cry. The girl who kept a house, and her mother, up and running since she was five, now playing mother to a thirty-five-year-old child. The girl who had kept the world from swallowing me whole, or so I'd always believed.

"Scarlett? I said, there in the dark, and as she turned to me I saw her face was streaked with tears. For a minute, I didn't know what to do. I thought again of that picture tucked in her mirror, of her and Michael just weeks ago, the water so bright and shiny behind them. And I thought of what she had done all the millions of times I'd cried to her, collapsing at even the slightest wounding of my heart or pride.

So I reached over and pulled her to me, wrapping my arms around her, and held my best friend close, returning so many favors all at once. We sat there for a long time, Scarlett and me, with her house looming over us and mine right across the street staring back with its bright windows. It was the end of summer; it was the end of a lot of things. I sat there with her, feeling her shoulders shake under my hands. I had no idea what to do or what came next. All I knew was that she needed me and I was here. And for now, that was about the best we could do.

CHAPTER TWO

Scarlett was a redhead, but not in an orangey, carrot-top kind of way. Her color was more auburn, deep and red mixed with browns that made her green eyes seem almost luminous. Her skin was pale, with masses of freckles for the first few years I knew her; as we grew older, they faded into a sprinkling across her nose, as if they'd been scattered there by hand. She was an inch and three-quarters shorter than me, her feet a size larger, and she had a scar on her stomach that looked like a mouth smiling from when she'd gotten her appendix out. She was beautiful in all the unconscious, accidental ways that I wasn't, and I was jealous more than I'd ever have admitted. To me, Scarlett was foreign and exotic. But she had said she would have given anything for my long hair and tan in summer, for my thick eyelashes and eyebrows. Not to mention my father, my conventional family, away from Marion with her whims and fancies. It was an even trade, our envy of each other; it made everything fair.

We always believed we lived perfectly parallel lives. We went through the same phases at the same times; we both liked gory movies and sappy stuff, and we knew every word to every song on the old musical soundtracks my parents had. Scarlett was more confident, able to make friends fast, where I was shy and quiet, hanging back from the crowd. I was forever known as "Scarlett's friend Halley." But I didn't mind. Without her I knew I'd be hanging out in the bus parking lot with the nerds and Noah Vaughn. That was, I was sure, the destiny in store for me until the

day Scarlett looked up from behind those white sunglasses and made a spot for me next to her for the rest of my life. And I was grateful. Because life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend.

When I pictured myself, it was always like just an outline in a coloring book, with the inside not yet completed. All the standard features were there. But the colors, the zigzags and plaids, the bits and pieces that made up me, Halley, weren't yet in place. Scarlett's vibrant reds and golds helped some, but I was still waiting.

For most of high school, we hadn't known Michael Sherwood that well, even though we'd grown up in the same neighborhood. He'd gone away the summer after middle school to California and returned transformed: tan, taller, and suddenly gorgeous. He was immediately *the boy* to date.

He went out with Ginny Tabor for about fifteen minutes, then Elizabeth Gunderson, the head cheerleader, for a few months. But he never seemed to fit in with that crowd of soccer-team captains and varsity jackets. He went back to his buddies from Lakeview, like his best friend Macon Faulkner. Sometimes we'd see them walking down our street, between our two houses, in the middle of the night, smoking cigarettes and laughing. They were different, and they fascinated us.

By leaving the popular crowd, Michael Sherwood became an enigma. No one was sure where he fit in, and he was friendly with everyone, sort of the great equalizer of our high school. He was famous for his pranks on substitute teachers and was always asking to borrow a dollar in exchange for a good story; he told outlandish tales, half true at best, but they were so funny you got your dollar's worth. The one I remember he told me had to do with psychotic Girl Scouts who were stalking him. I didn't believe him, but I gave him two dollars and skipped lunch that day. It was worth it.

Each of us had our own story about Michael, something he'd done or said or passed down. More than anything, it was the things he *didn't* do that made Michael Sherwood so intriguing; he seemed so far from the rest of us and yet implicitly he belonged to everyone.

At the end of every school year there was the annual slide show, full of candid shots that hadn't made the yearbook. We all piled into the auditorium and watched as our classmates' faces filled the huge screen, everyone cheering for their friends and booing people they didn't like. There was only one picture of Michael Sherwood, but it was a good one: he was sitting on the wall by himself, wearing this black baseball hat he always wore, laughing at something out of the frame, something we couldn't see. The grass was so green behind him, and above that a clear stretch of blue sky. When the slide came up, the entire crowd in that auditorium cheered, clapping and hooting and craning their necks to look for Michael, who was sitting up in the balcony with Macon Faulkner, looking embarrassed. But that was what he was to us, always: the one thing that we all had in common.

The funeral was the next day, Thursday. I went across the street to Scarlett's after breakfast, in bare feet and cutoffs, carrying two black dresses I couldn't decide between. I'd only been to one funeral before, my grandfather's in Buffalo, and I'd been so little someone had dressed me. This was different.

"Come in," I heard Marion call out before I even had a chance to knock at the side door. She was sitting at the kitchen table, coffee cup in front of her, flipping through *Vogue*.

"Hey," I said to her as she smiled at me. "Is she awake?"

"Practically all night," she said quietly, turning the page and taking a sip of coffee. "She was on the couch when I got up." She really needs some rest, or she's just gonna crash."

I had to keep from smiling. These were the same words I heard from Scarlett about Marion on a regular basis; for as long as I'd known them their roles had been reversed. When Marion had been depressed and drinking heavily a few years back, it was Scarlett who came knocking at our front door in her nightgown at two A.M. because she'd found Marion passed out cold halfway up the front walk, her cheek imprinted with the ripples and cracks in the concrete. My father carried Marion into the house while my mother tried her best therapy schtick on Scarlett, who said nothing and curled up in the chair beside Marion's bed, watching over her until morning. My father called Scarlett "solemn"; my mother said she was "in denial."

"Hey." I looked over to see Scarlett standing in the doorway in a red shirt and cutoff long johns, her hair still mussed up from sleeping. She nodded at the dresses in my hand. "Which one you gonna wear?"

"I don't know," I said.

She came closer, taking them from my hands, then held each up against me, squinting. "The short one," she said quietly, laying the other on the counter next to the fruit bowl. "The one with the scoop neck always makes you look like you're twelve."

I looked down at the scoop-necked dress, trying to remember where I'd worn it before. It was always Scarlett who kept track of such things: dates, memories, lessons learned. I forgot everything, barely able to keep my head from one week to the next. But Scarlett knew it all, from what she was wearing when she got her first kiss to the name of the sister of the boy I'd met at the beach the summer before; she was our oracle, our common memory.

She opened the fridge and took out the milk, then crossed the room with a box of Rice Krispies under her arm, grabbing a bowl from the open dishwasher on her way. She sat at the head of the table, with Marion to her left, and I took my seat on the right. Even in their tiny family, with me as an honorary member, there were traditions.

Scarlett poured herself some cereal, adding sugar from the bowl between us. "Do you want some?"

"No," I said. "I ate already." My mother had made me French toast, after spending most of the early morning gossiping over the back fence with her best friend, Irma Trilby, who was known for her amazing azaleas and her mouth, the latter of which I'd heard all morning through my window. Apparently Mrs. Trilby had known Mrs. Sherwood well from PTA and had already been over with a chicken casserole to relay her regrets. Mrs. Trilby had also seen me and Michael and Scarlett more than once walking home from work together, and late one night she'd even caught a glimpse of Scarlett and Michael kissing under a streetlight. He was a sweet boy, she'd said in her nasal voice. He mowed their lawn after Arthur's coronary and always got her the best bananas at Milton's, even if he had to sneak some from the back. A nice boy.

So my mother came inside newly informed and sympathetic and made me a huge breakfast that I picked at while she sat across the table, coffee mug in hand, smiling as if waiting for me to say something. As if all it took was Michael Sherwood mowing a lawn, or finding the perfect banana, to make him worth morning.

"So what time's the service?" Marion asked me, picking up her Marlboro Lights from the lazy Susan in the middle of the table.

"Eleven o'clock."

She lit a cigarette. "We're packed with appointments today, but I'll try to make it. Okay?"

"Okay," Scarlett said.

Marion worked at the Lakeview Mall at Fabulous You, a glamour photography store where they had makeup and clothes and got you all gussied up, then took

photographs that you could give to your husband or boyfriend. Marion spent forty hours a week making up housewives and teenagers in too much lipstick and the same evenings gowns, posing them with an empty champagne glass as they gazed into the camera with their best come-hither look. It was a hard job, considering some of the raw material she had to work with; not everyone is cut out to be glamorous. She often said there was only so much of a miracle to be worked with concealer and creative lighting.

Marion pushed her chair back, running a hand through her hair; she had Scarlett's face, round with deep green eyes, and thick blonde hair she bleached every few months. She had bright red fingernails, smoked constantly, and owned more lingerie than Victoria's Secret. The first time I'd met her, the day they moved in, Marion had been flirting with the movers, dressed in hip-huggers, a macramé halter top that showed her stomach, and heels at least four inches high. She wasn't like my mother; she wasn't like *anyone's* mother. To me, she looked just like Barbie, and she'd fascinated me ever since.

"Well," Marion drawled, standing up and ruffling Scarlett's hair with her hand as she passed. "Got to get ready for the salt mines. You girls call if you need me. Okay?"

"Okay," Scarlett said, taking another mouthful of cereal.

"Bye, Marion," I said.

"She won't come," Scarlett said once Marion was safely upstairs, her footsteps creaking above us.

"Why not?"

"Funerals freak her out." She dropped her spoon in her bowl, finished. "Marion has a convenient excuse for everything."

When we went upstairs to get ready I flopped on the edge of her bed, which was covered in clothes and magazines and mismatched blankets and sheets. Scarlett opened her closet and stood in front of it with her hands on her hips, contemplating. Marion yelled good-bye from downstairs and the front door slammed, followed by the sound of her car starting and backing out of the driveway. Through the window over Scarlett's bed, I could see my own mother sitting in the swing on our front porch, drinking coffee and reading the paper. As Marion drove past she waved; her "neighbor smile" on, and went back to reading.

"I hate this," Scarlett said suddenly, reaching into the closet and pulling out a navy blue dress with a white collar. "I don't have a single thing that's appropriate."

"You can wear my twelve-year old dress," I offered, and she made a face.

"I bet Marion's got something," she said suddenly, leaving the room. Marion's closet was legend; she was a fashion plate and a pack rat, the most dangerous of pairings.

I reached over and turned on the radio next to the bed, leaning back and closing my eyes. I'd spent half my life in Scarlett's room, sprawled across the bed with a stack of *Seventeen* magazines between us, picking out future prom dresses and reading up on pimple prevention and boyfriend problems. Right next to her window was the shelf with her pictures: me and her at the beach two years ago, in matching sailor hats, doing a mock salute at my father's camera. Marion at eighteen, an old school picture, faded and creased. And finally, at the end and unframed, that same picture of her and Michael at the lake. Since I left for Sisterhood Camp, she'd moved it so it was in easy reach.

I felt something pressing into my back, hard, and I reached under to move it; it was a boot with a thick sole that resisted when I pulled on it. I shifted my position and gave it another yank, wondering when Scarlett had bought hiking boots. I was just about to yell out and ask her, when it suddenly yanked back, hard, and there was an explosion of movement on the bed, arms and legs flailing, things falling off

the sides as someone rose out of the mess around me, shaking off magazines and blankets and pillows in all directions. And suddenly, I found myself face to face with Macon Faulkner.

He glanced around the room as if he wasn't quite sure where he was. His blond hair, cut short over his ears, tuck up in tiny cowlicks. In one ear was a row of three silver hoops.

"Wha-?" he managed, sitting up straighter and blinking. He was all tangled up, one sheet wrapped around his arm. "Where's Scarlett?"

"She's down there," I said automatically, pointing toward the door, as if that was down, which it wasn't.

He shook his head, trying to wake up. I would have been just as shocked to see Mahatma Gandhi or Elvis in Scarlett's bed; I had no idea she even knew Macon Faulkner. We all knew *who* he was, of course. As a Boy with a Reputation, his neighborhood legend preceded him.

And what was he doing in her bed, anyway? It couldn't mean-no. She would have told me; she told me everything. And Marion *had* said Scarlett slept on the couch.

"Well, I think I can wear this," I heard Scarlett say as she came back down the hallway, a black dress over her arm. She looked at Macon, then at me, and walked to the closet as if it was the most normal thing in the world to have a strange boy in your bed at ten in the morning on a Thursday.

Macon lay back, letting one hand flop over his eyes. His boot, and his foot in it, had somehow landed in my lap, where it remained. Macon Faulkner's *foot* was in my *lap*.

"Did you meet Halley?" Scarlett asked him, hanging the dress on her closet door. "Halley, this is Macon. Macon, Halley."

"Hi," I said immediately aware of how high my voice was.

"Hey." He nodded at me, moving his foot off my lap as if that was nothing special, then got off the bed and stood up, stretching his arms. "Man, I feel awful."

"Well, you should," Scarlett said in the same scolding voice she used with me when I was especially spineless. "You were incredibly wasted."

Macon leaned over and rooted around under the sheets, looking for something, while I sat there and stared at him. He was in a white T-shirt ripped along the hem and dark blue shorts, those clunky boots on his feet. He was tall and wiry, and tan from a summer working landscaping around the neighborhood, which was the only place I ever saw him, and even then from a distance.

"Have you seen-?" he began, but Scarlett was already reaching to the bedside table and the baseball cap lying there. Macon leaned over and took it from her, then put it on with a sheepish look. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Scarlett pulled her hair back behind her head, gathering it in her hands, which meant she was thinking. "So, you need a ride to the service?"

"Nah," he said, walking to the bedroom door with his hands in his pockets, stepping over my feet as if I was invisible. "I'll see you there."

"Okay." Scarlett stood by the doorway.

"Is it cool? To go out this way?" he was whispering, gesturing down the hall to Marion's empty room.

"It's fine."

He nodded, then stepped toward her awkwardly, leaning down to kiss her cheek. "Thanks," he said quietly, in a voice I probably was not supposed to hear. "I mean it."

"It's no big deal," Scarlett said, smiling up at him, and we both watched him as he loped off, his boots clunking down the stairs and out the door. When I heard it swing shut, I walked to the window and leaned against the glass, waiting until he

came out on the walk, squinting, and began those eighteen steps to the street. Across the street my mother looked up, folding her paper in her lap, watching too.

"I cannot believe you," I said out loud, as Macon Faulkner passed the prickly bushes and turned left, headed out of *Lakeview – Neighborhood of Friends*.

"He was upset," Scarlett said simply. "Michael was his best friend."

"But you never even told me you knew him. And then I come up here and he's in your *bed*."

"I just knew him through Michael. He's messed up, Halley. He's got a lot of problems."

"It's so weird, through," I said. "I mean, that he was here."

"He just needed someone," she said. "That's all."

I still had my eye on Macon Faulkner as he moved past the perfect houses of our neighborhood, seeming out of place among hissing sprinklers and thrown newspapers on a bright and shiny late summer morning. I couldn't say then what it was about him that kept me there. But just as he was rounding the corner, disappearing from sight, he turned around and lifted his hand, waving at me, as if he knew even without turning back that I'd still be there in the window, watching him go.

When we got to the church, there was already a line out the door. Scarlett hadn't said much the entire trip, and as we walked over, she was wringing her hands.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"It's just weird," she said, and her voice was low and hollow. She had her eyes on something straight ahead. "All of it."

As I looked up I could see what she meant. Elizabeth Gunderson, head cheerleader, was surrounded by a group of her friends on the church steps. She was sobbing hysterically, a red T-shirt in her hands.

Scarlett stopped when we got within a few feet of the crowd, so suddenly that I kept walking and then had to go back for her. She was standing by herself, her arms folded tightly across her chest.

"Scarlett?" I said.

"This was a bad idea," she said. "We shouldn't have come."

"But--"

And that was as far as I got before Ginny Tabor came up behind me, throwing her arms around both of us at once and collapsing into tears. She smelled like hairspray and cigarette smoke and was wearing a blue dress that showed way too much leg.

"Oh my God," she said, lifting her head to take in me and then Scarlett as we pulled away from her as delicately as possible. "It's so awful, so terrible. I haven't been able to eat since I heard. I'm a wreck."

Neither of us said anything; we just kept walking, while Ginny fumbled for a cigarette, lighting it and then fanning the smoke with one hand. "I mean, the time that we were together wasn't all that great, but I loved him so much. It was just circumstances--and now she sobbed, shaking her head--that kept us apart. But he was, like, everything to me for those two months. Everything."

I looked over at Scarlett, who was studying the pavement, and I said, "I'm so sorry, Ginny."

"Well," she said in a tight voice, exhaling a long stream of smoke, "it's so different when you knew him well. You know?"

"I know," I said. We hadn't seen much of Ginny since midsummer. After spending a few wild weeks with us, she'd gotten sent off to a combination cheerleading/Bible camp while her parents went to Europe. It was just as well, we

figured. There was only so much of ongoing Ginny you could take. A few days later Scarlett had met Michael, and the second half of our summer began.

We kept following the line into the church, now coming up on Elizabeth. Ginny, of course, made a big show of running over to her and bursting into fresh tears, and they stood and hugged each other, crying together.

"It's so awful," a girl said from behind me. "He loved Elizabeth so much. That's his shirt she's holding, you know. She hasn't put it down since she heard."

"I thought they broke up," said another girl, and cracked her gum.

"At the beginning of the summer. But he still loved her. Anyway, that Ginny Tabor is so damn shallow," said the first girl. "She only dated him for about two days."

Once inside, we sat toward the back, next to two older women who pulled their knees aside primly as we slid past them. Up at the front of the church there were two posters with pictures of Michael taped to them: baby snapshots, school pictures, candids I recognized from the yearbook. And in the middle, biggest of all, was the picture from the slide show, the one that had brought cheers in that darkened auditorium in June. I wanted to point it out to Scarlett, but when I turned to tell her, she was just staring at the back of the pew in front of us, her face pale, and I kept quiet.

The service started late, with people filing in and lining the walls, shuffling and fanning themselves with the little paper programs we'd been handed at the door. Elizabeth Gunderson came in, still crying, and was led to a seat with Ginny Tabor sobbing right behind her. It was strange to see my classmates in this setting; some were dressed up nicely, obviously used to wearing church clothes. Others looked out of place, awkward, tugging at their ties or dress shirts. I wondered what Michael was thinking, looking down at all these people with red faces shifting in their seats, at the wailing girls he left behind, at his parents in the front pew with his little sister, quietly stoic and sad. And I looked over at Scarlett, who had loved him so much in such a short time, and slipped my hand around hers, squeezing it. She squeezed back, still staring ahead.

The service was formal and short; the heat was stifling with all the people packed in so tightly, and we could barely hear the minister over the fanning and the creaking of the pews. He talked about Michael, and what he meant to so many people; he said something about God having his reasons. Elizabeth Gunderson got up and left ten minutes into it, her hand pressed against her mouth as she walked quickly down the aisle of the church, a gaggle of friends running behind her. The older women next to us shook their heads, disapproving, and Scarlett squeezed my hand harder, her fingernails digging into my skin.

When the service was over, there was an awkward murmur of voices as everyone filed outside. It had suddenly gotten very dark, with a strange breeze blowing that smelled like rain. Overhead the clouds had piled up big and black behind the trees.

I almost lost Scarlett in the crowd of voices and faces and color in front of the church. Ginny was leaning on Brett Hershey, the captain of the football team, as he led her out. Elizabeth was sitting in the front seat of a car in the parking lot, the door open, her head in her hands. Everyone else stood around uncertainly as if they needed permission to leave, holding their programs and looking up at the sky.

"Poor Elizabeth," Scarlett said softly as we stood by her car.

"They broke up a while ago," I said.

"Yeah. They did." She kicked a pebble, and it rattled off of something under the car. "But he really loved her."

I looked over at her, the wind blowing her hair around her face, her fair skin so white against the black of Marion's dress. The times I caught her unaware, accidentally, were when she was the most beautiful. "He loved you, too," I told her.

She looked up at the sky, black with clouds, the smell of rain stronger and stronger. "I know," she said softly. "I know."

The first drop was big, sloshy and wet, falling on my shoulder and leaving a round, dark circle. Then, suddenly, it was pouring. The rain came in sheets, sending people running toward their cars, shielding themselves with their flimsy paper programs. Scarlett and I dove into her car and watched the water stream down the windshield. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen it rain so hard.

We pulled out onto Main Street in Scarlett's Ford Aspire. Her grandmother had given it to her for her birthday in April. It was about the size of a shoe box; it looked like a larger car that had been cut in half with a big bread knife. As we crossed a river of water spilling into the road, I wondered briefly if we'd get pulled into the current and carried away like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod in their big shoe, out to sea.

Scarlett saw him first, walking alone up the street, his white dress shirt soaked and sticking to his back. His head was ducked and he had his hands in his pockets, staring down at the pavement as people ran past with umbrellas. Scarlett beeped the horn, slowing beside him.

"Macon!" she called out, leaning into the rain. "Hey!" He didn't hear her, and she poked me. "Yell out to him, Halley."

"What?"

"Roll down your window and ask him if he wants a ride."

"Scarlett," I said, suddenly nervous, "I don't even know him."

"So what?" She gave me a look. "It's pouring. Hurry up."

I rolled my window down and stuck my head out, feeling the rain pelting the back of my neck. "Excuse me," I said.

He didn't hear me. I cleared my throat, stalling. "Excuse me."

"Halley," Scarlett said, glancing into the rearview mirror, "we're holding up traffic here. Come on."

"He can't hear me," I said defensively.

"You're practically whispering."

"I am not," I snapped. "I am speaking in a perfectly audible tone of voice."

"Just yell it." Cars were going around us now as a fresh wave of rain poured in my window, soaking my lap. Scarlett exhaled loudly, which meant she was losing patience. "Come on, Halley, don't be such a wuss."

"I am not a wuss." I said. "God."

She just looked at me. I stuck my head back out the window.

"Macon." I said it a little louder this time, just because I was angry. "Macon."

Another loud exhalation from Scarlett. I was getting completely soaked.

"Macon," I said a bit louder, stretching my head completely out of the car. "Macon!"

He jerked suddenly on the sidewalk, turning around and looking at me as if he expected us to come flying up the curb in our tiny car to squash him completely. Then he just stared, his shirt soaked and sticking to his skin, his hair dripping onto his face, stood and stared at me as if I was completely and utterly nuts.

"What?" he screamed back, just as loudly, "What is it?"

Beside me, Scarlett burst out laughing, the first time I'd heard her laugh since I'd come home. She leaned back in her seat, hand over her mouth, giggling uncontrollably. I wanted to die.

"Um," I said, and he was still staring at me. "Do you want a ride?"

"I'm okay," he said across me, to Scarlett. "But thanks."

"Macon, it's pouring." She had her Mom voice on, one I recognized. As he looked across me, I could see how red his eyes were, swollen from crying. "Come on."

"I'm okay," he said again, backing off from the car. He wiped his hand over his face and hair, water spraying everywhere. "I'll see you later."

"Macon," she called out again, but he was already gone, walking back into the rain. As we sat at the stoplight, he cut around a corner and disappeared; the last thing I saw was his shirt, a flash of white against the brick of the alley. Then he was gone, vanishing so easily it seemed almost like magic – there was no trace. Scarlett sighed as I rolled up my window, saying something about everybody having their ways. I was only watching the alleyway, the last place I'd seen him, wondering if he'd ever been there at all.

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**Sarah's new title *ALONG FOR THE RIDE*
goes on sale June 16, 2009!**