



Labor of Love



Emily Franklin





**Praise for Emily Franklin's
The Principles of Love novels**

“Funny and poignant.”

—*Elle Girl*

“Love tells all in a voice that is alternately funny and heart-wrenching.”

—Sarah Dessen, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Just Listen*

“[A] believable, engaging story that keeps you up past your bedtime waiting to see how things turn out.” —*Pop Gurls*

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Personal Journal Became a Bestseller*

“Witty . . . wise . . . a good read.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Love Bukowski lives up to her first name as a sweet and charming character whose trials and tribulations, seen through her witty and keen perspective, will have you rooting for her

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Chalet Girls

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The Principles of Love
Piece, Love, & Happiness
Love from London
All You Need Is Love
Summer of Love



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For my children

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Chapter One



People always say that change is gradual; only measured in months or years does your appearance change. Only in movies does the heroine go from shaggy-haired shy girl in baggy clothing to a ponytailed heartthrob complete with eyeliner and hot body (previously hidden by aforementioned clothes) in the course of one personal renovation. But to me, *morphing* sounds lax. Change isn't meant to be rapid, is it?

Only slowly do you lose interest in singing, which was once your passion, or the casual interest you had in writing seem to be gnawing for your attention more and more. Or over time, someone drops twenty pounds or grows distant from someone they were once close with or their grades aren't quite what they were a semester ago.

I guess I always thought this gradual process was true. But yesterday, in the course of one phone call, I somehow

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managed to go from the life I knew to the life I currently inhabit. Everything I had before: summer java job on Martha's Vineyard, Brit best friend Arabella with me, school lurking in fall, a boy I like who likes me back (Charlie Addison), an upcoming interview at Stanford, a trip to LA to justify said interview, and a potential Fourth of July party at indie producer Martin Eisenstein's palatial house with my newly found half sister, Sadie. Doesn't sound bad. A lot of info, maybe, but good info.

In fact, when I think of my life as a short list like that, it feels great; neat and compact. And then came the phone call—or, more aptly, cell phone calls overlapping all at one time. Calls that changed everything. First was Jacob, my on-again-and-then-not boyfriend turned ambiguous friend, who was waiting for me back on the Vineyard with his heart on his short sleeve. Second from my now boyfriend, Charlie—who'd gone from local fisherman to practically titled elite prep—saying he missed me. And third from my mother—whom I've never met—and who had finally surfaced.

All that knowledge in my ear via cell waves made it impossible to stay in LA; it also made me sure I had to leave behind Sadie, whom I'd just met, and my interview at Stanford (which I realized I wasn't that into), and a world of surfing and surreal celebrity. The fact that Arabella stayed

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in California makes it better, actually, like having my best friend there to absorb it all for me semi-makes up for what I'm missing coming back.

On the plane ride to Boston, my neat little list of changes spiraled into a tornado of terror—a storm of emotions that deserves its own coverage on the Weather Channel that picked me up in its gale force winds and deposited me where I am now, unlocking the door to my house on Hadley Hall campus.

The kitchen with its yellow phone on the wall, the round wooden table set with four chairs, the burn mark on the counter caused when I once put a hot tray of brownies down too soon—it's all there. All the same. But me? Not so much. I move through the kitchen with my backpack and take the spiral steps to my room. My body moves the way it always has—so of course I bump into the corner of the coffee table in the living room and bash my knee on my bedroom door. But what I can't really get over is how the world appears to be spinning on a slightly different axis.

My house doesn't know that everything's different. That my biological mother, Gala, whom I've never met—never spoken to—has emerged after nearly eighteen years. The walls don't get that Jacob, the boy who won my heart then dropped it, broke out of our platonic bubble to announce he's "got feelings for me"—again. And the furniture sure as

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hell has no idea that I have a boyfriend. A real boyfriend. Charlie who likes me, who gives me chills when I see him. And my fall and winter clothing tucked neatly into my dresser drawers hasn't a clue that my dad cancelled his trip to Europe with his girlfriend, Louisa, to help me come to grips with said maternal mystery. The clothing also has no idea that several weeks from now it will be moved from said drawers into the confines of a new Hadley dorm room—with me in it.

The craziest part? Everything except the clothing and my own self are waiting for me on Martha's Vineyard.

I pick up the phone in my room and immediately dial for help. "You need to come over." I say it as a command, not whining, but urgent.

"I'm standing outside already, you fool."

I cup my hands into the glass on the windowpane and see Chris—aka my savior in times of trouble and strife—arms flailing while he grips the cell phone between chin and shoulder. I crack up and open the window enough to throw the keys down to him. He catches them, cheers for himself football style, and two minutes later he's in my bedroom getting the full scoop.

"I mean, what else can I say but holy shit?" he asks, shaking his head while trying to take in all the information I've spewed.

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"I'm overwhelmed." I sit on the floor with my back against one of the twin beds. I can't help but feel nostalgic already in here—my desk, my comfy bed, my view—it will all be gone when boarding orientation rolls around. "I'm going to miss my room." I make a sad face, overly pouty, and Chris does it back.

"You're not allowed to mourn your change in status. True, you're losing your day student clout but you're gaining boarder chic. There's plenty of time for that melodrama—you with Lindsay Parrish, Queen of the Dark—when school starts after Labor Day. In the meantime . . ." He bites his lip while counting something on his fingers.

"What?"

"Wait."

"What?" I stand up and cross my arms over my chest, tap my feet, and sigh. "I seriously think of myself as a patient person. . . ."

Chris makes a face. "You're so not, though. . . ."

"Yeah, I'm realizing this now."

"Only now? O you who when in serious crush phase have to check email and phone messages every eight minutes?"

I *tsk* at him. "As if you do anything different." With my hands, I comb my hair and twist it up off my neck. I have that reek of plane travel on me, my hair is still gritty with

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sand from the beach where I met Sadie, and I never showered before hopping on the red-eye back East. “Speaking of crushes, how goes it with your most recent dissing?”

Chris finishes counting and puts his hands in his pockets. “Okay—number one—Haverford Pomroy is, as you know, gay but taken. My ego is only just beginning to recover.”

“You liked him for a long time,” I say and nod.

“You know what, though? It’s not just that—it’s like I wasted so much energy on him, on wondering if I had a chance with him, if he ever noticed me beyond friend, all of that. It’s energy I wish I could get back.”

His words settle around me like birds flocking to scattered seeds. “I think you just described how I feel about the possibility of seeing Jacob.”

“And will you?”

I shrug. “I think I have to—he’s waiting on the Vineyard and I’m going there. . . .” I check my watch as if it’s programmed to give me an itinerary. “Tomorrow, I guess.”

Chris nods. “That’s what I was counting on. I’m thinking though . . .” He gives me a seductive look that would be a total come-on if Chris weren’t gay but because he is, just registers as his playful, scheming self. “I’m thinking baby could use a little support now that Arabella is off on another coast.”

“Oh my god you did not just call me baby.”

“I did.” He raises his eyebrows and gives me another

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smoldering gaze. “But only in an ironic way. With Arabella away—oh, doesn’t that sound like a book title? *Arabella Away: a Novel by Love Bukowski*.”

“I’m writing novels now?” I laugh and shake my head in amazement.

“Sorry—a little ADHD slipped in there. Back on track. What I’m telling you is that given your circumstances, you could probably use a little island company so as not to become a little emotional island unto yourself.”

“Well put.” I touch Chris’s shoulder and pretend to be wooed by him, getting obviously breathy and taken in. “You mean, you’ll go with me to the Vineyard and conquer my demons with me? You’ll stand by my side as I fret over first-time meetings with Gala? My mom—ahhh—I just said *mom*. Anyway, you’ll help me deal with my dueling romantic forces?”

Chris bows, gallantly. “I’ll stand by you all the way, slaying dragons and saving the castle.”

I plop down on my floor and hug my knees to my chest. “You really think I’ll have dragons?” Images of Charlie wondering why Jacob is there; of my mother, looking at me for the first time; of my father, waving college applications in my face; my still-present pangs of sadness over losing my aunt Mable—all of this hits me in quick succession, like driving by billboards on the highway.

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Chris sits near me, drumming his hands on a stack of my notebooks. Built into mini skyscrapers, the notebooks are journals and half-used school pads, each filled with notes, entries, jottings I couldn't ever get rid of but haven't yet done anything useful with. "You sure have a lot of these," Chris says, reaching for one.

I stop his hand in midair. "No." My tone is serious. "You know I'd read a line or something to you if it were contextual—but you can't just flip through there. No one does that."

"Upon penalty of death?"

I shrug and move his hand away from the stack. "Something like that," I say, and then, "I guess if my journals are so sacred maybe I should put them out of plain view. Or maybe I just naïvely assume that people won't violate my trust."

Chris nods and scratches his stubbly face. He's summer brown, taller than I remember, handsome—and single. He deserves someone who will appreciate him. "Or maybe you want to keep the journals out—"

"Oh, because of that weird wanting-to-be-found-out psychology? No, I don't think so."

"I didn't mean that," Chris says. He stands up and moves toward the door. "Maybe you keep them out as a reminder." He stretches the last word out long.

"Of what?" I look at the stack, amazed at how many days

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and months, afternoons and tears, funny happenings, are all contained in those pages.

“A reminder of where you’ve been, who you are, where you’re going.” He looks at me with his eyebrows raised, this time in a question. “A reminder that you like to keep track of it all.”

Keeping track of my change. True. We stand there, time ticking in silence, as I consider the transitory nature of this room, how it’s just a holding pen until I start senior year of boarding school—as a boarder. How every second I keep my feet planted on the rug is a moment I’m putting off confronting all that waits for me back on the island. “Where am I going?” I ask Chris. I check my watch again. This time, it signals something.

“POA?” he asks.

“Plan of action?” I tighten my lips together and pull him out the door and down the spiral steps as I talk. Motivation begins to hit. “We go to your dorm, shove casual yet adorable clothing into your bag, and you rejourney with me to the Vineyard.”

Chris halts on the staircase, teetering over the edge. “Now? Aren’t you exhausted from the flight? I mean a day ago you were . . .”

“I was in LA. With Sadie. A half sister. Jeez.” I pull him one step farther down. “And now—I know where Gala is.

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And where two guys are who've—as you said—taken a lot of energy from me. Not that they haven't given a lot back but . . .”

“I get it,” Chris says, and this time he's the one to yank me by the arm, to the door, and lock it after switching off the kitchen light.

“Yeah,” I say. “It's like my instinct after landing at Logan was to come back here. To my house. Which isn't really mine anymore, is it?” Chris shakes his head. “I wanted some mythical safe place where none of this new stuff—none of the information that's been pelted at my brain—could get to me.”

Chris nods as we walk the familiar path to his dorm. Campus is empty. Peaceful like this, it's difficult to imagine the grounds teeming with khaki, suntans, and sudden scholastic pressures in September. I try to relax, telling myself we have some of July, Illumination Night in August on the Vineyard, the annual Agricultural Fair there, and Labor Day—marking points before I'm officially a Hadley Hall senior.

“Love?”

“Yeah?”

Chris looks back at my house, then out to campus. “The thing is, change can find you anywhere. You can't run from it. Trust me, I speak from experience. One minute I was the

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hookup artist du jour and the next I was coming out to the entire school. Now I'm starting up the GSA."

"Ah, yes, the Gay-Straight and Everything In-Between Alliance . . . I'm sure you'll be great at that." My flip-flops scratch on the pavement, my mind still reeling. "But just so you know, I wasn't running from it—from change," I say and push my bag so it's on my back rather than my shoulder. "I was hiding from it."

"And now?" Chris waits for my words before we grab his stuff and jump on the bus to Cape Cod that will take us to the ferry terminal.

"Now I'm heading right for it."

Chapter Two



The ocean funnels out in front of me, seeming to widen as we get farther away from the mainland. Enjoying the cool sea air that causes his hair to stand on end and mine to whip this way and that while seagulls dart around for scraps of bread, Chris and I sit on blue plastic seats, our feet on the white metal railings.

“You’re so good at that,” Chris says, punctuating our conversation with compliments.

“At what?” I have a habit of scanning the ferry for people I know—acquaintances from Hadley, random kids I’ve met at parties, or even faraway faces from London. I stop myself from doing this now, realizing it’s a fine thing to do when alone, but rude when in the midst of a conversation.

“At describing situations. Or conversations.”

I’ve just finished telling Chris everything that happened

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in LA—all the way from coming up with a new name for Slave to the Grind II on the plane with Arabella to meeting Sadie, to thinking my mother was about to pop up at any minute. “Well, thanks. I guess I need to paint a picture really clearly to have it make sense.”

“It’s more than that.” Chris turns his head, checking out another group of prep school students, all with worn-in T-shirts, casual clothing that looks comfortable and cool while still effortless. He looks back at me. “You know how some people have a gift for soccer or they excel at Latin?”

“Like Dalton Himmelman?” I ask. “Man, I just pulled his name out of nowhere. Isn’t that so weird how you can go months without saying—or even thinking about—someone from school?”

“It is a bizarre fact of life,” Chris agrees. “Though perhaps Dalton isn’t the best example of random—I mean, he is Jacob’s best friend.”

“True . . .” I start to say more and then am stopped by yearbook-style candids in my mind. “Remember when Dalton and Jacob took apart Ms. Galligan’s car and reassembled it on the roof of Maus Hall?” I smile thinking about it. “Everyone stood there, staring up at it like it had been placed there by some giant creature.”

“See? Even then,” Chris says. “Do you ever listen to yourself?”

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“What do you mean?” In front of us the Vineyard Haven port comes into view, the shelter of the cove making the wind lessen. My hair stops doing its funky dance and the sun feels hot on my shoulders. “Oh my god I just got a wave of total nausea. And not from seasickness.” The reality of all of these people and potential upheavals waiting for me on the quiet island suddenly hits.

“You, Love. Your talent isn’t taking apart cars and being snarky and witty like Jacob. It’s not triple-lettering in sports like Nick Samuels. It’s not organizing and motivating people like me. . . .” Chris gives a little shimmy, then pats himself on the back. “It’s words.”

I breathe in the salty air, the smells of suntan lotion and seafood—lobster rolls and lemonade—the smells of summer that will begin to fade fast. “Doesn’t it feel like right after the Fourth of July summer slips away?” The image of water rushing down a drain comes to mind but I don’t say this—I just think of it and do some mental math about how long I have left before senior year starts. The ferry docks with a lurch. Chris and I stand up, grab our bags, and begin the shuffle toward the gangway and into the masses of disembarking passengers.

“You’re right, you know,” I say to him when he’s in front of—but not looking at—me. “I just like them. Words. I get to control them, or pick exactly which ones to use. And I

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always like when people tell me their stories from start to finish—rather than ‘yeah, you know, I met a girl, we kissed on the beach’—it’s so much more satisfying when someone takes the time to tell you about the beach, why they went there, what the girl looked like—or boy, sorry.” Chris smiles at me and nods.

We stand, angled toward land, but for now stuck in a crowd on neither boat nor firm footing. “So singing is done?”

I shake my head. “No. I’ll always love to sing. But it’s been dawning on me that writing—words, like you said—is what I like most.” Maybe parts of change are gradual, learning something about yourself over the passage of time. Then I remember the multiple phone calls from my dad, from Jacob, from Charlie, the possibility that my mother is right here—in the crowd of people waiting.

“So basically you’re loving college essays,” Chris says.

I shrug. “I dread the idea of them like everyone else—but maybe the reality will be better.”

“Maybe you just described your whole return trip to the Vineyard,” Chris says and points.

We follow the herd onto the pavement and I try to see what—or whom—Chris is pointing to. Another wave of nausea rushes over me and I grab Chris by the shoulder for support.

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“What?” He grips me back, steadying my wavering.

“I just thought—all of them could be here. Charlie. Jacob. My mother. Gala. She could be here.”

“First of all, how would anyone know you’re here right now? Aren’t you supposedly still in LA? Isn’t that what you told everyone—that you needed more time out there?” I nod. “Second of all, you really think the random triad would wait for you together?”

I shake my head slowly. “No. I just. I need . . .”

“I know what you need,” Chris says.

He’s probably thinking I need to chill out, run around screaming on South Beach until I’m hoarse, or chase away my freak-out with good music, or talk more while licking a black-raspberry ice-cream cone from Mad Martha’s until I have some semblance of clarity. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes. I do.” Chris is adamant and pushes me forward, directly into—

“Dad!” I’m practically smushed into his chest and tilt my head up to see his face.

“Love.” My name is a full sentence to him. He takes my bags, puts his arms around my shoulders, and hugs me. The same kind of hug I’ve had from him since I was little—tight but not smothering, with no patting because he knows I don’t like that. Still hugging, I turn my head so I can see Chris. He’s watching us and nodding, and mimes, “I called

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him for you,” making the universal phone call sign with his thumb and pinky. I nod. Chris did know what I needed—and he backs away into the crowd while I continue to be hugged, buoyed by my dad, rocked by his solidity.

“I didn’t even know I missed you,” I say to him when we have our iced coffees. Dad pulls my car over to the side of the public beach in Oak Bluffs and we walk with our drinks over to the less-populated side where the water is full of reeds.

“Gee, thanks.” Dad sits on a wide flat boulder and pats next to him so I’ll come and sit. Normally I might flinch at this, but right now I willingly sit right next to him. “I missed you.” He offers this as an opening to what we both know is the undercurrent.

I hand Dad my coffee, put my head into my palms, my face getting wet from the condensation that remains on my hands from the cup and my own tears. I cry and cry, the kind where your shoulders heave, your nose runs, and my voice sounds muffled, though Dad miraculously understands every word. “My whole life I never asked for her. Or at least not at the beginning. It was just us, you know? You and me and our pancake mornings. You taking me to kindergarten in those orange pants I insisted on wearing even though they were too long and I tripped in front of the school. You taking pictures of me and Arabella.”

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“Us,” Dad says. “We were quite a team.”

I look up at him, blurry with tears. “We’re not anymore?”

“We are. Or course we are.” Dad takes a long sip from his iced coffee. “But things change. You know that. We’ll always be us. . . .”

“Just different?” I sit up, stretching my back, and take my coffee back, sipping the sweet chill of it until I know what to ask. “So you saw her? I mean, obviously, you saw her. And she’s here and I was of course on the other side of the planet. Or country—but it’s different enough out there to feel like another planet. . . .”

“Love?” Dad raises his eyebrows and waits for me to tame my slurred words.

“Yeah.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about your mother. About Gala.” He shakes his head and stands up, leaving his drink nestled between two rocks. “There was a lot I didn’t know.”

“Like?”

He turns to me, his brow furrowed, the sun highlighting his hair, making it reflect red-gold hues. Maybe my red hair comes from him, too, I think. Mable showed me a photograph of Gala and I know she has red hair, that the lineage of hair tone comes from her—right to Sadie, and onto me. “I always thought she left really suddenly. Out of the blue.” He

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pauses, and I imagine he's right back in their old apartment with an infant me.

"She did, Dad. Mable said she woke up, asked you to give me a bottle, and when you came back she'd already bolted. I'd call that fairly sudden."

"It wasn't exactly like that—true, her actual departure happened really quickly. But in the years since she's gone I've thought a lot about it—and I think a part of me knew it was coming. She was leading up to it the whole time."

"So the fact that my mother—your wife—former wife, that is—oh my god, did you guys ever get a divorce?" The nausea returns, the overwhelming cloud of confusion hovers overhead. "The fact that Gala went poof was a given? Then why didn't you try to stop her?"

Dad comes back over to me and crouches down so we're face-to-face. "That implies I had any ounce of control over her. And I didn't. It was one of the things I liked so much about her—that impulsivity." He smiles, remembering. "She was up for anything—a moment's notice and she'd have a bag ready for Majorca. At eleven o'clock at night she'd perk up at the thought of driving until we ran out of gas, just to see how far we'd get. . . ."

I let myself slouch, ignoring all issues of posture, and wipe my eyes again. It's so sad, thinking about the younger version of my dad that I didn't know, that I'll never know. The

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one who'd never been left, the one who liked impulsiveness. Now he thrives on planning, structure, organization. "And how far did you get?"

"We got to now," Dad sighs. "Look, Love. We have a good life—you and I. Don't we?"

I nod. "We do." I don't insert the "even though you're making me board in the fall" because I don't want to interrupt any info he might tell me about my mom. He's been so secretive about her—or, not secretive, just dismissive—and I want to suck up everything he has to say before I meet her in person.

"Gala went off to have her own life, and we picked up the pieces. It's not like our lives were put on hold and neither was hers. Even though I knew she'd leave—or at least part of me did—I also knew she wouldn't be back."

"But Mable said you waited. For a couple of months."

"Sure—a grace period of sorts. I didn't throw out her papers or move her clothing. It was like a museum to the way things had been. And then—I just admitted it."

"Admitted what?"

"That the past, the life I'd known, was gone. You can try to recreate it—or make a memorial to it—but the truth is that what you once had—once it's gone—you can't ever get it back the same way."

I hear this and what I think is—he's absolutely correct.

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That's what I kept thinking I'd do with Jacob, what I tried to do with Asher after I left London, what I assumed I'd do with my mother—if I ever met her. “So then, what do I do now?”

Dad stands up and raises his voice, putting on his headmaster tone that's usually reserved for assemblies and faculty meetings. “Folks, we have a banner moment! Love Bukowski has asked her father for advice. She wants to know what she should do and—yes, that's right—she wants me to tell her!”

I laugh and flick more condensation water at him. “Come on, Dad. I ask you for your opinion . . . sometimes.” I look at him. “So?”

“So—now you proceed knowing you're not trying to keep everything calm and orderly, you're not trying to hold on to the past. You're making a new future. You'll meet Gala—you'll see what happens. The reality is I saw her very briefly, long enough for her to tell me she wants to see you, and I don't know her any longer. I guess I'll always know parts of her, but I don't know the details of why she's here, other than to meet you.”

“That sounds so weird. I have to meet my mother.” I want to ask for the detail-oriented version of the “brief meeting” my dad had with her. What they said, how he felt when he first laid eyes on her, if she looked the same. But I know from telling my own stories, from sharing details with

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Chris and Arabella, that those items, the concrete of what actually happened, makes it so real it sometimes hurts. And I suspect my dad isn't quite ready to relive that. "And then? After I meet her?"

Dad shrugs. "It becomes part of your life. Part of change. You're still you. You still sing and laugh and notice everything and have Chris and Arabella. You're still going to be a senior with—ahem—college applications and a future ahead of you."

"I know, I know." I nod my head. "But that's what's so bizarre. . . . These things happen, right? Huge things—finding a long-lost relative, or losing Mable, or even getting a boyfriend—which granted is not quite so huge but it's still a big deal. . . ."

"And?" Dad reaches out a hand and pulls me from the rock and toward the car.

"And then you think, well, if such and such would happen, my life would be totally different."

"But it's not."

"No," I say and look out at the ocean. Staring at the waves, I remember Charlie telling me to count them if I ever needed to calm myself down. I've used the technique many times but right now I don't feel the need for it. Instead, buried in the center of the nausea, of the fear of not knowing what's going to happen with Gala, with my romantic

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ruins or revelations, with college, I feel just a small nugget of something else: excitement. “Dad?”

“Yeah?” He shakes his shoes free of sand and looks at me. He checks his watch. “Louisa’s at the farmers’ market in Tisbury. I have to pick her up, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all,” I say, thinking that the market is right near Charlie’s beach cabin. “You can drop me off nearby—I’ll make my own way back. No doubt Slave to the Grind misses my finesse with the milk frother.”

“You don’t want to head right to the cottage?” He pauses, clears his throat, and clarifies. “Her cottage?”

“I know whose cottage it is, Dad. And no, I mean, it’s fine that Gala chose to come all this way to meet me. Even if it was at a totally inconvenient time. But I think if I jump ’cause she says jump—if I just show up because she’s ready—that I’m not going to feel very good about it. I think I need to take care of a couple of other things first. I can see her tonight.” I pause, wondering what else I’ll do tonight—work, or see Charlie. If I’ll bump into Jacob. If Chili Pomroy—the cool soon-to-be-sophomore I’ve become friends with—is around. If Chris is torturing himself by being near Chili’s brother, Haverford, his longtime crush who is otherwise attached.

“Just as long as you don’t put it off forever,” Dad says.

“Are you talking about meeting Gala or doing my college applications?”

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“Both.” Dad slurps the dregs of his drink. “I take it you’re planning on interviewing this fall instead of summer?”

“Nice segue, Dad. But yeah, that’s sort of how it worked out. Lest you think I’m procrastinating, I have been thinking about those essay questions. And about schools. And other ideas.” Dad waits for me to say more, but I give him my look to signal that the subject is—at least temporarily—closed.

We get in the car and I don’t complain about the fact that my dad is driving my car. For once, I enjoy being passengered around the island, looking at the land and sea swishing by, at the families and couples enjoying the sun.

“What were you going to say?” Dad looks at me. “Before—when I interrupted you about getting Louisa.”

I slink my arm out the window, feeling the hot metal of the car door, and stick my head into the breeze like a dog might. “Oh, then? Just . . . thanks.” I turn around, the wind pushing all my hair forward so part gets into my mouth, part in my eyes, part free-flowing. “I’m glad you’re here.” I watch him drive my car—the car that’s already taken me so many different places. Where will I be when the odometer reads 120,000? I’m tempted to ponder the possibilities, but I stop myself. “I’m glad I’m here, too.”

Chapter Three



There's nothing that compares to being kissed by the right boy at the right time. This is the thought that keeps overlapping in my mind after Dad drops me at Charlie's cabin. The red pickup truck is in the driveway, fishing poles and lobster traps in the back, and I assume that at any moment his Love sense will kick in, the front door will open, and he'll rush over (not so much that he looks overly eager, but enough so it's clear he missed me), and plant a kiss directly on my mouth (forgoing the confusing cheek kiss after an absence that makes you question if something happened during the time apart to make the kiss migrate from lips to face). But all of this is under the assumption that Charlie—my Charlie—is in there. I stare at the pickup truck and shake my head at all of my assumptions—that he was a poor fisherman, that he was a local, that he was a typical love 'em and leave kind

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of guy. I curl my hand into a fist and knock on the door, my heart speeding up as I picture him in his blue T-shirt. For some reason, I often associate a person with one specific article of clothing—my dad and his worn-in Harvard shirt, Arabella and a certain strappy, flowy moss-colored dress—even if I’m picturing her in winter, Aunt Mable—even though she exists only in memory now—is always clad in a plain white tank top, and with Charlie it’s his blue T-shirt. So not only have I crafted how he’ll greet me, I realize now, but what he’s wearing, too. Of course, once I’m alone on the steps and knocking for the third time, I wonder if perhaps getting dropped off here was a hasty decision and if, yet again, my assumptions are all wrong.

I reach for my cell phone to call him, but as I do, I think back to being here with Charlie for the first time, how we’d walked on the beach and talked, made out on his porch and by the fireplace. If he were outside now, he wouldn’t hear me. This revelation makes me slip the cell phone back into its nest and get all giddy. He’s here, he’s just outside!

I take off my flip-flops and leave them lined up (pet peeve=leaving my shoes scattered). The wind picks up as I run from the back of the cabin where the driveway and door are around to the front of the building where the porch is, where the beach is, and where Charlie is, blue T-shirt and all, sitting perched on the railing with his back to me. Even

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from this view, he's gorgeous. Before I can stop myself from standing statue still and admiring him from afar, my instincts take over and I realize I don't have to admire from afar any longer. He's mine—or, he is in that way that people feel like they're yours and you can run up to them and show them how much you missed them or how much you like them (or maybe love them?) without editing yourself. All of which I do, first putting my palms flat on Charlie's back, then gripping him around the waist. He flinches with surprise, which makes me—ten points for having a too-high startle response—yelp, which then makes him tense up and turn around. At this point, I completely freak out again—it's surprising when someone moves suddenly—but mainly because . . .

“You're not Charlie!” I yell this with true shock while not-Charlie falls on his butt from the railing.

“No shit.” He stands up, giving me a full view of similar gorgeousness—and identical T-shirt—but no, not Charlie. He watches me watch him and I feel asinine.

“Sorry.” I don't bother explaining that I thought he was Charlie, because this would be redundant and only add to my humiliation. “Sorry to surprise you and sorry to . . .” I stop short of saying “sorry about touching you”—which sounds like Bad Lyrics 101.

“Yeah.”

Emily Franklin

Unlike Charlie, this guy's got one- or two-word answers for everything. Okay. Humiliation begins to fade to annoyance as I wait for him to offer up some explanation. Then I realize that maybe I'm the one who needs to give a reason for showing up here. For all I know, in the couple of days I've been gone, Charlie could have rented his cabin out to a stranger.

"I'm Love—I'm a friend of Charlie's. Charlie Addison?" I end with a question mark, despising how teenage girl I sound, but seriously—what's the deal?

"I figured as much." He shakes out his hand, breaking the conversational ice and stretching out his vocabulary.

"And you are . . ." I do a quick study. He's older—older than I am, older than Charlie, but not by much. I blush, thinking that I had my arms around him—that my boobs brushed against his back.

"I'm Parker."

"Parker Addison?" Cue nod from him and glimmer of clue from me. "Wait—are you the same Parker Addison who went to Hadley Hall? Who changed the color of the assembly room from white to purple overnight and then played 'Deep Purple' while everyone filed in?" Really, how many Parker Addisons could there be—but having myth meet reality is bizarre enough to make me question the guy's identity.

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“Among other rumors,” he says and reclaims his perch on the railing.

“So, are you?”

“I could be.”

I consider telling him about his legendary status among Hadley students and alums—and all the stories that go with him (catapulting from one girls’ dorm to another, creating a zip line from his dorm window to the dining hall, taking the entire junior class of girls to the prom, that sort of thing—and all while getting straight A’s), but I don’t. Something in his demeanor—his ruffled hair, the tone of his voice—suggests a disconnect, maybe from the past, or maybe from everything.

We stand there for a few minutes with only the sound of surf slopping onto the beach to break the silence. “You’re not going to say anything unless I ask, are you?”

“Pretty much,” he says. He lifts a beer from the deck with his feet and brings it to his hands, then sips. He offers it to me without any words, just a tilted bottle as the gesture, and for some weird reason, I accept it.

“I’m not really a drinker,” I say after swallowing and handing the bottle back. “Okay? I don’t even get why people do it, really. It’s fake freedom, an excuse to act without editing, breaking rules, rah-rah and everything, but it’s not really for me.” Did I just say *rah-rah*? Did I leave my mind

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and vocabulary back in California? Parker hands the bottle back to me and I swig. “So, not really much of a drinker—I did, before, and I wound up puking all over this guy I really liked, but then he turned out to be a raging jerk, so while I was totally embarrassed—I mean, shattered—at the time, I’m kind of glad I puked on him now.”

“You might not be much of a drinker, but you’re one hell of a talker.” Parker takes another sip, then hands the rest back to me. I recall another campus legend involving him: Supposedly one hot Sunday evening at dinner, he filled the overly sweet punch pitchers with rum, causing faculty members and students alike to show up soused for the non-denominational chapel service.

I overlook this warning sign as thirst and carelessness in the moment take over and I slide the rest of the beer down my throat. In my belly my body realizes I haven’t had much to eat all day and sends messages to my limbs that alcohol has been ingested. “I do like my words,” I say, putting on a southern accent for no good reason. Well, maybe one good reason: beer.

“Want another?”

I shrug and follow Parker inside, realizing I haven’t yet discerned where Charlie is. I don’t even have true confirmation that Parker is Parker. But in the rush of getting back to the Vineyard, in the haze of maternal mysteries and roman-

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tic entanglements, it feels decent to suddenly go with the flow. Even if the flow is illegal and off the subject. Inside, my eyes begin to adjust to the dimness. I watch Parker in the kitchen and sit on the left side of the window seat. The entire downstairs of the cabin is one room—kitchen at the far end, enormous stone fireplace at the other, and around the whole curve of the main room is a window seat padded with long cushions.

“Here.” He clinks his bottle against mine and watches me drink as though we’ve known each other awhile or as if it’s totally normal to meet someone—your brother’s underage girlfriend—and give her a beer and not say anything else.

“So, it just occurred to me—this isn’t Charlie’s cabin, is it?” I look around the room, my gaze pausing in front of the fireplace where Charlie and I made s’mores and kissed for hours. In my mind we were the only people ever to do that here, but I suddenly get that probably we aren’t the first couple to wind up here after a proverbial walk on the beach. With a sting I realize also that I might not even be the first girl Charlie’s been with here. Not that we’ve “been together” as far as that expression goes. But we could. Or, we’ve been semiclose. Semiclose-ish.

“No,” Parker says, pulling me back to earth. “This isn’t his. He’d like to think so, but it’s not.” An impressive twelve words in a row. Sip. “He’s my brother, yes, I’m *that* Parker

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Addison—and God love him, but he has a way of acting as though anything he touches—anything with which he graces his presence—is his.”

“That’s kind of harsh.” It’s not just that I need to defend Charlie—if I’m truthful, that characteristic, how comfortable Charlie is no matter where he is, is something that draws me to him. I never considered it possessiveness before, more confidence, but maybe Parker’s known him longer and has a different perspective. Does that hold true for me? Am I one of Charlie’s things?

“Harsh but true.”

I chug the rest of my beer, suddenly wanting to be done with it and the conversation. Parker may have an impressive rep at Hadley, but he’s not exactly winning me over with his brotherly love. “I should go.”

“Yeah?”

And we’re back to one-word answers. “Into town, I guess.”

“I thought you were looking for Charles.”

“Charles. That always sounds so weird, so formal. Not at all boaty in the rough-and-tumble fisherman way, only boaty in the ‘I have a one-hundred-foot yacht and wear double-breasted blazers’ kind of way.” The beer hits my body with a rush, causing words to rush out even more than normal. I stand up and feel myself sway just a little.

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“Call me a lightweight, but I think two beers are all it takes. . . .”

“Lightweight.”

“Huh?” I look at him.

“You asked me to call you that—just following orders.”

He stands up, too, seemingly immune to the alcohol consumption, and motions to the front door. “Anyway, Charles Addison is not here, as I stated prior. He is in the area, however—at the big house.”

“He’s in jail?”

“Not that big house—though I wouldn’t put it past him.” Parker walks to the door and I follow. Out the door, down the steps, I wobble while Parker leads me back toward the beach, up a little path, and into thick bushes spotted with blackberries and bramble.

“Oops.” The thorns cut my thighs and I see thin streaks of blood rise to the surface of my skin, but it doesn’t exactly hurt. Thanks, beer. “Anyway, I’m glad to hear Charlie’s not in jail . . . the big house.” My voice trails off.

“Nope—not that big house.” He points to the clearing in front of us. “That big house.”

I’m agog since the sheer size of the structure is tremendous. We keep walking, emerging from the brush onto the top of a sand dune, my back swaying with breeze and beer. “That’s just massive.”

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“Yep.” Parker points to me and then to the house, and I nod. Without further ado, he nudges me down the dune—alone—which is how I wind up running (what else can you do down a steep hill?), and arriving breathless, bloodied, and a bit drunk at the regal entrance to “the big house” where Charlie is just exiting. Contrary to any of my prior images, he is not in a blue T-shirt (in fact, Parker must have actually borrowed it because I recognized the frayed hem) but dressed in a light blue button-down shirt, khakis that at least upon first viewing appear to have been pressed, and—the kicker—loafers. Basically, he looks like the anti-Charlie.

“Charles!” I say as I halt from my running pace. I’ve never called him that before, but what else can you say to someone who looks like they’ve been competing in the World Preppy Competition—and placed. Or won.

“Love!” He takes in my disheveled appearance and then looks over his shoulder at the front door where two people—I’m guessing Mr. and Mrs. Preppy—I mean Addison—are staring at us.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Great, now we’re all reduced to one-word sentences,” I mutter.

“What?” Charlie wrinkles his forehead for a second, then clicks into something and looks up to the dune from which

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I sprinted only moments before. Parker gives an exaggerated wave. “I see you met my brother.”

I nod and wait for the next part of my vision—the mouth to mouth meeting that assures that feelings remained constant while I was away. I wait—swaying just enough to let Charlie know I might have been drinking—but the kiss doesn’t come.

Over refreshments served by the pool, I try to regain some semblance of order while being given the more-than-once over from Charlie’s parents. So far, the drinks are only a tad icier than my reception.

“So, Charles tells us you’re still in high school?” Mrs. Addison asks. Her legs are crossed at the ankle and she’s managed to sip her drink without getting any of her perfectly appropriate lipstick on the glass.

“I do. I am. I’ll be a senior at Hadley this fall.” I figure high school’s a topic that’s safe, and I leave off the “Hall” from Hadley’s name on purpose, to show just how familiar I am with life there, with that world. It’s as though somehow the fact that I attend the same school that their son did connotes something. That I’m worthy? Then I despise the fact that they’ve made me feel insecure enough to flaunt my prep-school status.

Mrs. Addison nods while Mr. Addison sits back in his

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chair, looking into the distance as though an interesting game of tennis is being played on the lawn. Both he and his wife are the essence of Vineyard style—she’s decked out in a white linen shirt that miraculously never wrinkles and a pair of black trousers that don’t seem heavy despite the fact that I’m sweating in my shorts and sloppy summer top, while he’s in a white polo shirt that offsets his tanned arms and a pair of khaki shorts. From the outside, they appear placid and genteel. From my point of view this is slightly misleading. But maybe I’m being too sensitive due to my fading buzz and oncoming headache.

“Parker excelled at Hadley,” Mr. Addison says. “I trust you’re finding it a challenge?”

It’s this type of comment that I don’t know how to interpret. Is he merely making conversation—as in prep school’s a challenge—or is he saying that though his super-smart, socially elevated son excelled at Hadley, I—as the dim and disheveled girl who appeared at their door unannounced—must find it a challenge? So I give something equally ambiguous. “I’ve really grown there. We’re a good match.”

Charlie takes a drink when I say this, his eyes flickering over his glass at me. Are we a good match, too? “Love’s doing really well at Hadley. They’re lucky to have her.”

Mrs. Addison smiles without showing her teeth. “Was that the only school you applied to? I remember your

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interview there, Charles.” She raises her eyebrows and Charlie nods, not offering any other info about this. “And Parker . . .” She turns to look at Parker who sits at the far end of the pool doing the *New York Times* crossword and generally ignoring our group presence. “Parker breezed through.”

I sip my lemonade and rest the cold glass on my knee. I’m not wearing sunscreen and I can feel my skin reacting to the hot sun—I’ll achieve perma-blush soon. “I didn’t, um, actually interview.”

Mr. Addison’s face registers a look of being impressed, the corners of his mouth downturned, his eyes wide. “Well, now—she’s got you beat there, Parker!” He raises his voice so Parker can hear, though he shows no sign of caring.

Charlie explains, “Parker interviewed like everyone else does, but his records and personality were such a winning combination that they never made him file an application.”

“And Mike went to Exeter?” I bring up the sibling who isn’t present, Charlie’s sister Mikayla.

“Mikayla . . .” Mrs. Addison sighs as she refills my glass without asking if I’d care for more.

“Well, she graduated.” Mr. Addison says this so it’s clear we all understand the diploma could very well not have been given.

“Mike’s great,” Charlie says. Then to me he adds, “She’s off-island right now. In New York.”

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I think I'm done with the first encounter of meet the parents when Mrs. Addison stands up. Still unwrinkled, she gives a mere toss of her chin-length coiffed blond-white hair and Parker appears. Charlie shakes his head, then stops once he notices his father looking. "Parker and I are playing doubles today at the club." The comment enters the air for everyone's—or no one's—benefit.

Charlie purses his lips. He's different, subdued, as though he's blocked a certain part of himself here. "Have fun."

"And you, Charles?" Mr. Addison places his glass on the tray where it drips condensation.

Charlie doesn't look my way and it hits me that I feel like an intruder. They've been pleasant, of course—what else does one do in polite company but offer the random girl a lemonade on a hot day—but not welcoming. Not that I expected an embrace or anything, but a little curiosity aside from my school application would be nice. With a shudder I realize I never clarified why I didn't interview at Hadley—not because my records were so stellar like they now suspect—but because of my dad. Something tells me they'd be even less impressed if they knew I didn't get in on my own merits. Not that I haven't been succeeding of my own accord there.

"I have work," Charlie says. I fight a smile, thinking of him at the docks, where I first met him—how at ease he is

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by the water. How much fun we have together—enough so that even cleaning his boat is exciting.

I try to act lively, realizing the beer and the nerves have kept me from being my usual warm self. Just because they're slightly cold doesn't mean I have to be, right? "Are you going to the docks? What's the catch of the day?" I put my hand on Charlie's arm, enjoying the heat from his skin until he makes absolutely no move to touch me back. He doesn't go so far as to remove my hand from his forearm, but he doesn't register my touch at all.

Charlie stands up and looks at his parents and then to the house. "No. Not the docks." He looks at me, finally, his eyebrows raised so he looks just like his mother. "I'm done with all that."

All that? Like the ocean, the job he's had for a year, the rugged lifestyle he embraced is summed up as *all that*? "Oh." Here I am back to one-word sentences. Maybe that's why Parker says so little—there's not a lot of room for anything else, despite the high square footage count.

Charlie nods. "With classes starting in late August I have only a few weeks to make up for lost time."

Mr. Addison nods, concurring with his body as well as his words. "Charles is making great headway." He makes it sound as though Charlie is a yacht conquering the seas. "And you? Have you picked a place?"

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For a second I don't know what he's talking about—then I realize he means college, as though choosing one and getting accepted are as simple as picking a restaurant for dinner. "I'm not quite sure. . . ." I pause and look at the other people around me. In each pair of eyes I sense that I'm not supposed to offer up my true feelings, but that there's a correct answer. "I'm thinking about staying in the Northeast. . . ." This comes out of my mouth before I can rein the words back in. Maybe my psyche knows more than I thought.

"Whereabouts?" Mrs. Addison collects all of the glasses and holds the tray, unwavering, in her hands.

I swallow. The truth is that I have no idea. But this isn't what they're looking for in their son's girlfriend. So rather than complicating everything further, I just spit it out. "Harvard, maybe?"

Mr. Addison smiles fully for the first time since I've met him. "Good girl!" He's so thrilled that I feel excited, too, even though it's not real and he called me good girl, which sounds like praise meant for a retriever. I smile back, feeling fraudulent and idiotic while he goes on. "Mikayla went the city route but the boys know that the gods' honest truth is that the Crimson still reigns supreme. Not to mention there's the legacy to consider."

"My dad went there," I offer and it sounds like an apology, or like I'm trying to prove something.

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“Fantastic choice.” Mr. Addison nods. I nod back. Oh, like all I have to do is say I want to go to Harvard and—boom—I’m in. Thanks—thanks so much—the college process really was a breeze! I’m practically choking on the tightness of the air.

“I’ll see you for dinner,” Charlie says, giving a rather official nod to his parents and to Parker. Charlie and his brother exchange a look that means something but what exactly I don’t know.

I stand up and wonder how I’m going to get back to town. It would be easy to exist in a bubble out here, forget my life at the café, the life that’s waiting for me. At least, it would be easy if the Addisons welcomed me with open arms. But with Mrs. Addison pretending not to notice my unkempt hair, my scratched-up and now-enflamed skin, my unworthy last name (read: The Bukowski clan did not come over on the *Mayflower*—we do not have entire buildings named after us), leaving sounds good.

“Well, thanks very much for having me. Especially spur-of-the-moment.” I feel like doing a curtsy as though I have an audience with the queen, but I don’t. Instead I try to memorize all of the details I can so I can report back to Chris with accuracy—the cylindrical glasses, Parker’s effortless but domineering presence, Charlie’s . . . what—his apathy? Not just that. The veil that’s been drawn over him.

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With a jolt of worry it dawns on me that this person—the guy who sits and says little, the gorgeous but ineffectual one who defended me but in a way that made it clear I had to be defended—might be the normal Charlie. The person he was before he dropped out of Harvard and became an island-bound fisherman in touch with the sea and himself.

“A pleasure to meet you, Love.” Mrs. Addison shakes my hand.

“We’ll see you again soon?” Mr. Addison shakes my hand and looks at Charlie. “The Silver and White dinner?” Charlie’s lips go in clench mode again and he nods, so Mr. Addison looks back to me. “Silver and White, then.”

“Lovely,” Mrs. Addison says and without another word, whisks her firstborn, Parker, into the cavernous house to change for tennis.

Silver and White? Harvard? What? The whole interaction at the Addison abode feels foreign and filled with confusing ideas and issues, which is what happens, I guess, when so much is left unsaid. This reminds me of how Charlie was all that time in between our first getting together the fall of my sophomore year, and the incommunicado period that happened afterward. He never said what really happened when I thought he’d stood me up; he never cleared up my assumption that he was a local fisherman rather than a Harvard castoff taking a break from the moneyed set. Only

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when directly asked by me this summer were all of those mysteries unraveled. Just like Parker, he speaks only when directly confronted. Maybe that's the Addison way—this casual air of elegance that appears very easy when in fact it's all a cover.

Chapter Four



"So?" In the passenger seat of Charlie's red pickup, bouncing along the sand-edged roads on the way back into Edgartown, I can almost shrug off the weirdness we left behind at his parents' house.

He sighs, one arm resting on the open window, the other steering. Meaning, no arm for me. "So . . . now you see it."

I turn so I'm facing him. Even though he's got eyes on the road and hands to himself and the car, I can at least attempt some closeness. Isn't this the same guy who called me right away after I went to LA? Who kept saying how much he missed me? "Now I see what?" I wait. "Charlie?"

Without warning or signaling, he pulls the truck over to the right side of the road, putting the gears in park before answering me. "I am so sorry, Love." The visor, which has a habit of falling down, does, and Charlie whips it into place

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with more vengeance than befits the action. “Man. They’re incredible, aren’t they? Two minutes back in their clutches and I’m like a friggin’ droid.”

I lick my lips and pivot so my back is nearly resting on the passenger-side door, stretching the seat belt until I figure we’re parked and just undo it. “You weren’t that bad.”

Charlie finally looks at me directly. “That bad? Thanks.”

“Hey—you were the one who suggested it,” I say and then let loose. “I haven’t even gotten so much as a hug from you and I came all the way back from LA only to be greeted by Mr. Cold and Unemotional—a vastly different species from the person who called me every two seconds while I was gone. Not to mention having to contend with your parents—who—and this might not come as a huge shock-surprise—are not the most comforting of creatures.” I get all of this out in one breath and feel an immediate release.

Charlie laughs half out his nose and then lets the sound out of his mouth. “See? There’s my Love. Where were you for the past hour and a half during that stifled lemonade?”

“Where was I?” I raise my eyebrows and smooth my hair, then twist it back on itself so it stays in a bun. “Where were you? I at least have the excuse of never having met your parents—or Parker, for that matter—but you . . .”

“Yeah, I live there,” Charlie says in a clipped and sarcastic

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tone that would be funny if it weren't so pointed. "So—the Fourth of July dinner, right?" I nod. "I make my announcement about going back to school. I swear, the reaction from my parents was like I'd been critically ill and then suddenly in remission. . . ."

Charlie looks at me right after he says this and then blushes. Comparing his former student status to being sick might be truthful but it doesn't hit me well—my aunt's death from breast cancer is still too recent, too raw, for me to appreciate the comparison. "Sorry."

I shake my head. "It's okay."

"Anyway, my point is . . . they're basically all about appearances. My parents love that I'm going back to school. Another Harvard boy—"

"What about Parker?"

"What about him?" Charlie asks. "He sets the gold standard and I'm doomed to follow in his footsteps. Mikayla gets off without the familial duty because she's a girl—and my parents have lower standards for her. Pathetic, but true."

"God, it sounds awful," I say, my mouth grimacing as though I've tasted something rotten. "Mikayla isn't subject to scrutiny because of her gender?"

"No—she's totally subjected to it, just a different kind. My mother attacks the way Mikayla looks, whom she dates, her clothes—and Parker gets off scot-free; he always has.

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Even when we were kids, he'd do something wrong—break a glass, drink my father's scotch, throw a party at their house—and I'd somehow get blamed."

I reach out and touch Charlie's arm again and this time he responds taking my hands in his. Feeling his skin on mine brings a wash of warmth over me and for the first time since seeing him again, I feel connected. "I missed this." I squeeze his palms.

"I missed this." Charlie slips an arm around my back, pulling me into him, and places the other on the back of my head, holding me at an angle while kissing me. The kind of kiss they do in movies when a sailor is shipping out to sea for a year.

"So," I say when we pause the kissing.

"So, what was the deal with you and the beer?" Charlie gives me a quizzical look.

My hand flies to my mouth. "Was it that obvious?"

Charlie's lips cover his teeth and he nods. "Um, yeah."

"Do you think your parents knew?"

"Yep."

I tuck and retuck strands of my hair that have freed themselves of the bun. "Great. Now they think I'm a lush as well as undeserving of you. . . ."

"No. They don't think that at all. They're not stupid—they saw you with Parker. They know what he's like. . . ." Charlie

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thinks of something, then looks at me, his eyes flashing from amused to concerned. “Why were you with him?”

From his mouth, his expression, I gather that Charlie isn’t concerned about the beer, more that I was with Parker. “Are you asking if . . .” I hope my voice conveys the unlikelihood of what I think Charlie means.

“So . . . the first thing you should know is that, despite the fact that I’m always getting blame for whatever crap Parker pulls, he’s incredibly competitive with me.”

I nod, still enjoying the feel of Charlie’s arms around me, but going cross-eyed from talking and looking at him so close. I push back a little but lace my fingers with his. “It was embarrassing—I showed up at your cottage. . . . I mean, your parents’ cottage, and thought he was you. . . .” Charlie clearly doesn’t like that I mixed up my boyfriend with his ultracompetitive brother. “But of course, you’re far better looking and intelligent. . . .” I counter Charlie’s frown with some humor and it works.

“And the beer? Just the inevitably bad Parker influence? It’s so typical—he’s that guy—like his persona at Hadley—the one who’s so laid-back you forget he has an agenda. . . .”

“He’s not evil, is he?”

“No—it’s not that bad. It’s more like, he’s magnetic, you know? Everyone loves him—friends, girls, guys; even my

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stoic parents crumble around him. You don't know what it's like with siblings. . . ."

I push farther away this time, reclaiming my limbs. "Actually, I don't. But I will. Probably . . ."

Charlie's mouth drops open. "You mean your dad's having another kid?"

I make a face. "No! I mean, I guess he could although I never thought of that—and I'm not sure I could handle any other big news at this point. . . ."

"Why, what other big, exciting things are happening?" Charlie looks at me and waits. "Are you really going to Harvard?"

I shake my head. "You know you just sounded totally like your parents, right? You ask me this wide-open question and then answer it in your own way—"

"Oh, man. Just put me out of my misery now. . . ." Charlie starts up the truck, and has to turn the key twice to make the engine turn over.

"You'd think with a house like that, your parents might opt to fix the work truck. . . ."

Charlie shakes his head, the sunlight catching the ends of his hair through the open window. He has a standard prep school guy cut—short on the back and sides, longer on the top, but it's grown out now, not to the point of being shaggy, but long enough to convey images of summer fishing, of

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relaxing in a way I realize he won't be for long. "They'd never put money into this heap." He pats the seat. "That's the whole thing, isn't?"

I nod, understanding what he means. "Yeah—money into a car is so new money, right?" He nods and turns the large wheel so we're back on the road. "Your whole family—and I hope this doesn't sound too overgeneralized, but it will—is the embodiment of WASP upper-class prepster." I think back to the scene by the pool. "There's no actual ill will toward me, only a gentle not-so-subtle digging into my background."

"Yeah, well, to them—sameness is good, you know? It's like you went to Hadley and didn't interview, which overlaps with their good son, Parker, and then Harvard, which is still the golden ticket. . . ."

I sigh and look out the window at the greenery—summer is reaching its peak, with all the blooms and dark leaves, the high grass and thick air. It feels like a roller coaster, and I know when we reach Illumination Night it will feel like I've hit the apex, and the quick ride to the bottom will carry me faster than ever to fall. "I hate that I caved like that."

"Like what?" Charlie takes a right on the road that will lead us straight to Edgartown center and looks at me as he turns.

"In the course of a few minutes I went from being me—

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to being this girl who overemphasizes Hadley or plucks Harvard out of the heap of colleges just because . . ." I pause.

"Because you thought it was an in. I get it. We all do it."

"But I don't," I say and look at him seriously. "I'm not that person. Or don't want to be. I mean, really, did you notice me because I was just like everyone else? Are you drawn to me because I fit in seamlessly?"

Charlie shakes his head. "No. Definitely not. But at the same time . . .," he sighs and chews on his upper lip. I think about his lips, studying the way the top one forms a soft, cursive M shape, thinking about the times they've touched mine, and wondering where all of those times will lead. "I've made my decision, and my parents are supporting me for the first time in a long while."

"So you're going back to Harvard for them?" We're closer to town now, emerging from the bubble of being together, and my heart starts to pound with a different rhythm than the way it did when Charlie finally kissed me. In my chest, that organ beats out feelings of nervousness since I don't know quite what to expect at Slave to the Grind II when I get there. But it also registers contentment—being in a place I love with a boy I really, really like.

"I'm going back for me, but the fact that it pleases them—that doesn't hurt, either."

The traffic merges at the busy island that forks off to Oak

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Bluffs where Chili and Haverford Pomroy live. I imagine Chris there, pining for Haverford—or maybe seeing him again and knowing he’s taken will lessen the attraction. It could go either way—you see someone you can’t have and you feel nada, or you see them and feel everything.

“It makes sense—of course it feels reassuring to have your parents’ approval.”

“And funding,” Charlie adds. “I got by just fine working—but . . .” He steps on the brake as we wait out the incredibly slow last portion of the drive. “It’s not my intention to go back to being the way I was pre-year off.” He avoids looking at me, instead focusing on an imaginary mark up ahead. “I was an asshole, pretty much.”

“I’m so glad I didn’t meet you then.”

“Why, you don’t have interest in jerks?”

“No—not just that. I think I have a hard time seeing people for other than what they are when I first know them. It was difficult enough to get past you ditching me at the diner that time. . . .” I bite my lip remembering how much that hurt, how relieved I was to find out he didn’t show up because he was rescuing his sister. “It’s something I need to work on, I guess. If I met you in your asshole phase, I might never have seen you for anything else.”

“But now you see the real me,” Charlie says. “Right?”

I nod. The real Charlie is the one I met on the docks, the

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one who wasn't Ivy League-driven, who wasn't concerned that his pockets were empty. "I do. . . . Only—you were a little . . ."

"What?" He presses the gas and we lurch forward, only to stop again by the supermarket.

"Off—you were kind of off around your parents."

"Was I?" Charlie shrugs. "I didn't notice it—but it's entirely possible. I had you and your drunken scratches. . . ." He leans over and traces one of the bramble marks on my thigh, his finger leaving tingles up my leg. "You were a distraction and—you did show up out of the blue."

"So I'm to blame for your weirdness?" I say it half-joking, half not, and wait for his response.

"I'm still getting used to being back in favor with the other Addisons. Mikayla—she never cared. She's always cool. But everyone else . . . they shut you out, you know? You do something other than what's expected of you and it's not just the money that disappears." He looks at me. "Everything else does, too."

"Well, I'm not like that." I offer this not only to placate him, but to show him I'm there for him no matter what path he chooses. "I don't care if you're a lawyer, a professional clown, or a mechanic."

Charlie laughs. "I love that you specified *professional clown*, like if I were just an amateur clown that wouldn't be okay."

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I cross my arms over my chest, faux-official. “A girl’s got to have her standards.” We laugh and the traffic finally gives way. We pass the pizza place, the fish market, and the road to the beach, and my pulse races more. I swallow. “Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“A lot happened in LA,” I say.

He blushes. “How lame am I for not diving right into that barrel? My selfish behavior is only indicative of wanting to straighten things out with you—and with my family.” He looks at me as he drives the truck into the center of Edgartown, pulling into a loading space in front of the Whaling Church. It’s a popular location for weddings, and there’ve been many times I’ve ended a shift at the café and walked onto the brick sidewalk for some fresh air to find I have a view of other people’s happiness—the bride and her attendants, little girls in dresses. I’m not someone who spends any time fantasizing about a wedding—it’s just not that big a thing to me (I do think about the partnership, the marriage, but the actual wedding doesn’t occupy my thoughts). But seeing it here, in this special place, does make me smile. Today, though, the church is devoid of people, the sunlight changing, and my boyfriend waits for me to speak.

“I don’t know where to start.” I look at him and unbuckle my seat belt.

He stays strapped in, clearly not joining me at Slave, and

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puts his hand on my shoulder. “That’s just how I started my speech to my parents when I told them about going back to Cambridge.”

“Oh my god—do not be one of those people who says they ‘go to college in Cambridge.’” I put air quotes around the phrase. “It’s like ‘I go to school in New Haven.’ Oh, really, what school might that be? We all know it’s Yale. . . .”

Charlie gives a small laugh. “I will try not to fall prey to those stereotypical behaviors. Anyway . . . about the Silver and White?”

“Are you asking me?”

“Officially.”

I nod. “I never thought I’d know people who go to that, let alone be asked . . . but yes. Officially.” The Silver and White is the island’s premier summer closer event. Airy open tents are erected oceanside on Squibnocket Point, and the Vineyard elite mingle with the wealthy and wonderful—some of whom don’t summer here, but simply fly in for the event. For others who do spend several months of the year, the glittering silver and white colors are the first signal that the autumnal orange and reds are around the corner. They literally pack up the next day and leave the island before the grounds crew has rolled up the tents and put away the sterling silver-rimmed plates. The fact that I’ll have nothing to wear to this event is the least of my

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concerns—first I have to come to terms with the image of going in the first place.

In the sticky heat of the pickup, I feel lucky to be with Charlie. Glad he's open to talking about the future and his family, and only a tiny bit concerned that he didn't know he was being aloof and distant around the pool at his parents'.

"I have to write a paper," Charlie says and laughs. "A paper! Haven't done that in a while. . . . It might take some time—and it's due on Monday."

"Translation being: Don't freak out if I'm incommunicado this weekend?"

He nods and smiles. His eyes travel from mine to my lips and I can't help but mirror the gesture, focusing again on his mouth. He hasn't grinned from the side of it yet—and I wrinkle my forehead trying to figure that out. Doesn't Charlie do that? Doesn't his mouth curl up on one side when he's made a funny remark? I reach forward and twist his lips with my fingers, laughing while I do it.

"Whatthehell?" He says the words smooched together while I play with his mouth.

"Nothing," I say. "I just couldn't remember a certain expression."

"Was it this?" Charlie twists his mouth. I shake my head. "Was it this?" He sticks out his tongue. Another head shake. "Was it this?" Charlie swoops in, grabs me, and right here—

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in the middle of Edgartown, in a no parking zone, where brides say their *I dos*—we kiss.

A few minutes later, I'm out of the truck. I walk around and stand on tiptoe so I can lean into the driver's-side window and kiss him again. A quick one—before we get carried away again. Just how far carried away will I get with him, I wonder as we do the good-bye peck. Will he be that one—the one you remember forever? A flash of writing letters to Jacob comes back to me—how he asked me my thoughts on virginity. What if Charlie is the one? This freaks me out for a second, so I quickly pull back and position my whole self back on the sidewalk.

“What?” He drums his fingers on the oversized wheel and tilts his head. Still no side-grin. Maybe it's a gesture he left back with his lobster traps and fishing gear.

“Nothing.”

“So, you're going to keep me in the dark about LA?”

I open my mouth and take a big breath. “I'm still in the dark, I think. So until I know more . . .” I don't want to spill out all the info the way I did to Chris. It's as though if I tell it too much, it won't mean the same thing. I don't want to keep the fact that I have a half sister a secret, and I don't mean to hide that my biological mother is here—right here, on this island, perhaps in the corner chair—the one with the purple cushion—at Slave to the Grind II at this very mo-

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ment, but I don't want to share it yet. And I sure as hell want to avoid the who-is-Jacob conversation with Charlie for a while longer, too. I mean, I don't even know who Jacob is to me anymore, so I can't very well explain him to Charlie.

"I understand. I'll know when I need to know."

"Hey—Mable used to say that," I say and smile. I miss her every day, my aunt, but her words have stuck with me like a continual loop I can rely on. The easiness of being with him fights with the part of me that comprehends that my mother could be waiting down the street. That if she's not at the café right now, she could be in an hour. If not, I know where her cottage is and I can just show up when I'm ready.

"I know she did," Charlie says. He sticks his hand out the window and I reach for it. His fingers slip easily in between mine. "It's so hard to back away from you."

Charlie stares at me. "Good."

For once, the one-word sentence suits the moment perfectly, and I repeat it and replay his look while I walk the few blocks back home.

Chapter Five



"You seem to have settled back into the flow," Chili says after she's placed her order for a mocha-latte frappé.

I make the blended drink, and nod. "Not like I was gone long."

"Long enough, right?" Chili shakes her head in wonder. "How are you not imploding from all that info?" I switch the blender on and read her lips while the noise blocks out the sound. I can't make out everything, but my smile fades as soon as I make out the words *total bitch*. Not because I dread those words, but I know they can mean only one thing:

"Lindsay Parrish?" I stick my tongue out for a second and then see Doug and Ula, the café's new owners/managers, shoot me a look. They're busy making plans for the unveiling of the new sign out front, a sort of grand reopening opening for here and the café in Boston next week. After

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that, both places will be called Mable's. Slave to the Grind will cease to exist.

Chili sucks on her straw and then presses her hand to her forehead. "Ah, brain freeze. And yes, Lindsay. She was here—gasp—"

I act out the gasp as Chili says the word. "Here?"

"On *your* island, I know—the nerve." Chili laughs and raises one eyebrow. I can do that, too, and we both do it now until I have to get someone else's order and she trots back to the coffee station so we can keep talking.

"She came in for the fourth," Chili explains.

It hits me. "Don't tell me she ferried in for Henry Randall's party. . . ."

"Um, don't you mean his dad's party? But yeah, she came in just for one night and she flew, FYI."

"Of course she did." I steam milk and then pour the airiness onto the top of a cappuccino. Someday I will go to Italy and drink truly Italian cappuccino. I will eat croissants in France and I will experience pad thai as served on the street in Thailand. This swirl of countries all disappears after I serve the drink.

Chili leans on the counter and I plate a cookie for her. We share it—me sneaking bites while Doug and Ula have their backs turned and Chili gives me the lowdown. "You didn't miss much." She looks at me. "And don't give me that

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expression—yeah, I went to the party. It was fun, actually. Or, it would have been almost enjoyable if Little Pony hadn't showed up."

When she visited school this spring and saw for herself the hurricane that is Lindsay, Chili started inventing other names that go with the initials L and P. Little Pony. Lame Princess. Lost Preppy. "But what was the purpose of her visit?" I have that sick feeling of needing to know everything I can about Lindsay while despising her.

"I'm not a customs agent, Love," Chili says. "But I imagine her reasons for visiting the island are pleasure. Or—no—make that business and pleasure."

"I cannot believe I have to deal with her on a daily basis in a month."

"Well, I get the feeling she's not thrilled about seeing you that much, either. She tried to corner Haverford and ask him where you were. Like he knew."

"Why would she care?" I make a face and shrug. "The girl needs to get a job. Then maybe she wouldn't have so much spare time to plot her evil. . . . Then again, I have a job and it doesn't stop me from all my ramblings. . . ."

"You can't compare Lindsay's malevolent social dealings with your familial and romantic intrigue." Chili bites the last of the cookie and speaks with her mouth full. I smile at her, filled with relief that she'll be at school with

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me in the fall—with Arabella going back to London, she and Chris are probably the closest friends I have. “Speaking of which . . . have you . . .” She doesn’t complete the sentence.

“No.”

“When will you?”

I probe my mouth for cookie crumbs and make sure there’s nothing in my front teeth—nothing like trying to serve the public with food remnants. “Today,” I say, the reality of the statement hitting me as I say it.

“Really?” Chili clenches her fists and her eyes widen.

I nod. “I’m ready, I think. Or, as prepared as I can be.” I wipe the counter, washing away all the drinks that rested on it this afternoon, leaving the marble free of debris. “Today’s the day I’m going to finally meet my mother.”

After lunch by the docks with Chris, after hearing about his still-unrequited crush on Haverford Pomroy, my stomach is full of fried food and the rest of me is consumed with fear. What if she’s mean? Or what if we have nothing to talk about? In my mind, my mother has a sort of amoebic form—sometimes similar to Aunt Mable, with a quick wit and natural affinity for all things music-related—and other times an amalgam of mothers I’ve seen in movies and on TV, retro hairstyle and apron along with a matronly voice telling

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me I need to work hard on my studies and not let a boy go all the way. Not that I need that advice—although, given the way things are going with Charlie, perhaps it's more relevant than it once was.

As I walk from the waterside past the art galleries with their large canvases of hazy baseball fields and boats, past the candy store, and the seafood shack, I realize that both images of my mother are obviously wrong. Or, more than that, they're direct fodder from my psyche. I want her to be one way—cool and relatable like Mable was—or so clichéd I don't have to take her seriously. Mosquitoes peck at my legs and I lean down to slap them, crouching on the bricks inlaid to make the sidewalk. Just like cobblestones, these bricks served to keep the huge shipping schooners balanced in the days when Edgartown thrived as a whaling village. Each brick is part of a greater pattern, wedged in just so to form something solid I can stand on. People are like this, too. Maybe Gala isn't so much one thing or the other, but a whole array of emotions, experiences, and characteristics I have yet to encounter. I wouldn't want my mother to receive a summary of me on paper the way I tried to neatly package her, so I try—in the last few minutes before meeting her—to stop boxing Gala in with imaginary descriptions. This is exactly what colleges do: Judge you by paperwork—grades, scores, recommendations, essays, and

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maybe an interview. And I don't want to do that to her. I don't want it done to me.

As I decide this, I feel less of a gaping hole where she should have been my whole life—a hole I didn't ever pay attention to until this past year, really—and in its place, a buoyant solid. The best part of not meeting someone yet is the newness, the unpaved road ahead with them. Nothing has happened yet, so it's not bad feelings, just unfeelings.

I smile and take a deep breath, proud of my maturity and calm. Then I get about a foot away from the steep stairs that lead to the cottage—her cottage, where I stayed with Mable and Arabella—when it hits me. It's not unpaved, this road with Gala. It was paved a long time ago. Way back when she left. So I suddenly feel stupid and scared all over again—not to mention pissed off with her and with myself. How could I overlook that fact?

Maybe, I realize as I force myself up the first step, it's because I need to.

At the door, I take one last mother-free breath and knock. The moments afterward seem to stretch out endlessly as I wait for the sound of footsteps, or a voice that is both unrecognizable and familiar. But I hear nothing. Would it be wrong to open the door? It's not my house, but I feel personally connected to the place. I figure that if Gala has come all this way from California to meet me as my dad said,

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if she's waited while I get my nerve up, then she won't care if I let myself in. She could be in the bathroom or using a hair dryer or blender and not hear the knocking. The old me, someone I was maybe sophomore year, might have accepted no response, but I'm older now. More resilient. I reach for the brass knob, turn it, and am not at all surprised to find it unlocked.

Chapter Six



Inside, everything is the way it was when I was last here with Mable. It was her last time on the Vineyard before her death, and a wave of sadness brushes up, lapping at my feet. But it doesn't crash. I guess that's what happens with loss: First you're drowning in it; then you're swimming, until finally the waters recede and you're sitting there on a regular beach, with waves and surf kicking up every so often.

"Hello?" My voice comes out of my body in a way that makes me feel like an actor reading rehearsed lines. Nerves. Crazy whirlwind of feelings. I try again. "Hi! Um, I'm here—hello?"

I don't know quite what I expect, but silence isn't it. It's like those moments in a movie where you're waiting for something to jump out of the closet—each second clicking past increases my pulse. In the kitchen, the dishes are on the

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drying rack—a single cereal bowl and coffee mug. I take this in as evidence. She's here alone.

"Gala?"

I can't shout *Mom* to her—that would be just plain odd—it's not a word I've uttered much and I'm not starting upon first meeting.

"Love."

Prickles of surprise ripple from my neck down my arms. I turn around. "Dad?"

"Hi, sweetheart." He looks at me with the same gaze he had when our dog got put to sleep. I was in third grade then and came home from school to find the dog bed empty, Chocolate's bowl of food untouched. He'd been hit by a car and was in so much pain, Dad had him put to sleep. I never even got a chance to say good-bye.

"What happened?" I rest my palms on the counter. The surface is old, chopping-block wood you have to oil so it doesn't crack. Mable taught me that. She also taught me where the rags and cleaning products are—in a small otherwise fairly useless space to the left of the fridge. I go there now, claim a clean cloth, and bring it over with the bottle of oil, to the counter.

"She's not here. Love?"

"Uh-huh." I sponge clean the counter, dry it, then set to work. First you douse the top with oil—not so much that it

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puddles, just enough to spread a sheen over the entire thing, including the sides. I rub hard, putting my shoulders into it.

“She’s not here.”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding as the wood drinks in the moisture. “I’m getting that feeling.”

“So I came. . . .”

I stop and look up. “You came to rescue me. Again.” I swipe at the counter, checking in the light to see if I’ve missed any spots. “You can’t keep it up, Dad.”

“What do you mean?” He rakes his hands through his thinning hair. Louisa has encouraged him to keep the top a little longer, which suits him. Now he looks like all the other boys on campus, only the sides of his hair are flecked with silvery gray. Gala’s never seen him with anything other than deep brown hair. I wonder what it would be like to see someone after so long. To see me as anything other than an infant.

“Did you send her pictures?” I look at him. “Of me, I mean?”

Dad shakes his head while he answers. “No. I think I told you I have no contact with her. Zero.” He pauses, pressing a fingertip into the counter and feeling the slick of oil.

“It’s not supposed to be so slippery,” I say and wipe at it again. “I put too much on.”

“It’s not supposed to be like this at all,” Dad says. He

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looks at the counter and then at me. “I didn’t come to save you. I came to tell you. . . . Okay, maybe I did want to save you. But not from her. I can’t do that. One person can’t control another person’s actions.”

“You’re doing it,” I say and he knows just what I mean. I loathe when he brings his job home—when he uses headmaster speak to talk normally with me.

“Sorry. But you know what? Being a headmaster is part of me. It’s part of my identity. You’ll learn that what you do—your job or career or occupation, whatever you call it, leaks in. Or maybe who you are leaks over to the job side.”

“You’re losing me here, Dad.” I hold the rag in my hands, surveying the kitchen and the living room for signs of life. The shades are drawn.

“She left.” Dad’s voice is big, almost like the stage voice I used when I first shouted hello.

“Left the cottage or left—” I catch Dad’s glance. “Oh. She’s gone, you mean.”

“Left. Gone. What’s the difference?” His shoulders slump. “She’s a producer—that’s what she does. She finds talent, slicks it onto a record. . . . Maybe that’s making light of her job. She’s good at it, I know. Successful. I guess what I’m getting at is that once a record is complete, it’s over. At least her part of it. She doesn’t tour, she doesn’t travel with the band selling T-shirts.”

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“So you’re saying her job is segmented.”

“Yes. I’ve thought a lot about her—Gala.” He says her name and I can tell from his tone how long it’s taken the ocean of sadness he had surrounding his breakup with her—or his desertion—to recede. “She’s a leaver.”

“It seems like she stuck it out in LA,” I say. “I’m not trying to defend her, but I’m just saying. She clearly jumped ship with us, but it’s not like she changed jobs every two seconds or lived in a motor home.”

Dad rubs his eye and yawns. This is probably more taxing on him than I can imagine—his own past whipping him in the face, plus his daughter’s heart on the line.

“I can’t judge her life now. You’re right. My mistake. All I can tell you is that it’s my belief that once someone proves to you that they can—and will—leave you, they will do it again.”

Suddenly I get it. Possibility springs up. “Wait a minute.” I watch his face for signs he knows I’m onto him. “You saw her again, didn’t you?” Dad puts his lips together like he’s going to whistle, but no sound comes out.

“What do you mean?”

“After. After she left that first time.” I step forward toward him. “She came back?”

Dad clears his throat as though that will distract me from uncovering the unsaid part of the past. “It’s complicated.”

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“Well,” I say matter-of-factly, “my shift’s over, I’ve had lunch, and apparently I have nothing on my social calendar, so I’m all ears.”

Dad sits down next to me so we’re side-by-side at the counter on stools that belong in a diner circa *Grease*. We don’t look at one another; we just rest our elbows on the wood and stare at the sink, the drying rack, the fruit bowl filled with peaches, plums, and mottled nectarines. “You were tiny, when she took off. You know that, I think.” He sighs. “I spent a few months wallowing until all of a sudden I imagined her plotting. That’s the difference between life in prison and a long sentence, right? Intent? I realized she had the intent to leave. She didn’t lie there in our bed, with you in the bassinet in the other room, and spontaneously decide—oh, hey, I think I’ll take off in the middle of the night.”

It’s weird to hear all this. Like that film, *Rashomon*, which I saw for my film elective at Hadley. I’ve been told the details of that night from another source. From Mable. All narratives are like that, I guess—different viewpoints depending on your context in the story. It’s easy to forget I wasn’t the only one left. Sometimes I think about my dad and how his heart was shattered into a billion fragments, or how Mable lost her best friend. But right now, I think of her. Of Gala, lying in her nightgown or T-shirt or pajamas,

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whatever she wore, tired, and I finally see her as miserable. Trapped.

“She must have really needed to go.”

“That’s part of what I’m getting at. I don’t think she took leaving lightly. I believe—and maybe it’s partially my mind’s way of rationalizing the event—that she thought it over for a long time. Looking back over the weeks and months before, she distanced herself from me, from Mable.” Dad keeps his upper body straight but turns his head and via peripheral vision I can see him looking at me. “I used to think that premeditation made it worse. Only now I think . . .”

“That she must have weighed in on the damage she’d do?”

Dad agrees, nodding. “Exactly.” He puts his hands on the stool and turns it so I’m now facing him, interview style. “She’s not a bad person. This whole thing would be easier in some ways if she were—”

“Less complicated. Then we could just sit around bitching about her.”

Dad studies me, thinking. “You’re pretty wise, you know that?”

A smirk is my only reply. I take his hand and play with the loose skin around his knuckles the way I did as a kid. Back then, his hands seemed so large and strong I figured they could protect me from everything that might try to

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harm or hurt me. “You’re a good dad. A lot of people can’t say that about their fathers. I’m glad I can.”

I leave the kitchen and wander around the small living room, wondering about Gala, about this place, about Sadie. “Dad?”

He talks from his stool. “Yup.”

“Work with me for a second—where’d she go? Seriously.”

“Back to Los Angeles.”

Familiar sinking feelings tug at my arms. Did she pre-judge me like those college essays? “Wasn’t my allure strong enough?” I make a joke out of it, doing a grandiose modeling pose as though Gala might choose to cast me in something. Oh, yeah, her life.

Dad stands up and takes a set of keys from his pocket. “Here.”

“What’s this?” I reach for the keys and hold them, wondering if they’ll unlock some treasure chest or if Dad’s changing the locks on our house at Hadley for some reason.

“Gala is selling her house.”

“I know. I was there, remember?” I flash to that monstrosity of a mansion, my brief stay, how empty the house was, how devoid of personality. The opposite of Mable’s apartment. Not that I should keep comparing Gala to Mable, but it’s built into me. “And Arabella’s still there. With . . .”

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“Love. A couple of things before we talk the sun down.”

“Okay.” Outside, the afternoon light ripples over the buildings and sidewalks, into the front windows of the cottage, casting long shadows from the cabinet that holds the mail, where once I’d found the deed to this place.

“First: Gala phoned me on her way to Logan. Her reasons were valid—she had an offer on the house and as you may or may not be aware, real estate is going through a tough time right now. The bubble burst and she needed to close as soon as possible.”

“I don’t actually know what closing is, but I get the gist. Second?”

“She’s coming back.”

My mouth is caught between smile and wanting to be not at all affected by this. “When?”

“Labor Day weekend. With Sadie.”

“Which I was going to ask you about . . .”

“Wait. Let me finish.” Dad’s eyebrows are so clenched he looks pruny. He must be on the verge of announcing something big.

“You’re getting married. To Louisa. I knew it. When?” I cross my arms over my chest, feeling for some reason proud of beating him to the punch and then guilty for stealing his announcement thunder.

“No . . .” Dad raises his eyebrows. “No wonder all your

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class comments say you're able to dispute a point before there's been one set." I shrug. "There's something else. . . ." We face off like we're going to rumble in a comedic way.

"Dad—the day's only so long. . . ." I don't want to hurry through this but I factored on spending lots of time with Gala. So now that she's not here, I want to get a move on filling up my night. With Charlie working so much on his academic aims, I've been taking long walks on the beach, the clichéd romantic ideal, but with Chris who decided to hang out here for the remaining weeks of summer. He's set up the Gay-Straight Alliance at school and looked at a few colleges, but basically I think between now and when that first chapel bell chimes for senior year his goal is to be so friendly, so funny, so okay with the fact that Haverford is seeing someone else, that Haverford grows attached to Chris's nonchalance and falls for him. We'll see. Maybe tonight I can convince Chris to spy on Jacob with me. I haven't seen him yet, despite milling around various venues where I'd expect to accidentally-on-purpose bump into him.

"Love?"

"Dad."

"These"—he points to the keys—"are for here. She left you this." He hands me a sealed envelope.

"I thought you said you didn't see her."

"I didn't. She dropped it by the café."

Emily Franklin

My mouth hangs open. “She was there? Where was I?”

Dad flings up his hands. “I don’t know. You’d think in this vast world of communication possibilities, you two would think to use a phone. Or email.”

“The only email I have is when I haul my butt to the library.”

“Oh, right. My point is that perhaps both of you are avoiding talking.”

“I am. You’re right. I don’t want to have a phone call with her. How much more awkward could that be? Um, hi, I’m your . . .”

“Okay, okay.” Dad holds a hand in the stop position. “So you have the keys. You have her letter or note.” He glances at the envelope.

“Oh. You want me to open it? Now?”

“You could. Or, no, that’s not my place. Ignore that.” He sighs. “I came here because Gala called. And I knew you’d wind up looking for her. I came here to give you the keys and the letter. . . . Doug had stored them behind the counter.”

How incredible, I think. All the while I was serving smoothies and pouring coffee, adding cream with that or making coffees dark and sweet, my actual mother’s handwriting and feelings, or whatever’s in the note, were waiting for me. “Doug’s a space cadet.”

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“He’s just swamped with the renaming. But yes, it was a bit of an oversight not to give you this as soon as she asked him to.”

“Maybe it doesn’t seem as pressing to anyone else. I mean, it’s not as though she walked in, announced I was her long-lost—or long-left—daughter.” Dad wipes his hand down his face the way he does after a grueling squash game. “Are you sweating?” Maybe he is going to tell me he’s proposed to Louisa. “Dad, whatever you need to tell me, it’s okay. I can handle it.” I sort of assumed he’d be committed to her now—either by asking her to move in when I started boarding (cue inner groan) or by an engagement ring.

“Sadie isn’t your half sister.”

This makes me really sad. Sadder than it should, seeing as I’ve had a half sister for only a few weeks. And I’ve spent a grand total of maybe twenty hours with her. But it’s something, having that genetic connection. Or not even the genes, just knowing she and I would be connected forever. “Oh.” The word and my mouth are very small, closed over the sudden vanishing of a sibling I never even thought to long for.

“She’s your full sister.”

A moment passes. My words—usually so steadily streaming—are dried up. The only ones I can push out are, “Holy shit.”

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Dad doesn't shake his head at my profanity. He doesn't scold me or tell me to watch it or that in a month I'll be under language guidance rules of Hadley Hall (aka no rhyming or misspelling Fruckner House, my dorm-to-be). "Those were actually the words I used when Gala told me."

"You just found out?" I grab his arm. He nods. The excitement creeps into the room and we begin fast-talking, overlapping.

"The math was too weird," I say. "I kept thinking about it on the plane and . . ."

"I'm not a man who pays all that much attention to menstrual flows . . . but when I found out about . . ."

"So you never knew. All this time. It's like a crappy Disney movie."

"Exactly." Dad paces while we talk. "What's the apt title—the daughter you never knew."

"No—something bigger—something punny, so the audience knows it all works out in the end." I exhale audibly. "So, can you backtrack?"

"I'm on the phone with her and she tells me she's leaving, etcetera. That there's this note for you. And there was something she needed to tell me."

"Did you know what it was?"

"I assumed it was about her getting a divorce."

"She is?"

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Dad nods. “Yeah. I guess she and Sadie’s dad . . .” He pauses. “Her father—well, you know what I mean, moved out. The house needs to sell for the divorce to go through. . . .”

“And Sadie?” I quickly do the math. “She must have gotten pregnant when she came back.” Dad nods, slowly this time, maybe thinking back to that night. Or that day. Whenever it was he and Gala were together long enough to conceive another baby.

“It doesn’t take long,” Dad says and gives me that pointed look so I know I’m supposed to infer more than just the fact that he got Gala pregnant during only a short interlude after her initial leaving, but that I need to be careful, too.

“Oh my god, Dad, please don’t mush this together with a safe-sex talk.” The ground suddenly has huge appeal. I stare at the wide floorboards. “I’m not even—I’m not having sex or anything. Okay?”

Dad clears his throat. “I’ll admit this is a sidebar, but I know you used to tell Mable everything. Or not everything, but a lot. And I just—if you ever need to . . . or you want a . . .”

“Thanks.” I cut him off to save him the words, or maybe to save us both from taking that giant leap forward into a world where I’m adult and grown and out of the house or at least not virginal any longer. Where I love a guy so much

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I sleep with him. Dad knows me well enough to understand I will take that step when I'm ready, and when I do it, it will mean Dad's not the only man in my life. It's one thing to deal with the awkwardness of your kids having their own sex lives (or your parents, for that matter), but it's another thing entirely to push past the love they set out for you, and into a world of your own.

"So she came back, you did . . . whatever it is you did together. . . ." I wave my hands in front of my face. "I don't need to know those details. But then—she never . . ."

Dad's voice gets quiet, soft, the hurt just scratching at the surface. "She never told me. She says now that she didn't know what she'd end up doing—keeping it or not or . . . I don't know. But she stayed in LA."

"Remarried. And raised the kid as hers."

"With her husband, you mean. Sadie's dad."

Dad sticks his hands in his pockets. "Gregory. Gregory Eisenstein."

Again my mouth opens in wonder. "Wait. Gregory Eisenstein as in Martin Eisenstein?"

"Who? What?" Dad throws his hands up in confusion and then lets them retreat again to his pockets.

"Martin Eisenstein, Dad. The producer? You know, *If This Is Life, Between Hours, Everyday Linen*. That one set in India . . ." My dad is totally lame at remembering movies

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or actors. I have to describe entire plots and settings to him to gain a glimmer of recognition that he's seen the movie.

"Was that the one with the castle?"

"No—that was *If This Is Life*. Whatever. The point is—if . . ." All the fragments of the past year come back to me: meeting Clementine Highstreet in London, how she knew Martin Eisenstein, and how Arabella's parents did, too. "I'm trying to sort this out. I think . . . Clementine knew Gala, didn't she?"

"She could have. Your mother spent time in London. Before me, with me, after me. She hung out with musicians, mainly."

"I'm sure of it, then. She knew Clementine—and Clementine always said I looked familiar." My hand flies to my face. I must look like her. I look like Sadie, or we resemble one another and we must look like our mother. "I'm not ignoring the fact that you found out you have another kid, Dad, I'm just puzzling through. . . ."

"I know."

"That makes so much more sense. All along I was like, why is this guy being so nice—and no, not in a casting couch sort of way. But, like, there's no reason for an indie film guy to want me to do voice-overs for him unless . . ."

Dad starts to do pre-athletic stretches. He always does

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them when he's thinking things through—before a faculty meeting or when he's writing the opening day remarks. He lunges forward. “Unless . . . it were a favor for Gala?”

“Right. For his . . . sister-in-law.” I mentally transport back to Sadie's house. “Sadie didn't think that going to Martin's party out there was that big a deal. I thought it was because she was a JAB. . . .”

“JAB?”

“Jaded and bitter. Except she's not at all. Maybe she's a little jaded, but she's not bitter. Not what I met, anyway. She's all surfer and mellow and . . .” I look at Dad, realizing I'm describing not only my sibling but his child. “It's crazy, isn't it?”

“To be on this small island, in this tiny cottage, with such huge concepts.” Dad pulls one arm over his head with the other, stretching and resembling a malformed gingerbread man. “Are you okay?” Dad looks at me.

Despite the vastness of this idea, that I have a full sister, that my dad isn't just my dad, that the mother I wanted to meet disappeared again, I answer, “Yeah. You know what? If she had Martin find me—or if Clementine knew who I was? It means that she . . . that Gala wanted to find me months ago. Not just that I went looking for someone who didn't want to be found.”

“That she had interest first, you mean?”

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I nod. "Yeah. It means something, you know?"

"In a roundabout way, yes. She could have found you directly. . . ."

I stare out the window. If I squint, if I try hard, I can just make out the water. I imagine things floating there—big thing like boats, yachts, and smaller items—crabs and algae, seaweed rocking in the current by the docks. How all of those things are buoyed by water, which really has no color at all. "She couldn't." I bite my lip. "I don't think she could—it was too hard. After you do something like that . . ." I think more, imagining writing the story, the night when she left. I settle on her wearing a nightshirt. Flannel. Plaid. How much she must have struggled. "She did irreparable damage. So looking for me . . . wouldn't really have been fair, from her perspective. Like, why now?"

"But indirectly . . ."

I nod. "She checked up on me. The Hadley Web site has all the info she needed. Hell, all she had to do was google you. She finds out you're at Hadley. Then she waits. I wind up in London—a fact conveniently listed on the 'Who/Where' section of Hadley news online."

"You've tried this?" Dad looks amused.

"Dad—everyone's googled themselves. Haven't you?"

"It's never occurred to me." He smiles. "Now I feel silly."

Emily Franklin

"You're not silly. Just a luddite."

"You did well on your verbal. . . ."

"Okay—we covered sex—let's not venture into SAT land." I stick out my tongue and give one dog pant. "I'm zonked. But so . . . she found me. She calls in a favor from her brother-in-law, and when it doesn't work . . ." I do an aside to remind my dad. "Remember, I didn't get to the movie? Anyway, then she has Martin email me an invite to his elite Fourth of July festivities. . . ."

"You think she was planning on meeting you there?"

"Why would she have come here, then?"

Dad shrugs. "Maybe she thought you weren't coming."

"I wasn't. Or, I wasn't supposed to. I was here. . . ." As I say this, I smile. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"It seems that way," Dad agrees. "She came here for you. She looked for you for a long time. Maybe years. Or followed your path until it was okay in her mind."

"I guess after failing to have other people lead me to her—Clementine and Martin—she did it herself."

I feel good about all this until I look around and remember she's not here. That I was semi—stood up. Dad knows me too well to let my expression of disappointment slide by unnoticed. "She didn't forget you. She didn't intend on leaving. And I'm guessing she didn't want to pressure you into seeing her so much that you'd be scared

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off. So she stayed in the cottage, hoping you'd make your way here."

"And I did."

"And you will again. You have the keys. That means something. She does own it."

"And she'll be back. Labor Day, right?"

"Right." Dad stops stretching and coughs. "With Sadie."

He and I stare at one another for a few seconds. Then we both start to crack up. "You couldn't predict this, huh?" he asks.

"No way." I redo my ponytail and feel my stomach start to digest the fried food from lunch now that my nerves have stopped sucking up all my bodily attention. "And now?"

Dad holds the front door open. "Now I get Louisa from the Hob Knob Inn and catch the ferry back. Our reservation's at six." He sighs and then hugs me. "I'll come back for Labor Day."

"Not for Illumination Night?" I do calendar math. Three weeks and Oak Bluffs will be filled with lantern lights and music.

"I don't think so, Love. With my sudden trip here . . . even with nixing the vacation to Sardinia, I have too much work to do before the year starts." He gets his work face on, all serious mouth and pensive expression.

Emily Franklin

"I'll drive you guys to the ferry, if you want." I follow him down the stairs. From there I figure it's a quick drive to Chili's house. I can unload with her, and then maybe go for a run with Chris. Or maybe Chris and Haverford, so I can make allusions to Chris's crush and have him blush, and Chris can shoot me looks of warning.

"That'd be great." Dad stares at me as though offering to give him and Louisa a lift is the most mature thing I've ever done. "You're handling all this really well."

"I hope so." Once we're down the stairs, I stare back at the cottage. It feels tiny now. As though it's just a box of ideas waiting to swirl up the chimney and out into the ocean air.

"I have another kid." Dad shakes his head, amazed.

"It's really incredible . . . all this. You know what Disney would call it?" Dad waits. I pat my pocket where the note from my mother lies waiting. "*Family Ties*."

"That was already a TV show."

I nod, acquiescing. "I know. But really."

"How about *Long Distance Carriers*? As in cell phone plans."

"How about . . . no." I laugh and Dad does, too. He puts his arm around my shoulder as we walk toward the inn and my car. "How about a title that seems totally irrelevant until the last scene when you suddenly go, oh, apples! That's why

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they called it *Orchard*. Then you think back and remember all that carefully placed fruit in every scene.”

Dad squeezes my shoulder. “I have no doubt you’ll come up with the perfect title one day.”

I let myself lean into him and then walk forward, knowing he’s right.

Chapter Seven



Chili and Haverford's house is a vibrant mix of colors, typical of the cottage community of Oak Bluffs. Ornate woodwork, carved railings, spires, and oddly shaped windows trimmed in bright pinks, blues, and greens make the whole area feel otherworldly.

I park my car at an angle, hopefully legally, and walk a few streets over to their place, trying to keep the issues, problems, and information of the past weeks and hours a part of me, not the whole me.

Sitting on the narrow porch, rocking like a trio of grandparents, Chili, Haverford, and Chris nod when I approach.

"Say, isn't that the Bukowski girl?" Chili says, affecting an old woman's voice and squinting at me like she needs bifocals.

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"You might just be right, dear," Haverford says. "My, she's grown."

"Yes, she's filling out her shirt quite nicely," Chris adds and cracks himself up. I laugh, too. "Too bad the sight of tight T-shirts does nothing for me."

"Unless the T-shirt's on me," Haverford says, overtly flirting with Chris. Chris takes it well—as well as you can when the person you like is otherwise involved but still your friend.

"That's right, folks—I'm a sucker for washed-out gray T-shirts with faux logos on them." He fake-glares at Haverford.

"Listen, before these guys start a gay rumble here, can we formulate a plan for this weekend that doesn't suck?"

I look at Chris, who looks at Haverford, who looks at Chili, who then sighs and looks back at me. Leaning back on the railing while the three of them rock in the late-afternoon heat, I try to think of something fun. "This is so pathetic," I say. "We have, what, weeks left—not months, weeks left—before school starts and we'll be clawing at the doors, wishing we were right here on this porch."

"So let's appreciate it," Chili says.

"Good idea." Chris rocks harder in his chair.

A few minutes pass. "Well, that was effective." Haverford's sarcasm coats us all.

"What's wrong with us?" Chili moans. "Aren't we supposed to be young and crazy and full of spontaneity?"

Emily Franklin

I shake my head. “Y’all . . .,” I say, even though I am in no way southern. “My life is so full of change and excitement right now, I’m not sure I need anything else.”

“No diving off the pier at night into shark-infested waters?” Chris asks.

“No dressing up in your finest and trying to gain access to the Yacht Club’s open bar?” Haverford queries.

“What about the agricultural fair?” Chili suddenly gets excited. “We could go see the cows, the pigs, ride the Whip. . . .”

We all consider this. “I do like my cotton candy,” I say and grip the railing behind me. “Do I look like a figurehead?”

Chris nods, then leans forward. “A figurehead? Are you still overly ensconced in the boat world?”

“Hardly.” Chili and Haverford go inside to negotiate cars, dinner, and curfew with their parents while Chris and I sit side by side on the small staircase.

“So you’re not wrapped up in Charlie’s nautical scene?”

I slide my flip-flop on and off, looking at the V-shaped tan line. Even on my paler-than-pale skin, the sunlight has left a mark. “He’s so focused on work.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

I shake my head. “Not really. Not in and of itself. I’d be doing the same thing, probably.”

“If you’d taken a year off?” Chris kicks at the sandy

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tarmac with his retro sneaker. The dark green and orange of it remind me of fall at Hadley, the vibrant colors on the quad.

“I think a year off is a kind euphemism. Charlie dropped out. I don’t think he had any intention of going back when he left.”

Chris elbows me. “Do you think a small—maybe minuscule part—of you was drawn in by that?”

“Maybe. I don’t like to think about that, though, because now he’s not that guy. He has those qualities—but his life will be so different this year. It already is.” I picture Charlie hunched over a desk, taking notes from some academic tome, and not picking up when I call his cell.

“Does it worry you for the fall? Like when you picture still being with him?”

My mental movie cues—me on the Harvard campus strolling hand in hand with Charlie, who waves to his Shetland sweater-clad cronies and introduces me as his swell girlfriend. I’m in a sweater set. “In my mind, we’re this outdated couple—sipping shared frappés at Barley’s Burgers.”

“So you’re in *Grease*.” He pauses. “Can I be Kenickie?” He flips a nonexistent collar on his imaginary leather jacket and quotes, “A hickey from Kenickie is like a Hallmark card. When you care enough to send the very best.”

“Sure,” I say and touch his shoulder like I’m knight-

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ing him. "You can be my sidekick greaser. Only I get to be Ponyboy."

"Oh my god you are so mixing movies right now."

"I know. But I loooove C. Thomas Howell in that." I regain my conversational composure. "I guess I do worry about it a little. It. Such a short word for such a complex thing." I stretch out the word, rolling the syllables off my tongue. "My *relationship* with Charlie. It has the potential to be the biggest one. The longest, and definitely the most mature."

"It seems that way." Chris looks at me. "So, you're settled in it, though? Not paranoid about whatever old flames he left behind on the Ivy League campus?"

"I never thought about that. The old girlfriend issues. Thanks, Chris, now you've given me more useless fodder to churn over while I try and sleep. I wasn't worried about that, exactly. More like how do we make the transition from summer thing to year-round couple?" I let my posture flag, slumping as my forearms rest on my thighs. I look at Chris over my right shoulder. "I don't know. That time seems so long ago."

"Sophomore fall?" Chris flicks his eyebrows up, remembering. "Ah, yes, I remember it well. It was a long time ago, I guess."

"Do you ever think that? Count how long you've been out or . . ."

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"I don't tally up the days, if that's what you mean. But I do . . . keep a record, maybe? More of how my emotional state is—or has been." He checks behind to see if Haverford's there.

"The coast is clear—he's inside. Prettying himself up for you. . . ." I smirk.

"You are so in trouble if you bring up my crush in front of him."

"But he knows. You're the one who told him."

"Ah, yes, part of my brash and brilliant plan that went completely wrong."

"Now you're doomed to be his buddy? His confidante." I sigh. "Sounds familiar." I think of my first boyfriend, lusting and liking Robinson Hall, who wound up being a jerk. He cheated on me at the end, and so did Asher, my London love. Or at least I thought it was love at the time. But I don't now.

"And yet . . . he flirts with me." Chris stands up and smooths his shirt and pushes the hair off his forehead. I think about Haverford's T-shirt comment before and wonder how Chris can handle that outright acknowledgement of the unrequited crush, the overt looks and smiles. "It's actually not as painful as it appears."

I cast a doubtful look his way. "Really? Because I've been there, liking someone, not being able to have them, questioning every flirt, every ambiguous conversation."

Emily Franklin

Chris arches his back. "I'm okay with it." He watches me scratch the bug bites that litter my calves and then swats my hands away so I stop. "You'll just make them worse."

"Oh, and you're one to talk about scratching an itch. . . ."

"Okay, theoretical maven . . . you're stretching the metaphor, but I'll give you a certain amount of credit for probing." He stands in front of me, semi-studying my face, and then goes on. "You know how normally you like someone and then something happens or doesn't? I took the plot into my own hands and admitted my feelings, right?" I nod. "And even though Haverford's with Ben—not that I've seen or heard much about him this trip—I'm not in that state. . . ."

"Which state, Tennessee?"

"Funny. No. I'm not in that terrible state of post-admitting kidding myself. I realize Haverford might not like me the way I like him. I even realize he might never return the feelings."

"And you're fine with that." I stand up, undo my ponytail, and shake my head upside down. It's long enough now that the ends are close to sweeping the ground.

"I am."

Chris tugs on my hair and I look up, throwing my locks back dramatically. I'll look all full-headed and lustrous for about three seconds, and then my hair will remember its job

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is to fall lank onto my shoulders. “How can you just be okay with that? I always . . . I feel like I want to be that person. Someone who can just be accepting of limitations, but I’m not.”

“But I wouldn’t be, either,” Chris says. He lifts his chin to gesture to the doorway where Chili gives us the one minute sign. “But what changed it for me is saying it all. Just putting it out there so that no matter what, I’ve said my piece. Whatever happens happens. But this way, I’m not carrying that weight of knowing I could have expressed myself.”

“I’ve been thinking so much about change—you know, as a concept. Trying to pinpoint if it’s gradual or sudden.”

“Totally understandable considering the recent additions and subtractions in your life.”

“And maybe what I should do is try to focus less on the nature of change and more about me in it.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Chris motions for Chili and Haverford to come down the steps, to follow us as we start to walk.

“Meaning take the Chris path and tell Charlie how I feel.” I push my shoulders back, standing tall. Or as tall as you can get at my height. “I can express myself. I’m much better than I was. You yourself said I tell great stories. So now all I have to do is not think about the plot and just exist in it.”

Chris touches my back so I stop walking. We wait for

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Chili and Haverford, for our weekend to begin. “You have to do more than that, Love. You have to take the bull by the horns. Grab that person—Sadie, Gala . . . Jacob—and tell them how you feel.”

I hear the names and blush. Not because I know that Labor Day is inevitable or because I’m not an only child any longer. None of those giant changes. “I’m so lame for not dealing with him sooner, aren’t I?” I say and wait for Chris to absolve me of my reluctance to contact Jacob. “I just don’t want to dredge up the past and all that.”

“Silly me. I thought when you said tell people how you felt, it included actual humans. Not just telephone poles.” Chris thumbs to the slanting pole to his right. I ingest what he said, know he’s right. I can’t ignore Jacob forever. It would just be easier if I could.

Chapter Eight



My cell phone buzzes a message to me as Chris drives to the grounds of the Agricultural Fair. I have a habit of leaving the ring on SILENT and then wondering why I miss so many calls.

“Thanks for letting me brush up on my stick shift skills,” he says, signaling left.

“Ahem!” I say and listen to her message. “She’s still in LA,” I inform Chris as Arabella tells me. “She’s . . . staying for a while longer—she hooked up with that surfer guy. No surprise there. And she’s been spending time with Sadie.” I pause, wondering if that’s okay. Arabella knows my sister more than I do. Then I poke Chris. “Wait—do you think Sadie knows we’re fully related?” Chris makes his exaggerated I-have-no-clue face, his mouth rubbery and pulled down at the sides, his eyes wide. “She wants me to pack up her stuff.” I close the phone.

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"Is she coming back at all?" Chris downshifts into third.

"Yeah—for Labor Day. Her flight's out of Logan." I fast forward to that weekend, to meeting Gala, seeing Sadie if she comes, and hugging Arabella good-bye.

As if he knows my thoughts, Chris says, "You're going to cry when she leaves, huh?"

I realize he could be talking about any of the women I have in mind. "Yeah." I confirm his theory and point to the fork in the road. "Turn. Chris—turn!" I pull the wheel a bit. "Sorry—I'm not the best passenger in the world."

"Seriously." Chris takes my hand off the wheel and rolls his eyes. "Are we there?"

Chili and Haverford are ahead of us, leading the way to the site of the annual Agricultural Fair. It's a Vineyard tradition and an all-island event, so when we get close to the grounds and there's no backup of cars, no pickups pulled off to the side, and no other cars filled with overeager teenagers, I'm doubtful Chili knew what she was talking about when she suggested we go.

"I think so," I say, "but . . ."

"But . . . check it out—sibling squabble." Chris stops the car next to Haverford's dune buggy. He and Chili are strapped in, using one another's shoulders as punching bags while Chili argues. "I didn't know! So sue me!"

"I told you it was last year's dates." Haverford shakes his

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head. At Hadley, he's a mock-jock, a term used on campus to describe students who, though thoroughly involved in athletics, will drop sports as soon as they get to college or the real world, destined for academic or artistic greatness. Someone for who sports is a temporary passion that will fade into watching games rather than playing them. Right now, Haverford has his game face on—the muscles in his arms tense, his jaw locked.

"Take it easy, Have," Chili says and makes a disgusted face at her brother. "You're way overinvested in this."

Chris pokes me in the thigh as we eavesdrop and I try not to laugh. We wait for more drama.

"All I'm saying is, get your facts straight." Haverford lets an angry burst of air out from his lips and stares ahead at the road.

"Look on the bright side," I suggest, leaning out the passenger-side window. "We got a really good parking space!"

This lessens the mood slightly and we decide to park and explore the grounds anyway. Haverford parks in front of a large tree while Chris pulls up close, right to the edge of the field.

"Hey!" Chris points. "That's kind of cool."

The four of us swish through the long grass at the side of the grounds and onto the closer-clipped sections. Chili runs

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ahead and then sprints back, breathy as she speaks. "I wasn't far off. The day after tomorrow. Sorry."

Haverford shrugs off his annoyance and looks ahead at the scene. "Let's check it out anyway."

It's funny to watch their sibling interaction. One minute they're ignoring one another, the next they're in fits of laughter that only they fully understand, and the next they're pissed off and grumpy. It's not like with parents and not exactly the way it is with friends.

"You know what?" I ask as Chris and I kick our way through the green grass. "I'm psyched that I have a shot at that." I point to Haverford and Chili. They're walking side by side, and every so often he kicks her in the rear and she does the same. Then he roughs up her hair and she laughs.

"I bet," Chris says. He walks forward, past where Chili kneels tying the laces of her sneaker, and up to the motionless rides. "Step right up folks, don't be shy now."

"No one ever accused you of that, that's for sure," Haverford says. He leaves to circle the main tent while Chili, Chris, and I look at the empty merry-go-round, the unmoving spider ride. A few other people are around—older couples anticipating the fair, a family with toddlers running in the field, maybe one or two other people who got the dates wrong—but the fair is basically empty.

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"I hate that ride," Chili says. "Or—sorry—not hate. My parents loathe improper use of that word. I don't care for it."

"Me either," I say. "I once screamed so much my aunt had to ask the operator to stop so I could get off. I like bumper cars, though. They must have those here, don't you think?"

"Probably. Last year it was near the pigs. Don't ask me why I remember that, but I do."

The sunlight is less forceful now, and shadows are overtaken by the sinking sun. The fair has livestock, games booths, rides, and food. Right now, it's fairly still with only the ride operators unpacking and setting up.

"We're out of here," Haverford announces. He motions for us to go his way as though we're all on a team and he's the quarterback.

Chris shrugs. "He wants to go to some party out near Squibnocket Point. Some kid's house from Markson." Markson Academy is one of Hadley's rivals—we play them every year in the fall and for a day at least, people pretend to care who wins. We wear the Hadley colors, some girls doctoring up Hadley gear to their best advantage (e.g., making deep-cut *v*'s in their sweatshirts, creating cropped Hadley tanks out of T-shirts) and the true jocks painting their faces. Then we all go back to studying.

Squibnocket makes me think of the Silver and White

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event, the thought of which sends a chill down my back for no good reason other than it feels like a big deal. “Whose party is it?” I ask as we walk past the livestock tent. The animals are the first to arrive, and various sounds—grunts, whinnies, and clucking—emanate from the tent’s open flaps. I’m not sure I’m up for a random prep-school party. If you’ve been to one you’ve been to them all. Good-looking people quipping one-liners while scoping out the facial talent, hooking up or throwing up until someone calls it quits. Studying with Charlie sounds better. Not that he’s asked me over.

Haverford coughs. “No one I know. But I got directions.”

“From who?” Chris asks.

“Yeah—this better not be another one of your overheard directions to a supposed party,” Chili says.

Haverford shoots her a look. “I don’t think you’re in a position to bitch at me about wrong addresses.”

“Dates. I got the date wrong. For the last time, I’m sorry.”

Chris and I roll our eyes. “Okay, enough.” We walk past a smaller tent that will in a few days house handmade quilts, jams for judging, and pies of all sorts, but for now is filled only with empty tables.

“So, who gave you the directions?” I ask Haverford. He’s

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in front of me, approaching the Whip. A few people stand near one of the carts. Closer up, I can make out that they're our kind—that is, teenagers without a purpose at this very moment.

"He did." Haverford points with his arm stretched out tin man style like he wants me to go long, go long. I do, running ahead, miming catching a big pass, over to the Whip, to the group of aimless teens, one of whom is Jacob.

"You're the one who knows someone who's having a party?" Chris asks, all in one breath to Jacob, who does his best (or maybe it's not that tough?) to nonreact to my presence. A millisecond of locking eyes constitutes our hello.

"Guilty as charged," he says. "Should be a fun one—barbeque. Serena Best."

"Serena Chest?" Haverford raises his eyebrows. One of the guys near Jacob nods.

"You're disgusting," Chili says, admonishing both of them.

"What? It's her name—I didn't give it to her."

I don't know how or if Jacob has looked at me or is looking at me. My eyes have taken a liking to the grass, looking there, at my feet, anywhere but at Jacob.

Chris tries to recover for me. "Let's go!"

We move en masse until I realize something.

"I'm not going," I say to anyone who's listening. I hang

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back, letting Chili and Haverford, the other random people with Jacob, get ahead.

Chris turns around. “You okay?”

I nod. “I’m fine. I’m going to check out the pigs and then head home. You guys go ahead.”

I go back to the fair, back to the livestock tent, and look at chickens, then make my way to the pigs. Why is it that I never seem to call the shots with Jacob? He shows up here, inserting himself into my evening just like he called me out in California. Maybe I’m projecting some of my feelings onto him. Maybe I don’t even know what I feel about him. Or what he feels about me, other than his declarative statement that he “has feelings.” Great. We all have feelings. But which ones?

Perhaps I’m just the slightest bit annoyed that I didn’t get my movie-perfect reunion. The one in which I’m better groomed than I am right now, for starters. I lean on the fence that surrounds the pigs until I decide it’s time to call it a night, even though the sun hasn’t fully set.

My car looks miniature and out of place near the decades-old oak trees and green pasture. I watch my feet as they move through the grass until I’m at the door. Sometimes I pick apart details—my toes and the scratchy field, the door handle, still warm from the fading sun. I’m so caught up in

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those small things that when I slide behind the wheel and see another person in the passenger seat, it takes me a second or two to scream. But I do.

Even when I see it's only Jacob sitting there, drumming his fingers on his knees to enhance the casualness of this encounter, I keep screaming—it's like my voice and mind aren't connected.

"Sorry," I say. Then I realize I don't need to be all girly and apologetic for no good reason, but before I can retract the apology, Jacob talks.

"No," he says, biting his lower lip a little and looking at me with those intense green eyes I tried to avoid before. "I'm the one who should be sorry."

"It's not that big a deal," I say and put the keys in the ignition. I don't start the car, though. "You just surprised me, that's all."

"Oh—I mean, I'm sorry about sitting here and springing myself on you—but more than that . . ." He takes a breath and looks out the window. "Want to take a drive?"

I have my hands on the wheel, steadfast at ten and two o'clock. "I don't know." Then I look at him. Not just glance, but really look. He's the same. But not. And inside I feel those stirrings—not only the remnants of romance, but the fun feelings of just being around him. He looks back at me. "Sure. Let's drive."

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. . .

“This isn’t exactly what I had in mind,” I say when we’re both behind the wheel.

“But you gotta admit—it’s pretty cool.” Jacob pats the wheel of his sparkly purple bumper car. “I love my glitter. Glitterbug, I’ll name her.”

“Why are cars and boats always she?” I ask and admire my own choice—a bright green car that glitters.

“How else are you going to convince guys to go to sea for a year at a time with no promise they’ll return?”

“Ah, yes, the risk of love,” I say. I mean it to be funny, to keep pace with Jacob’s perma-wit, but my words seem to hang in the air, calling undue attention to themselves.

“What I meant before,” Jacob says while pretending to navigate, “was that I’m sorry about . . . making you come back here. You were off doing your thing, just like we said, right? Friends. But Crescent Beach really screwed with my head.”

We look at each other from our respective parked cars. He’s beautiful, still, in a way I can’t shake. He looks at me and I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing. “I agree—but I have my own reasons—what’s your take? What messed with your mind the most?”

He leans back in the small car, considering. “Well, okay—so you remember Juliette.”

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“Can I insert one thing right here—I mean, if we’re going to have one of those lay-it-all-on-the-table kind of discussions you and I seem to be so good at having?”

He nods. “Be my guest. Lay it out there.” He motions with his hand like I’m spreading jam on a baguette.

“It’s so annoying that you pronounce her name *Juliette*.” Jacob licks his lips and starts to laugh. “I mean, I get that you met her in Switzerland and that it’s not affected there—that is, in fact, the correct pronunciation since she’s French and all.” I pause. “And phenomenal looking, by the way.”

“Yes—true on both fronts. But from now on I shall refer to her as Juliet. As in that song.”

“Dire Straits?” I ask even though I’m perfectly aware of what he means.

“Yeah.” Jacob stands up and holds on to the metal pole of the bumper car and switches to a jaunty pink one. “How’s this?”

“Suits you,” I say. “So . . . you were saying . . .”

“Right.” He sits in the car, which is next to mine, and we look like we’re about to drag race, but the minivehicles are motionless. The sunlight slips further down behind the trees. Soon it will be dark and I will be here, with my old boyfriend, my old friend, my old something, talking. Is it too intimate? Is this wrong, considering Charlie’s place in my life? Worry creeps in for a bit, but then I push it away. This is

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okay. This is just talk. This is necessary. “So, Love, we had this pact—you and I. We’d be friends. Only for a while it didn’t really feel that way. And then, at Crescent—which I realize is an ironic place, given the fact that we split up there after sophomore year . . .”

I nod. “Over Chris. Remember that? You were all huffy, thinking I was fooling around with him on the dunes while really he was trying desperately to come out to me.”

Jacob holds up his hands. “Stop—I know. Believe me, it took an entire summer and fall for me to get past feeling like a total dickhead. I was young. Jealous. The usual crap.”

“And now? What’s the story?” I ask and stand up to trade my green car for white. “Hey, I’m in the lovebug. Heh. I adored those movies when I was little. Aunt Mable used to play them for me. *Herbie the Lovebug*. *Herbie Goes Bananas*. But I digress.”

“You’re the writer—you tell me what our story is.” His eyes rest on mine while he tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. His dark curls are softer now, less coiled than I remember, giving his whole appearance a gentleness that sets me at ease.

“Why would you say that? That I’m a writer . . .” I feel as though it’s something I’m just figuring out myself. That he has given me that classification feels funny.

“I didn’t think it was any surprise. I mean, you’ve writ-

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ten lyrics for ages. Good ones. Believe me, I've tried and I've read other people's, and the majority suck. And I figured with your journals . . ." He looks away. "The ones in your room . . ."

"I know which ones you mean." I picture the stacks of them tilting this way, unsteady, threatening to topple over and open up for the world to see. Or maybe this is a metaphor for me. I stand up and so does Jacob. Before we say anything else we simultaneously move to the bright blue bumper car in the center of all the others.

Standing side by side, we pause, and then squish next to each other, with me at the wheel. "So I'm driving?" I ask, putting my hands on the black circle.

"You are driving this . . . figuratively and literally." His shoulder touches mine. Our legs touch, too, my bare skin against his jeans. There are marks on the jeans—a phone number written in red marker, a splotch of something. Suddenly I need to know what these are. And suddenly just decide to tell him. "See this? I like, have to know whose number that is and why you have it. And the stain?" I touch it just for a moment, then pull my finger away. "Was it grape juice? Liquor? Mustard?"

"Does it look like mustard?" Jacob's voice is deadpan. He always cracks me up. I start laughing but then continue.

"Do you get what I'm saying, Jacob? For all intents

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and purposes, we're not much—not really friends, as you said. And certainly not more . . ." I look at him as I say this and catch his gaze directly. In the small space, I can feel his breath, watch the rise and fall of his chest through his shirt. He could kiss me now. Or I could kiss him. Or we could hug. "We haven't even said a proper hello," I say and initiate the hug.

I'm magnetized to Jacob. My mind knows it's not he that I'm dating, that he isn't my boyfriend, isn't even my super-close friend, but my body just swoops over as though we've never been apart. As though everything that's come after that first kiss at the end of sophomore year outside Slave to the Grind with the apple blossoms blowing around us—never occurred. I never went away for the summer to Music Magazine for my internship; he never traveled abroad and stayed there; I never went to London; he never hooked up with bitchy Lindsay Parrish (not that they went very far, according to rumors, but still—eww); as though I never woke up next to him at the Crescent Beach party to find he'd been flanked on the other side by his French import hottie, Juliette; and I'd never been swept off my feet by Charlie.

But all of that did happen. So even though I am utterly drawn to Jacob, even though I feel some base, instinctual need to lean too far into him, even though I could stay just a few seconds too long after the normal hug procedure, I

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don't. In fact, to prove to myself that I don't want to do anything other than greet him cordially, I end the hug with a pat.

"I don't remember you as being a patter," Jacob says, miming the action when we've pulled apart and are once again motionless driver and passenger in the bumper car.

I pat into my palm, looking as though I'm trying to flatten playdough. "I'm not. I mean, I hate patting. During a hug at any rate. But I just did it to you and I..." I stop myself from rambling and then force myself to look directly into Jacob's eyes, which is something akin to looking right where you're not supposed to—behind the door in scary movies, into the light in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—basically, somewhere forbidden. How best to proceed? Do I spew the quagmire of feelings currently swishing around my brain? Do I play coy and act like the Friend Girl I'm so good at being? Or none of the above. Just natural. Honest.

"It's good to see you, Jacob," I say, looking at his green eyes, but not for too long.

"You, too," he says and smiles, a sigh closely following. "You didn't come back here for me, did you?"

I shake my head. "I would have . . . at some point. . . ." Saying this aloud makes me sad. Like a moment has passed. So I say this: "That made me sad."

"Me, too." Jacob hoists himself from our cramped closeness

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and positions his body on the front of the car, like an oversized hood ornament. He notices me checking this out. “We can talk better like this—face to face, I mean. Instead of . . .” He folds his arms in on his chest, squished. “I don’t know. I used to think that everything happens for a reason. But I don’t really. So with us . . .” The word lingers in the space between us. I take a breath.

“There’s another chance, you’re saying?”

“Something like that. When I called you in Cali—not that I knew you were there, obviously. Or I would’ve flown there instead of ferrying here. But I didn’t want you to run to me in some overdramatic gesture. I didn’t want my feelings to be a gesture at all.”

“What did you want?” My stomach growls so loudly we both hear, and I put my palm over it as though I can comfort it into silence. “Fried food for lunch. Always makes you hungry for an early dinner.”

Jacob nods. “I think I wanted to . . . how to say this without sounding like a total scam artist or cheeseball?” He thinks. “Remember when we used to write emails? Before you knew who I was?” I nod. “I loved that. I loved . . .” He looks quickly at me and then away. “I loved just getting something other than spam. Messages that made me think.”

“I miss those,” I say. “I’ve never had that kind of correspondence with anyone.”

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“And then we wrote those letters. . .” Jacob blushes as he says this, no doubt remembering how brutally honest we were on topics ranging from love to music to sex.

“We can keep the contents of those to ourselves,” I say. “We’re going to be seniors.”

“Hard to believe.”

Then, because it’s time and because I want to make everything clear—to him and to myself—I say, “I have a boyfriend.”

Jacob hops off the car. “I know.” He’s not sad, not angry, just matter-of-fact. Before I can ask how, he stands in the middle of the bumper floor with his hands in his pockets. “I saw you guys. On the beach once. I knew you were back—and I figured you’d get in touch when you were ready.”

“I didn’t mean to . . .” I stop myself. What didn’t I mean to do? Miss our moment together at Crescent—again? Tell him on the phone that I was seeing someone? “I don’t know why I didn’t call you right away when I got back.” He laughs, which confuses me. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just . . .” He motions for me to come with him. I get up and follow him over the bumper fence and onto the grass. The sky is pink now, with lemony streaks around the horizon line. Sunset. I look at Jacob. Together, we’re the image of summer love. Make that sinset, not sunset.

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But we're not a couple and nothing's happened. "Love—I knew you were back because I saw you a couple of times. In random places—the market, South Beach, that Hadley party you and Chris showed up at for ten seconds."

"They were playing bad music and the crowd was not my . . ." How do I phrase this so as not to offend him? He became the big-shot guy on campus while I was in London, and even though his best friend, Dalton Himmelman, is a constant, there are other people. People he might have ignored in his prior incarnation as left-of-center guy who are now his friends. Like Rich Halbertam and Nick Samuels and Jon Rutter. The very cool set. The few guys who can float between all the crowds—blend seamlessly into the wealthy, the weird, the academic aces, the ironically clothed, the beautiful and brainy alike. Rich, Nick, and Jon are intriguing, but the girls who follow them around sometimes leave a bit to be desired. My theory is that their match in cool and adaptability—girls like Harriet Walters, Chili, or—ahem—even me—won't get their attention until college. Or later in life. And by then we might have moved on. "I'm not big into the mean girls of Fruckner."

"You can just say her name, Love."

"Fine. Lindsay Parrish is a walking nightmare. And I don't need to rip into her for reasons—I'm not that girl. . . ."

"I know you're not. You're not catty. I don't think that."

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So that's why you left that party? I thought maybe you saw me or something and bolted."

"No," I laugh and shake my head as we walk past the pigs.

"Sometimes," Jacob says, putting his hands on the fence as the animals oink, "I think I'm done with being human—just for a day I'd like to know what these porcine creatures think. These rolling tubs of lard—they have it good. No lovelorn songs, no college apps, no wondering what'll happen in the future."

"Ever heard of bacon?" I ask, feeling like Fern from *Charlotte's Web*. Aunt Mable read that book to me at least ten times and I still love it.

"Here." Jacob pulls me by the sleeve until we're near one of the food vendors.

"Slush, sno-cone, pizza—it all sounds good," I say and tap the side of the fried dough cart. "But they're closed."

"Hang on." Jacob disappears behind the row of food vehicles. In his absence, everything shifts from slightly romantic to slightly eerie. Funny how perspective can do that—one minute it's a Linklater dialogue-driven movie and then next I'm the heroine about to have her own fear-fest. Why does my brain do that? Is it the writer in me? Or is my mind telling me things—yes. Suddenly I get it. Whatever it is you're imagining comes from you, so it means something. With

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Jacob, my two visions are either our banter—banal but laced with undertones of feelings—or scary. Maybe I'm afraid of being with him, of where that could lead. Or maybe, like now, I'm afraid of life without him.

"Here," he says, proud when he returns with a pretzel. "Didn't score the cotton candy, which I know you favor, but I did get this."

"I like that you know about my unnatural cotton candy cravings." I have a thing about those details—the ones people recall about you. Remembering means something. That you're important enough to stay in a person's mind and they know your cousin's name is Kelsey or that you don't like corn in any form. Or maybe it just means some people have a knack for storing trivia. But I'd like to think Jacob remembered on purpose. And I'd also like to believe that Charlie knows I love cotton candy. Or other specifics.

"I like a lot of things," Jacob says. He doesn't exude attraction to me; his eyes flicker every now and again at my face, down my body, but not in a lascivious way (at least that's not how I'm interpreting it). More like he's aware of this time with me, with all of me.

He watches me bite into the pretzel and then smiles when I start scraping the large pieces of salt off the exterior. "An aversion to sodium?"

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“No. It’s more like I enjoy the idea of salt—the remnants of it. Not the heaps they put on.”

Jacob points to his forehead. “Duly noted.”

“Why do I have no doubt that you’ll remember that bit of minutia forever?”

Jacob shrugs. “Because that’s who I am. We’ll be at the Hadley reunion with our spouses and kids and I’ll walk up to you and say, ‘Hey, Love, still scraping the salt off your oversized pretzels?’ ”

I gulp at this image—not just being old enough that we’re at a Hadley reunion. But that we have spouses. And they’re not each other. That time has passed. And from Jacob’s scene-setting, we’ve been out of touch. That’s what’s so weird about teenage life—I know at the back of my mind that I won’t have anything to do with most of the people I know now. It’s fine in the everyday. But when that knowledge slips to the forefront, I begin to wonder why I bother knowing people or connecting to places at all.

“I might not be married. You don’t know,” I say lightheartedly, even though the reality of seeing him at a reunion feels heavy. “Which reunion did you have in mind, anyway?”

“I bet your husband would be all ruffled—like ‘scraping the salt off your pretzels, what does that mean?’ He’d think it was a euphemism for something sexual. . . .”

“That sounds like your brain,” I say. “Overanalytical,

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charming, and yet with a layer of typical-guy sleeze in there. . . .”

“So now *I’m* your husband?” Jacob snags a bite of my pretzel and smiles while he chews.

“Jacob?” I hold the rest of my pretzel, my hunger gone as I seek the words for what I want to say. “I didn’t avoid you because I felt nothing. I didn’t want to see you because I felt too . . . something.”

“Something—good, general word—as a writer, can you be more specific? You’ll have to if you want a shot at the Beverly William Award.”

“How do you even know about that?”

“Hey—I have parents who are way overinvested in my college choices. They’ve been shoving every guide, every grant, every potential award possibility in my face. I read the description of that and figured you might apply for it. Either that, or the Marchese Award for the student who translates Shakespeare into Italian.”

“That was my second choice,” I say. “Ciao.”

“Go on. I don’t mean to distract you from honesty with my impractical wit.”

“I like your wit,” I say and hand him the pretzel. “I like you. I like being with you—but . . .”

“I know that *but*.”

“Yeah.” I push my hair behind my ears, wondering when

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I last washed it. It's been smelling like coffee lately—so much that I've grown immune, but Charlie and Chili have both commented that being near me brings to mind the words *latte* and *dark roast*, and not always in a favorable way.

Jacob laughs. His voice. "I'm glad you have . . ."

"Charlie. Charlie Addison."

Jacob makes a face, semi-impressed. "So we're dating institutions, are we? Addison . . ."

"I know. But—he's really great." I stretch my arms above my head. It's normal, being with Jacob. Not overly flirty or anything. And I don't have to feel bad, like I'm doing anything now that hints at infidelity. Right?

Jacob looks at me. "Good. You deserve great."

"So this . . ." I point to him and to me, to the space in between. "We're fine?"

He shoulders up to me, bumping me like the cars would have if they'd been powered. "You know us—we'll always be better than fine."

"So, what's the name for us, then? Friends? FWH—friends with history? What?"

"Damn, woman, can you stop being a writer for one second?"

"I didn't say that because of writing. . . ." I push him away playfully. "Just—I don't know. I guess I like definitions. God, now I do sound like a writer."

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We walk back over the grass to my car. I always want to settle things, to be certain of what's going to happen, and I've tried hard to unlearn that. In my pocket, I feel the letter from Gala. Just knowing it's there raises my pulse. Change and steadiness. I might not read it now. Not for a while. Maybe right before she arrives. It's funny, but where I normally have an insatiable appetite for knowing things, delving into people, I don't seem able to do that with her. The letter exists, and it won't go away. Maybe that's why I don't want to read it. Once you read it, once you know something, you can't unknow it. Who knows.

I look at Jacob. He stands, feet planted in the tall grass at the field's edge. In another lifetime, maybe I'd have been standing next to him, holding his hand, or the two of us would wait out the night, looking for constellations.

"You going to that party?" I ask.

"I guess." He shuffles his feet to one side and then back. Is he waiting for me to say don't go? God, if another of me existed, I would. At that fifth, tenth, or fifteenth Hadley reunion, will I regret not making him stay? Not asking him to go back to the empty fairgrounds and sit in the Whip, our bodies near but not touching? It feels like tonight is that starting point, though. Or if not the beginning, the continuation of our friendship—and to ask the glittering evening to stay like this, to convince him not to go to a party where

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he'll most likely hook up with some hottie, feels loaded. Like I'm promising something I can't give. Besides, if he did get together with someone, who's to say I'd care? He's okay with me being with Charlie, and I really believe that Jacob and someone else wouldn't bother me. Not like last year when he had his brief make-out session with Lindsay Parrish.

I lean on the side of my car. "Thanks."

"For what?" He opens my door and I climb in.

"I don't know for what." But I feel grateful for the time with him. For the fact that he didn't run away just because—yet again—our feelings didn't overlap.

"I'm here for another week."

"So I'll see you then," I say, but it comes out like a question.

"You will," he says and shuts the door. The window is rolled all the way down, making it simple for me to reach out and squeeze his hand as a good-bye, but I don't. Instead, I turn the key and watch him leave.

As he walks away, I hear him whistling. At first I don't recognize the tune, but then it comes to me as I'm driving: Dire Straits, "Romeo and Juliet." I sing without any music to back me up, "There's a place for us—you know the movie song. . . . When you gonna realize, it was just that the time was wrong?"

Chapter Nine



I'm back at Slave to the Grind II, alone save for the customers who don't understand my shift is over. One wants a refill (it's self-catering). One wants a donut (we're all out). One wants her muffin heated (smirk—me, too—whatever that means). The name-changing ceremony is the day after tomorrow. By then, I'm hoping to have at least sorted through my college essay notes.

Up the stairs to the apartment I was sharing with Arabella, I think again how weird it will be not to see her all the time. How it's a good thing, maybe, that she stayed in California while I came back. Like practice for the fall. After all, she and I have been glued since sophomore fall—at Hadley, in London, back home. A few weeks and she'll be here, but all I have in the meantime are her piles of clothing—swimsuits strung on the bathroom hooks, skirts left in gentle heaps

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on her bedroom floor—and photographs of us in various locales. I pick up one of us sitting on the bench outside of the Black Dog bakery, each of us with an oversized apple fritter. Looking closely at this makes me miss her more. Not to mention crave an apple fritter. Note to self: Grab one tomorrow morning before hitting the books. Arabella's graceful smile inspires a smile back, even if it's only to a picture. Then I decide I don't have to just get grumpy and sad; I can call her. So I take out my phone and wake it from its closed sleep, only to have it move in my hand.

I realize that all that buzzing I felt in the bumper cars might not have only had to do with seeing Jacob. It might also have been my phone, poking at me with its vibrating ring. Those strange sensations I felt during the past couple of hours were only partly due to being with Jacob. The other part was due to having missed not one but three calls.

And they were all from Charlie. He's been chained to his desk most nights and I'm glad he wanted to talk, but now I have the sinking feeling that he's going to ask why I didn't pick up and I'll have to tell him why. Saying that I negged his calls makes it seem as though being with Jacob was more important. I'm glad I didn't feel the buzzing. It's like that time with Jacob existed in a separate, parallel universe where I felt free to blab.

I fling my grimy T-shirt off, shed my shorts, and slip on

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a plain white fitted T-shirt and an Arabella castoff, the skirt she called Brontë because it looks as though it belongs in an epic novel yet is a color that defies description (thus the proper name).

“Hey,” I say when Charlie picks up. “I’m walking to my car. I have coffee and crumpets in hand—your study break fuel.”

“Hmmm . . . crumpets—sounds suggestive.”

“Yes, I’m your little crumpet.” I laugh as I try to talk on the phone while getting into my car while carrying a cardboard tray of coffee. “But now I’m your crumpet with a coffee stain.” Once in the car I try to napkin off some of the offending spillage. Arabella won’t care but I do—it’s her skirt and I’m just far too clumsy. “I might have to soak my skirt in your sink.”

Charlie clears his throat. “That sounds just fine to me.”

“You know what I mean—to get the stain out.”

“I’ll be waiting with bated breath and a bucket of bleach. Or whatever it is you kids use these days. . . .”

We hang up and I smile the whole way to his house, even when I get turned around on a back road and have to circle back to the driveway. It’s odd, knowing the Big House exists now. The cottage used to seem like the end point, the only thing here, but now I understand it’s just a stopping point on the way to somewhere else. Briefly, I wonder if that’s what

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I am to Charlie or if we're more—if he's more to me than that. It's possible, right? People meet and fall in love and—

Luckily, I get to the cottage and find that he's lit two lanterns for me and left them by the back porch. I take one and walk around to the front, to the beach side. This time, I'm relieved to find him—not Parker—there. And that he's waiting for me. I put the lantern down at my feet, look at him, and then dart out to the waves. Salt water is good for cuts; maybe it's good for coffee stains. Charlie follows me out to the waterline, strips off his shirt, revealing a breathtaking body underneath, and wades past me.

"Aren't you going to come out?" he asks, his hair slick after diving down and resurfacing. He's farther out than I would have gone.

"I can't stand that far," I say, walking into waist-high and then chest-high water. It's cold—the Atlantic in summer isn't close to tropical. But that's not what makes me shiver. It's being close to him. Close to the person I like so much, who is wearing not so much clothing.

Charlie swims back to me and takes my hands under the water. I imagine the unseen creatures—sea stars, hermit crabs, fish—all looking at our entwined hands and thinking it looks like a wonderful new creature. "I'll hold you," he says. I clasp my legs around his waist and he walks with me like that out to where he was.

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The ocean water gleams, bright in spots where the moonlight hits the surface. We stay in that position, not talking, not kissing, not doing anything but looking at one another—staring in a way that isn't at all awkward—just intense and comforting at the same time.

I don't know how many minutes go by, how many waves bring the tides that much closer to changing. All I know is that at some point I feel a need for him like I haven't felt before and I try to tell him this with my eyes.

"I know," he says and then we're both in the water, shallower, though I'm not fully standing—and kissing. We're both so wet and moving in sync, I hardly know we're sand-bound until I'm lying down in the waves and Charlie's next to me, our legs scissored.

I've read magazine articles that enlist you to speak up and tell your partner what you want in bed (I assume this counts for in the sand, too), and I'm sure at some point I will need to do this, but right now, Charlie gets it pretty much spot on.

"Do you want to . . . ?" He's propped up on his forearms, our bodies touching, looking not so much down at me as sideways. We're on each other.

"I haven't . . ." I stop, refocusing on where I am. Here. On the beach. With Charlie. Whom I've known for a couple of years. But we haven't been together that long. In my body

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I feel ripples of wanting and then not wanting, each feeling mimicking the tidal pull. “You know I haven’t had sex before, right?”

This could be the showstopper. The line that kills the evening. But Charlie doesn’t flinch. He stays exactly where he was and kisses me. This starts a whole other round of rolling on the sand (not as sexy as it is in films, by the way). I lose myself in the motions, in the water and with his hands on me and mine on him.

Then he pulls his mouth back from my neck and looks into my eyes. “I pretty much figured that, yeah.”

This piques my curiosity. “Why?” The sand invades my underwear and I try to shift around to get it out—to no avail. “Do I just scream *virgin*?”

Charlie cracks up, one hand still gripping my waist, the other—wet—on my collarbone. “That’d be a funny scene—you, on Main Street, shouting. . . .”

“Yeah, okay. You know what I mean.” I look into his eyes. Have I ever been anywhere else other than this exact spot on this beach with this boy? “If you, as you say, figured that I was. . . .”

“I said I *pretty much figured*, for those of us taking notes. . . .”

I kiss him again, but more as a punctuation mark. Then I sit up. “Seriously, why? How?”

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Charlie sits with his knees up, his arms around them, next to me in the shallow water, small waves licking at our feet. “Well—a bunch of reasons.” He turns to me. “You sure you want to know?”

I nod. “I’m developed enough as a person to know that if I’m on the verge of . . . you know—then I want to discuss it. And in my weird but prototypical way, that means I need to hear from you.”

“Okay.” Charlie looks at the moonlight wavering on the water. “For starters—you have a close relationship with your dad.”

“Ugh—we’re bringing my dad into this?”

“It’s true—any Psych 101 class will tell you that girls who have close-knit relationships with their dad will have more confidence and lose their virginity later. Most of the time, anyway.”

I put on a serious, scholarly voice as though addressing a class. “Ah, yes, being valued by a key male early in life leads to being valued by other males later in life. Got it.”

“So there’s that. . .” He looks at me over his shoulder and slides his hands onto the back of mine so we’re making a double sand print. “And I just . . . you don’t seem . . .”

I blush, thankful that he can’t see it in the dark. Then I figure I might as well be really honest. “I’m blushing, in case you can’t tell.”

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“It’s not this. . . .” He motions to my body and his.

“Oh, so I don’t reek of inexperience?” I flash to my actual sum of it—a few pecks and one slobbery first kiss before high school, Robinson Hall freshman year, Channing—his friend who kissed me but only once, Asher in England with whom I shared the most physically—but not everything. And Jacob. We had a bunch of heavy kissing sessions, one impassioned afternoon in back of the science building, but more emotional nudity than anything else. Not exactly a roster of bodies.

Charlie laughs and scoots closer, so our legs touch. “Not at all. It’s more . . . in college girls are different.” He looks at his lap, at the sea, anywhere but my eyes. With the rolls of each wave, it occurs to me he’s been places and with people I haven’t begun to hear about. “Wait—that’s a gross overgeneralization.” Charlie stands up so his back is to the moonlight, his feet still water-planted. I lean back on my elbows as though I’m sunbathing. “You’re not like that. You know, when I saw you after you’d been drinking—with Parker . . .”

“I feel the need to defend myself—it wasn’t *drinking*—well, it was, but only a little. And I’ve since thought about why, and it’s because I was under emotional duress.”

“Good phrase.”

“Thanks. I found out all that stuff about my mother,

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and . . .” I don’t put in the Jacob info now because it feels off the subject. Not to mention the fact that as soon as I think of it, I’m pulled away from the beach and back into bumper cars and feel a rush of guilt for some reason.

“No, I know. You’re not a drinker, per se. And you’re not slutty.”

“Um, there is a vast pool of experience between virginal and slutdom, you realize.”

He shakes his head. “No. I know. Again, I’m generalizing. What I’m trying to say is that with other women I’ve dated or . . .”

“Whatevered?” I offer.

“Yeah—it was like sex was the goal. Or, if it wasn’t the end point, it was certainly a big part of the larger picture.”

“And it’s not with me?” I stand up, too, suddenly feeling more exposed than I had in the water. My clothing is dripping wet. I still have that coffee stain to contend with, not to mention feeling as though my sexuality is dripping away, too. “Am I just not a sexual person?”

“Oh my god, no—far from it.” Charlie hugs me, our wet bodies squishing together in a way that feels closer than when we’re dry. “You’re totally sensual—which is better than sexy, by the way, at least in my book.” He pulls back and tilts my face up to him. “You know that I’d love to . . .” He bites his lip.

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"You can actually say the words," I say and give a small grin.

"But I don't want you to think that's what this is. An exercise in getting to that moment."

We stand there in the motion of the water, the breeze that now chills me, still hugging. "I don't know when I'll feel it's right," I say. Charlie nods. He's respectful and yet caught up in me—what more could I ask for? Then I realize my own words. I said *when* it'll feel right. Not *if*.

"You ready for some dry clothes and a snack?"

I nod, letting Charlie lead me inside the cabin.

Once inside, he takes the stairs two at a time to grab something to wear and I survey the main room and my feelings. It's clear from the computer's hum, the open books, the pages of notes, that he's been working hard, studying and catching up on his Ivy world while I've been reliving high school's greatest hits with Jacob. Blush washes over me again when I put Charlie at his desk on a split-screen visual with me at the non-fair with Jacob. Maybe Charlie won't ask about the phone calls I didn't pick up.

He comes down the stairs, freshly changed and bearing a white T-shirt and boxers for me.

"Catch!" He balls up the items and chucks them to me, and I catch them in a feat of momentary sportiness.

But where to change? After someone touches your

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breasts, does it mean you automatically strip off in front of them? Not as far as I'm concerned, yet going to the bathroom down the narrow hallway by the back door seems a little forced. So I do the day-camp thing of pulling my underwear off, putting the dry boxers on, then slipping my skirt off. Charlie comes up from behind me once my wet shirt is off.

"Here, let me help you with that." He unfastens my bra from the back but doesn't attempt any fondling.

"Why, thank you, sir," I say and slide it off and put the white T-shirt on before turning back to face him. "Nice choice of colors, by the way." I point to the pure white shirt. While it covers me, even hangs long, it is rather sheer. "Let me guess—you didn't plan it?"

"Oh, no," Charlie says and grins. "I totally picked white on purpose. There's no pressure, and sex might not be the focus of us. . . ." He gestures between us. "But you look amazing in that."

I drop my wet clothes. They land with a squelch on the floor as I move to kiss him.

"Where were you, anyway?" he asks midkiss. My lips are attached to his but my eyes are open. We stare at one another for a second before I have to push away.

"What do you mean?"

"Before . . . when I called you half a dozen times and you

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didn't pick up." His tone suggests he's waiting for a good reason. A solid story.

Within these few moments, I realize the timing of all this sucks. If I'd gotten Charlie's messages or beat him to the punch, the offending fistwork in this case being that I just spent hours with someone whose place in my life is undefined. "I was . . ."

I start the sentence with every intention of finishing it honestly. Because really, what happened with Jacob? Nothing. What does it mean? Nothing. Okay, maybe it means something. But not anything I can articulate right now. Then I figure if Charlie had had a similar encounter with some old friend, I would want to know. So I try and say it.

"I was with an old friend."

"Yeah?" Charlie doesn't think much of this and holds my hand absentmindedly as he sits at his desk. With his free hand, he returns to paging through the open textbook on the kitchen table. His work is spread out in front of him in neat piles. My own work spaces are always cluttered—random papers with quotations to be used in my papers, books I might reference, messy penmanship abound. Charlie's looks like a factory of regimen and order—all carefully done notes on index cards—each one numbered and cross-referenced. For some reason, these are a big bummer to me right now—a reminder not just of school but of his swapping fishing

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lures with their shiny sides and ornate hooks, his freewheeling self, for the contents of a back-to-school sale.

“My friend, Jacob. Jacob Coleman.”

Charlie nods. “Cool.” If he senses anything special about my “old friend” being male, or that Jacob means something to me, he doesn’t let on.

I drop his hand and he hardly notices. “Cool?” I don’t mean it as a challenge, but what does he know about good old Jacob to call seeing him cool? “It was fun,” I add. “Catching up.”

Charlie looks up from the book and into my eyes. Here’s the turning point: We could resume kissing and distraction from work or I could push the Jacob thing. Not because I want him to be jealous. I’ve been that person and it’s no pleasure trip questioning someone’s honesty. But more because I want to be truthful. I want to express myself like Chris did with Haverford—lay it out there and see what happens.

“So,” Charlie asks, just when I think he’ll push me and my “old friend” aside, “just who is this Jacob person?”

I hoist myself up on the kitchen counter and help myself to a glass of water from the tap. “How long you got?” I look at him over the rim of my glass.

“For you?” Charlie stands up and rocks back on his heels. “All night.”

Chapter Ten



"So just like that?" Chili asks, handing money to the woman in the booth.

"Yeah—it was a total turning point in our relationship. I told everything and he listened. Not just listened. He heard me." I bend and fold the cash in my own hand, cash I'm not looking forward to parting with. With my whittling down my café shifts and taking off to LA, my bank account statement isn't what I hoped it'd be. I need more money for college visits, for senior year.

"That's so great."

"It is. It's like Charlie and I admitted to one another that we each have a past, you know? That we've been other places or felt other things, but chosen to be together. It's almost stronger that way." Chili nods. I hand my money over, getting in return a snake-length of paper tickets, each one

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a potential ride or game. I take in the bustling scene: Vendors with pretzels, bright pink wads of cotton candy, and sno-cones are next to the kiddie area, which boasts a roller coaster painted to resemble a dragon, miniature bikes that go in circles, and then larger rides—the Whip, the bumper cars. I smile when I see them.

Chili looks at me. “What?”

I shrug. “Nothing. What do you mean?”

“You just got a look,” she says, eyeing me for further evidence.

I shake her off and lead us to the totally unscary House of Hauntings where Haverford, Chris, and the cool set—Jon Rutter, Nick Samuels, Chloe Swain, and Jacob Coleman—are all waiting. After the hugs hello and overlapping *how’s it goings*, we join the line. Supposedly creepy groans and deep-voiced moans emanate from loudspeakers cleverly positioned behind thick black curtains.

“Are you ready to get frightened?” Nick asks. He’s all swagger and fun.

“Oh, yeah, this’ll be terrifying,” Chloe says. I know her only from my social history class and a few conversations in the student center, but she seems nice. “A real shocker.”

Chili pipes up. “I hate these things. They’re such lame attempts at fright.”

“You’re just jaded,” Jacob says.

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“Yeah.” Jon nods. “Didn’t your dad do that series of horror movies?”

Chili and Haverford’s dad is a serious filmmaker now, but he has early misfortunes on his resume. Haverford steps up. “Why yes—we had the pleasure of screening *The Mouth of the She-Wolf* last week, just to remind Dad that he wasn’t always so cool.”

“My mother laughed all the way through,” Chili says. “But it was freaky in some parts.”

We move as a herd into the front of the line. When it’s our turn, we all pile into the small black carts. I’m with Jon Rutter and Chili. Nick Samuels bunks in with Haverford and Chloe. And Jacob rides solo, ever the man of his own mind.

“Hey, Coleman,” Jon shouts to Jacob, “you know what happens to the character that wanders out alone, right?”

The carts chug into the darkened tunnel, where the pre-recorded moans and groans get louder. Ripped up pieces of fabric hang from the ceiling, fake blood splatters the sides of the wall, and every few seconds something jumps out at us—a beheaded mannequin, twin kid dolls that look normal except for their evil eyes and fangs. I can’t help but laugh, surrounded by familiar people and generally having fun. Then the cart swivels, and we’re in a hall of mirrors, only the lights are blackened and various monsters show up with us in our reflections.

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“When did the House of Hauntings get so high-tech?” I ask.

“Man, that’s kind of freaky,” Jon says.

“It’s only lighting and cels on the strobe,” Chili says.

“Well, deconstructing it doesn’t make it any less scary,” Jon says. Then, just in case we think he’s a wuss, “Not that I, personally, am scared. . . .”

“Right.” I look at the nearby carts. “Hey—there’s Haverford.”

Chili makes a ghostly noise, and Haverford echoes her as our cart glides on the tracks and into the dungeon. Right when we’re paused by the fake jail cell that houses more mangled mannequins, Jon jumps out of the cart, pulling Chili with him.

“Wait!” I yelp. “Where are you guys . . .”

Then suddenly Haverford is next to me and the cart moves again. “What? You never heard of musical horror carts?”

“You guys are . . .” I’m stopped by a sudden burst of scary—a bodiless arm that flings out from the wall holding a dagger. I duck to avoid it. “What the . . .”

Haverford taps me on the shoulder. “Hey—now that I have you alone . . .”

“Don’t tell me you’re the killer,” I say and imagine the whole thing as one of those uber-self-aware horror flicks

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where everyone's well versed in the genre and yet manages to get sliced up anyway.

"Ah, no," Haverford says, whispering in my ear. "That I'm not."

I look at him, our heads close together as the dungeon-people rail against their bars. "What?"

"You think Chris is still into me?" Haverford grips the metal bar that's meant to keep us from jumping out of the cart.

"Tough call," I say. I can't immediately tell Chris's side of the crush story—that he is still, but that I believe the interest is fading due to lack of requitedness. But I don't want to do him the disservice of hinting that the crush is over and done with, either, because that might mess up any potential future. "Why do you ask?"

Haverford shrugs. "No particular reason." He swats at a headless horseman. "Someone might want to know."

"*Someone* meaning . . .?" The cart turns, this time into a fake swamp complete with dripping sounds and wolf howls, as though wolves prowl through marshy areas all the time.

"Meaning me," Haverford says while leaping out of the cart, momentarily being stranded on the narrow edge near a disgusting tree made of seaweed or something equally stenchy and damp. Then he jumps into an oncoming cart while I am, yet again, alone. This time, I look around and

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there's no one I know. Just me, a dark and eerie swamp, and noises.

"I hate this," I say aloud, even though I'm smiling and it's an overstatement. I know it's all a set, none of it's real, but it's one thing to make fun of it en masse, another thing when you're by yourself and things are jumping out. Another severed arm lands near my face. I scream. A stupid mummy jumps out—I laugh-scream. Then a hand falls from the wall, right onto my shoulder. I squirm to avoid it, but it doesn't let go. The cart pauses near a supposedly capsized jeep, upturned in the water, with ghostly images of its former passengers swaying in the dark. I move to the other side of my cart, only to be met with another squeeze. This time, I feel hands on both shoulders. The surprise is great enough that I yell—loudly.

"Ahhhh! I need . . ." What? Help? A knife? The lights to go on?

The hands and arms clutch my shoulders, then circle me in a grip that in friendly circumstances would be a hug but in a house of hauntings is just plain scary.

Then—plop—Jacob appears next to me. He faces forward, gripping the cart's bar. "What'd I miss?" he asks like we're watching the Friday Night Flicks at Hadley, the movie screening series, where only true film buffs, freshmen, and the stoned go.

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Still shaking from the viselike hold his hands had on me, I elbow him in the ribs and he winces. “Jerk! I was scared.”

“Um, isn’t that the point?” he asks as the cart swivels back and we’re on the other side of the fake swamp, moving toward the hall of mirrors again.

“Yeah, but only in an ironic way—like, we’re about to be seniors and aren’t we cool and clever to go on this ride,” I say and put my hands on the rail.

“It’s that kind of mind-set that always gets screwed in the movies,” Jacob says.

I hold up my hand to stop him. “Before you launch a list of movies, let me just say that I prefer rides like . . .”

“The tea cups?” he jokes.

“No. Do I seem like a tea cups kind of girl?” I make clucking noises with my mouth to show he’s way off. “No—I like flume rides. I like the Whip. I like games, squirting plastic ducks to win a prize. I like bumper cars. . . .”

Jacob looks at me, his eyes holding all of that night, in the parked bumper cars. He puts his hand on mine on the railing. I let it rest there for a second or two and then move my hand away. “You’re not a freak-fest kind of girl?” Jacob ignores the brief touch and points to the werewolf head that appears from the wall. It’s dark in the tunnel now as we head toward the mirrors, and just as quickly as he appeared, he vanishes.

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Chris appears in Jacob's place, seamlessly. We sit there in the dark, the other carts in front of us leaving the darkness and entering the ghastly hall of mirrors, a veritable prom of all the gross creatures we've seen throughout our ride.

"Well, this has been truly frightening," Chris says, deadpan.

"Yep," I agree. The cart moves from darkness into grayish light, the mirrors on all sides, so we can see each cart. A projector makes a third party appear next to me and Chris, a guy in a top hat and monocle, as if proper attire connotes creepy. "Um, random guy sitting with us."

Chris drapes his arm around the hologram and I laugh. "Maybe *he'll* date me."

"Speaking of which," I start, "remind me to tell you what Haverford said."

"Okay," Chris says, his lascivious grin on. "Remind me to tell you what he did."

I raise my eyebrows. "A lot can happen in an eight-minute ride," I say, smiling.

Chris's smile changes to surprise and he nudges me so I'll see why. In the mirror, a few carts ahead, two bodies ignore their hologram extra passenger. Chloe Swain and Jacob are in lip-lock. Not the graphic, hookup kind, but the romantic, sweet—his hands on her neck, her hair—kind. The Jacob kind. My stomach dips down farther than it did when the headless dolls appeared.

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Outside, we all dismount from the carts and walk toward the food vendors. Chili comes up next to me, aware that my skin is buzzing with everything I've seen.

"So," Nick Samuels starts, "what's the verdict? Lamé, laughable, or truly frightening?"

I look at Jacob, who may or may not notice. "Oh, it might not be that believable," I say, "but it was definitely scary."

Chapter Eleven



When I decide to do something—go to London, write a paper, get back in shape by running every day—I usually do it. So when I wake up at dawn, and a combination of inspiration and desperation compels me to the Oak Bluffs library to write my college applications and essays, I pretty much know I won't emerge until they're done to my satisfaction.

Leaving behind the newly named café, I shake off the heated memories of the naming ceremony. The crowd was decent-sized, thanks to on-beach advertising and good word of mouth about the free blended drinks—my signature Mochanilla Chiller. Ula and Doug unveiled the new sign—a rectangle in which *Mable's* is carved and painted in gold leaf—and I gave a few words about Mable and her spirit, her warmth, compassion, love for her job, and how most of all she was the best person to curl up with a good cup of coffee

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and talk to. Then they erected the sign and people cheered before scooping up Mochanilla Chillers and mingling. In this crowd were Charlie, who stood near me, and Jacob, who stood near Chloe Swain, Nick Samuels et al, and Chris, who kept eyeing Haverford. I looked mainly at Doug and Ula and the sign, once at Henry Randall, whose dad owns the café property. Henry gave me the prep school half hello that translates into I know you, we might have been friends or hooked up, but now we're sort of just acquaintances. I never hooked up with him, but he and Arabella had a summer fling, and I don't harbor ill feelings toward him. More a void. But when my eyes traveled the crowd and landed on Jacob, I couldn't help but try and see what—if anything—was happening with him and Chloe. It's not that I'm invested in him, but I've definitely got too much curiosity—if his mind were a journal, I'd love to read it. I couldn't detect any direct body contact, but the image of his mouth on hers in the tunnel of hell came back to me while I was staring. And just as I thought I had gotten away with sneaking these glances, I felt someone else's gaze on me. Charlie's eyes were glued to me as I looked away from Jacob. Charlie's eyes didn't register annoyance or hurt, but he definitely took note. When I'd given Charlie a smile, I flicked back—once—to Jacob, and caught him looking at me, too.

Covert glances, lustful longings, and reproachful gazes

Emily Franklin

aside, I gather everything I need into an overstuffed backpack and drive to the Oak Bluffs library. I choose Oak Bluffs because the library is a little removed from town and where I'm less likely to run into another Hadley person checking email. I can't run the risk of sitting near a window and watching people I know go by lest they lure me away, so I drive to the next town, and park not on Chili and Haverford's street because again, I don't want to get distracted, but on a quiet street jumbled with painted cottages and porches.

The inside of the library is suitably hushed. I sit at the back, cloaking one of the computer chairs with my jean jacket, taking over the real estate space with my hoards of stuff. Once I'm settled, I try at first to do the Charlie Addison technique of having all of my study implements in order. But it's not me. Within moments my pens, printouts, notes, and disks are strewn about the desk. Rather than the dread I've been harboring for months, maybe even years, I sit with my Common App and start with all of the mindless info—educational background, test scores, academic honors (how tempting is it to make stuff up like “Most Punctual” or “Most Likely to Write Song Lyrics in Class”), and so on. Only when it gets to parents' educational background do I pause. Okay, I know where my dad went, what degrees he holds, and so on. I bite my lip. Do I guess at my mother's? I wipe my face with my hand. This could totally throw me off

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track, all this wondering. But I don't let it consume me like it would have at one point. My mother's note to me is in my bag, still unread. In the space for maternal information, I write "Unknown," deciding this is the most truthful, accurate information. Yes, I know she went to school, but I don't think she graduated, and I have no proof. There's no story, no degree on our walls, nothing that states her whereabouts, scholarly or otherwise. With resignation, I realize that even though Labor Day is rapidly approaching, her sudden presence in my life might not change as much as I thought. It will take time to have her drop-in appearance domino into the day-to-day of my world.

Before I get sidetracked, I grab a red Swedish fish from my bag. Note to self: Must go to candy store and replenish supply. I look at the questions—elaborate on an extracurricular one. This is supposed to be brief, but it takes me a long time. I waver between singing—which has been a primary focus for longer and therefore, I imagine, would be taken more seriously than anything else—and writing, which sounds like a sudden interest but isn't. If you look at my life, the lyrics, the lists, the English papers, the extra work on the Hadley literary magazine, it adds up. I write all that, plus I weave in my long project with Poppy Massa-Tonclair, my professor in London, who loves my writing and happens to be a world-famous author of "stunning literary novels

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with commercial appeal” (this from the *New York Times Book Review*).

The next question, the long essay, uses up what’s left of my Swedish fish and takes me a while, but I’m confident with my subject choice. Whom else can I write about except Mable? She’s the obvious choice, but the best one, too. Her presence in my life, both maternal and otherwise, her personal struggle and how it affected me, and helped me grow, but how it’s the kind of growth I wish I could give back.

The pages take a lot out of me. I wind up crying at the end. Partly because the essay has its sad moments, of saying good-bye to her, the twinkling lights of Boston glowing outside her window as a reminder of the world she was leaving, and partly because of the relief of having written it. It’s the same feeling I get with singing sometimes, an excitement when I know and love a song that comes on the radio, and as I sing it, and then a combination of letdown and relief when it’s done.

I print out a bunch of supplementary forms required by certain colleges—Dartmouth’s peer evaluation, which I will give to Chris, Sarah Lawrence’s learning essay, multiple requests for additional essays ranging from books I’ve read over the past twelve months to unusual life experiences to travel in other countries. Harvard, for example, lets me provide further reason they should choose me from the swill of appli-

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cants by submitting proof of my “exceptional talent.” Have I sleuthed my way to a scientific breakthrough? No. Have I been picked up by a record label at the ripe age of seventeen? No. But do I have anything of merit—yes. From my bag, I pull out the original of my journal project for Poppy Massa-Tonclair. Sending it is a risk in some ways, because it’s very personal, but with her recommendation it’s got to at least make me stand out. I email myself as a reminder to make clean copies of it to include with my applications.

I won’t necessarily apply to every place, but I am too focused right now to stop. I figure it’s better to have more essays done. I write furiously, unaware of time, or the red fish dissolving in my stomach, the light changing into afternoon speckle outside.

As payoff to working so hard, I email Arabella and find out she’s online.

I pour out everything—my unopened letter from Gala, questions about Sadie, getting more physical with Charlie, talking to Jacob, seeing the smooch in the House of Hauntings.

LoveBoo2

It’s like he wanted me to see it. To see him kiss her. Or maybe Chloe kissed him. I don’t know. But he put his hand on mine when he was in my cart. Why?

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PieceofBella

He was testing you, I think. Giving you one last shot at giving in to him—to whatever it is that draws you both together—

LoveBoo2

And I refused.

PieceofBella

And he made a point of telling you that okay, fine, he'll move on.

LoveBoo2

Rather quickly, don't you think?

PieceofBella

You know what they say, the faster you get back in action, the more you're denying your feelings. . . .

LoveBoo2

Do they say that?

PieceofBella

Who knows. But it seems like that's what he's doing.

LoveBoo2

And what about you? What's new with you and Surfer Boy?

PieceofBella

His name is Chase. And it's kind of fizzling.

LoveBoo2

Really?

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She tells me how there's no point really, since they're bound to go their separate ways. How the major flaw in flings is that they have to end. I tell her I'll miss her, that I do miss her, and she writes fast, slapping the words over one another, both of us knowing that with the holiday weekend coming up we'll have to deal with a tough good-bye in person.

LoveBoo2

Do you realize it'll be our first good-bye when we don't know that we're going to see each other again? It's so open-ended.

PieceofBella

We'll sort something out, right? Don't think I could handle too much time apart from my Love! Maybe you could come with me to Europe. . . .

LoveBoo2

Hey—I just spent hours doing my college apps—don't stick that carrot in front of me now.

PieceofBella

A girl I know is going off to be a Chalet Girl—working in the Alps making good money for socializing and skiing. . . .

LoveBoo2

Sounds awesome but . . .

PieceofBella

I know, I know. Back to your regularly scheduled program, right?

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I nod at the computer. I can feel it, that fall chill at night, the back-to-school ads on the radio. Soon. By the time I look up from my cubicle, I know the day has slipped by. I check my watch, which says it's four thirty. Is that possible? Have I worked for that many hours straight? I sigh, content but jittery from so much work and so little to feed me other than ideas. As I stretch, I allow a quick peek out the front windows as I gather my work into neat piles, separated by paper clips. I tuck everything into folders and furrow my brow at the steady clumps of people walking by. Normally, this street isn't so crowded. Then I remember. Illumination Night.

"How apt that you found inspiration on a night like this," Dad says to me as I hold the phone to my ear, my backpack slung over my shoulder, my stomach growling in double time. The librarian locks the doors after I leave.

"I'm so relieved, Dad," I say and chuck my stuff in the car. "You have no idea."

"Actually, I have a very good sense of the stress. . . ."

"Oh, that's right," I say, remembering he sees this all the time. "Anyway, I'm glad to be mostly done." A huge sigh escapes my mouth—even my breath can't wait to shake off the day. "Can you believe I did it in one day?"

"Isn't that how you tend to work?" Dad asks rhetorically. "You think and think. . . ."

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“I am a churner. If thoughts were milk, mine would now officially be butter. Yeah, I stew about things and then just do it.” I peel off my top layer—and leave on the tank underneath. I feel grubby though, my fingers sticky from the last of my Swedish fish. “Essays, done,” I say, miming making a check on a list even though Dad’s not here to see it. “Applications, done. Except for a few little details.”

“Now you just have to narrow it down to where you actually want to go.” He waits, opening a space for me to blurt out a sudden first choice. But I don’t have one. Or a second for that matter.

“Right . . . wherever that is. And they have to choose me. Or not.”

We finish talking, confirming his plans to come down for Labor Day—otherwise known as the family reunion from Mars—and then I sign off. I need to shower off the slime of too much library action before joining the Illumination Night festivities. Charlie and I are meeting by the pink house, a large Victorian seaside cottage, and planning on walking around the village together.

As I’m about to leave for Edgartown, I shrug to no one in particular and lock the doors, enjoying feeling free of actual weight from my bag and conceptual weight from my essays and applications, and walk toward Chili’s house. She and Haverford are hosting a roaming dinner with their

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parents, and I told Charlie we'd stop by, but maybe they need an extra set of hands right now. Cars are already jamming into the few parking spaces, and cottage owners are busy setting up their porches for tonight, when streams of people will wander around in the lantern light.

Past the aquamarine-colored cottage, I cut between two other houses so I arrive at Chili's house from the back. Her parents have a sense of humor and didn't mind when she erected a sign from the eponymous restaurant and hung it from the back door as a welcome. I see the sign, the green and red of it, and smile, thinking how glad I am to have her as my friend, even if she's younger. I walk to the sign, knock on the back door, and find that it swings open, revealing the open layout of her family's bungalow. The kitchen counters are set with trays, empty though, since their party doesn't start for a while. No one answers when I say hello and no one responds when I clomp around.

It's funny, too, because while Chili has become a close friend, and her brother is a by-product of that, we're not so close that I could just walk into their parents' house and kick off my shoes to watch TV. So I tread lightly now, and figure I'll go out the front door, make my way back to the car from there. Through the hallway, each wall painted a different color—orange, bright yellow, indigo—I glance at family portraits and gulp, thinking how many there are, how many

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different places they've been together; how few pictures we have at home. How no matter what, my family will always be unique—oddly shaped, triangular at best. Does Gala have lots of her with Sadie and Sadie's dad? Does she expect to suddenly insert herself into our albums?

I reach for the front door handle, peering as I do through the diamond-shaped cut-out window. As if the window is a camera, I have a close-up shot of Chris and Haverford. Together in a decidedly nonplatonic embrace. Do I open the door and interrupt them? Or back away? I decide the latter is the way to go—the last thing I need is to be witness to yet another round of random kissing.

The back door slams with a thud, I hope surprising Chris enough so he comes to his senses and realizes that kissing someone who already has a boyfriend—a long-term one— isn't the best idea. No one can be happy with that. And most likely Chris'll be the one to take the fall.

On the way back, I think about sisterhood and Sadie, about where she'll wind up at college, if she's figured out that we're so close in age. The radio is tuned to the Vineyard station, WMVY, which I love even though they seem to play a certain group of songs over and over again, mixing the perennial favorites in with enough new stuff that you might not notice. I sing along to "The Boys of Summer" as it plays, wishing the lyrics didn't pull me into September—saying no

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one's on the road or at the beach, *feel it in the air, summer's out of reach*. . . .

Where will I be when this song becomes reality? And what will happen then? I catch my reflection in the sideview mirror, and feel older. Not old, but a glimpse of maybe what I will look like later on, at that reunion Jacob spoke of. What parts of you remain the same after a season ends? What people, which memories do you keep? Which bits of your person get discarded?

Chapter Twelve



Back at the café, I nod to the servers, sneak a raspberry-lime soda from the back cooler, and go up to the apartment. Instead of throwing my bag down, I'm careful. Finished applications along with a note about copying my Poppy Massat-Tonclair project go in a special box I've labeled. Chalk it up to watching one too many design shows last spring, but I am actually enjoying feeling tidy. Compartmentalizing my stressors into containers.

I sip my drink, look in the empty fridge for nothing in particular, and then pad barefooted into my room to search for something new and exciting to wear. Not one for making fashion my statements, I tend not to spend time agonizing over outfits, but tonight's different. It's Illumination Night. A night of enchantment. And the first time I'll experience it with a boyfriend, so it means something. All those

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firsts—the first time Charlie and I kissed or fought or shared a drink or . . . lots of firsts. But what about *that* first?

Chris comes in while I'm wearing not one but two dresses—a long, black sheath on my right side and a white cotton one on my left. Both simple, both possibilities.

“Looks like your right side is heading to a funeral and your left side's off to beddy-bye,” he says, helping himself to a handful of rainbow goldfish in a bowl on the counter before he realizes they're totally stale.

My first thought when I see him is: How can he be talking about my clothing when his lacking love life just got a literal mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?

“Are you really wearing those?” Chris asks.

“Huh?” I stare at him, still stuck on the mental image of him with Haverford. I pluck at the dresses. “Not necessarily. I was just testing them out.” I want Charlie to be overwhelmed by me tonight. Not just happy to see me but a real *wow* moment. Often, I'm so caught up in talking or just in living, that I let that stereotypical girly stuff go—and I'm glad for the freedom from it. But every once in a while, like tonight, when I'm eased of academic worries and plopped right in the last weeks of summer, I want it all. To be that girl who has a brain, a decent life—albeit a slightly whacked out family—and a guy. The guy. The one whom I like who likes me back. “I'm debating which one.”

Labor of Love

“Well, they both fail.” Chris purses his lips and gives a frustrated look at the fish in his hand. “These are disgusting, by the way.” Chris’s tone is sharp. Funny like usual, but caustic, too.

“They’re just stale, is all,” I say and shrug. “Arabella bought them a while ago, so . . .”

“Ever heard of the wastebasket?” He grabs the bowl and dumps the assorted rainbow of minifish into the trash.

“I’ll call animal control if you like,” I say, laughing a little at the idea of the cracker fish being rounded up with nets while I try to sweeten his sour mood. “What’s going on?” I attempt to be casual and unassuming, not wanting to be obvious about what I saw him doing.

“Nothing.” Chris marches to my closet and flings through items, disregarding this one, considering that one, until he pulls out a swirly patterned dress and holds it out to me as though he’s solved the issue, no question.

I take the dress but shake my head. It’s the one I wore to a dance at school sophomore year, but the problem isn’t that it’s dated. In fact, the article is timeless—from the midseventies—and still in great condition. My issue is that it came from the basement of my house, from boxes crammed with my mother’s stuff. Arabella and I stumbled on them when she first came to Hadley, and at the time, I was annoyed with my dad that he cared I’d gone through them. But now I

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get it. All that past, coming into the now? Who needs it? And clothing—like tastes and smells and songs—can yank you to a specific moment. I never once thought maybe my dad had shared something special with my mother when she'd worn this with him. Now I see.

"Not this one," I say and step forward next to Chris so I can look through the clothing I've already looked through.

"God, you are so melodramatic," Chris says and huffs, taking a step backward like he wants to see me try and fail at finding something more suitable.

"What's your problem?" I snap, hoping he'll just fess up and I won't have to drop the *I know* bomb on him.

"You have this incredible life and you just don't even appreciate it."

I drop the search for clothing and turn around to face him, my hands on my hips, both sides of me feeling heated. "Of all people, I'm the one you say this to? I think I appreciate my life, Chris. Maybe you're the one who needs help."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"So I don't want to wear the dress that my mother wore decades ago to some other function—that doesn't make me deranged."

"I never said *deranged*."

"Great, pick at my words why don't you." I shake my head and check my watch. Chili's party starts in twenty min-

Labor of Love

utes, and I need to meet Charlie at the pink house before then.

"I learn from the best. . . ." Chris's sarcasm fills the room.

"You know what I think?" I say while Chris feigns surprise. "I think you're pissed off."

"And just why would that be?" He sits on the edge of my bed, then feels restless and leans on the door frame.

"Because I have Charlie."

"Oh, please," Chris says, too loudly. "Don't for a second give yourself that much credit. I don't care that you have a boyfriend. . . ."

"No—you just care that you don't." I spit it out and wait for Chris to react. His face goes stony and he crosses his arms over his chest. "You loved that I flew off to LA, potentially messing things up with him, and you thought it was great that Jacob came back. You were all into that soap opera, weren't you?" I don't wait for him to speak. "But now that the chips have fallen and I've sorted it out—you have nothing to say. Hell, even Jacob thinks it's great I have Charlie. You'd think maybe my best friend would have said something—anything—to me about how nice it is to finally be treated right by someone I care about."

We stare at one another. He doesn't move and I don't slither out from the two dresses. They're fairly representative now, actually—the lighthearted, pure me and the darker,

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moodier side. I don't want either tonight. I want fun, pretty, interesting. I want the dress Chris picked out—he got it right all along.

Chris doesn't add anything further—not a sigh, a hug, an apology, a comment. He just backs out of the room and closes the door. I remove the black-and-white ensemble and stare at Gala's dress. It suits me, but I don't want it to. Rather than wear it and have to think about it all night, I go to Arabella's room and look through her things, rushing so I won't be any later than I already am. Her bed, closet, and bureau are still a vomitorium of fabrics. Tank dresses and tube tops, prissy frilly shirts, jeans, cutoff khaki shorts, dresses, and sandals adorn all surfaces. I reach my hand in the closet, all the way to the left, too deep to see, and pull out something lightweight and soft.

The dress is a V-neck, close-cut from the bust through the waist, slim through the hips, then a slight twirl from the thighs. The under layer is dark pink, the color of a garden flower, and the top layer is lighter pink, stamped with creamy white blooms. I slip it on. Very un-me, but in a good way, I think. I brush my hair, leave it long over my shoulders, slide some honey balm over my lips, and go to meet my prince.

Okay, so bringing royalty (princes, kings, and their female courtly counterparts) into my night is a slight exaggeration.

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But I drive past the pink house and spot Charlie before he sees me and thinks he's worthy of some kind of title. I love that; catching someone you know when they don't know you're there. You see how they move, their body language, nervousness or sidewalk flirtations, fidgets—things you don't really notice when you're with them. I park and watch him wait for me. He looks left and right, swaying slightly in his spot by the pink porch, his clean white shirt bright against his tanned face.

Charlie's mouth forms the word *amazing* when he sees me, which is all I want to hear. Not that Chris is annoyed with me, not that my family life is all over the place, not that school is beckoning. Just that this boy on this night thinks I'm amazing, and I kiss him as a nod back to him.

We walk hand in hand along the sidewalk near the ocean, across from the bandstand and the expanse of green where picnic blankets already cloak the lawn. Out in the ocean, ferries arrive and depart; a subtle backdrop to reinforce that leaving and arriving are a daily part of life, even here in my wondrous setting.

"You're practically skipping," Charlie says, watching me walk in my ballet flats, the hem of my dress flitting with the wind gusts off the water.

"I'm happy." My smile stretches clear from one side of my face to the other, and I'm sure I'm showing way too much gum, but I don't care. Charlie pecks me on the mouth.

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“Happy is good.” He pulls me across the street, toward the mayhem of crowds and food and music. It’s nice to feel a part of everything. So much of the time I feel apart from it all. I try to explain this difference to him.

“I know what you mean. It’s sort of the same feeling I have about being back at school. Or, not being back yet, but going back.” He puts his hand on my waist, guiding me to a back street rather than Circuit Avenue, which is jammed with bodies. “I had this group of friends. . . .” He looks down at the pavement, then pulls me aside. I rest on the side of a large planter that’s filled with geraniums. “My friends freshman year were pretty much all assholes.” He pauses, dropping my hand. “The sad thing is that I was totally one of them.”

“But you’re different now, right?” I look at him with a smile, to show we both know it’s true. He’s changed.

Charlie nods. “I am. Sure I am. But . . .” He sighs and kicks at the concrete. “But you’re still you, you know?”

“What are you saying, that you worry your asinine ways will resurface?” A miniscule pang nudges at my stomach. Not hunger, just this gut feeling of uh-oh.

“I’m not going to tread over that ground again. That’s not what I mean. It’s like, part of me is really glad to gain back my parents’ approval. And go back. But I also know that, in a way, I’m not really going back. I’m starting again.

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But with all these people I know and who know this older, shittier version of me. Does that make sense?”

“Of course.” I stick my bare legs out so they touch his, enjoying the slight fuzz from his hair, the warmth of the fading sun on his skin. “You can’t ever really shake off your old persona. Unless you do that thing where you transfer or appear at a new summer place and take on a different persona completely. Then you don’t know who you are and you’re just splintering yourself.”

Charlie moves closer, puts his hands on my face. “You know a lot, Love Bukowski.” He doesn’t say the “for a not-yet-senior in high school,” but we both know that’s what he means.

“Are you going to start emphasizing our age difference now?” I ask, nervousness creeping in.

“Uhh-okay. . .” He’s clearly thought about this before. “I didn’t think this would be the optimum time to delve into the long-distance age conflict, but . . .”

My dress suddenly feels trite. My worries about the fall—which, who am I kidding, is too close to discount—come back all at once.

“Don’t get that look, Love,” Charlie says. He stands there, his legs still touching mine but not in the same way.

“This is what I mean. . . I’m going back to this place that I left on pretty poor terms. And I’ll see people who I’m not sure I want to know any longer.”

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“Like Henry Randall?” I ask, thinking about how Henry kept speaking about some old friend of his who left Harvard and kicked their friendship in the shins.

Charlie’s eyes flash with anger. “Yeah. Like him. He’s a perfect example of what I don’t want to be.”

“Well, who’s making you? Just go back there, do your work, and become that guy—the person you want to be.”

Charlie looks dismayed, as if I’d made light of his situation. “Sometimes you’re really . . .”

“Oh, now this is my fault?” We’re not arguing. Not exactly. But it feels like we’re about to. Still touching hands and slightly smiling, but tense.

“No—you’re naïve.”

“So, one minute ago I was beyond my years, and now I’m too young. Okay.” I stand up and hate myself for wanting the fairy tale. When will I realize that when you repeatedly imagine how things could be, it messes up how they really are?

“Love, wait. I don’t want to get into this now.” He takes my hand and leads me along a small path of stones set into the dirt between two buildings, behind the movie theater and out toward the other ferry terminal, the smaller one that goes to Nantucket. He positions me so that I’m on a bench as though I’m waiting to board and he’s on the brick walkway.

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"We haven't had that talk."

"We haven't?" I think back to the sex, or my lack thereof, discussion on the beach.

"Not that . . ." Charlie smirks. "The one in which I say how glad I am to be with you, and you say you are, too, and then we deal with the fall."

"The fall."

"Yes." He puts his hands in his pockets and taps his foot.

"I'm assuming you mean the season, not the biblical."

"Yeah, Love . . . are you . . ." He takes a deep breath. "Are you thinking this is—has been . . ."

I hear our relationship in the past tense and immediately I get that sting of pretearing. Here I am telling myself it'll all work out when I really don't know, do I?

I get off my passenger bench and stand next to him. We lean on the guardrails, looking out at the cluttered harbor. Buoys bat and dip, boats rock on their tethers, seagulls squawk. None of those inanimate objects knows how much I want this to keep going. So I say it. I take that leap and decide to—yet again—just tell him what I'm feeling.

"I want to keep being with you," I say. I don't look at him, but instead fix my gaze on a red mooring ball. "I never saw this as a summer fling, if that's what you're getting at. And I didn't think . . . especially after . . . when I'm with you, I feel good, you know?" I sneak a look at him. He, too,

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is fixed on something out at sea. "It's not like I go to UCLA or even Wesleyan."

"You're so not the Wesleyan type," he says.

"I know. It's just an example." What type am I? Hearing him say that, something occurs to me. "What about your family?"

"What about them?"

"Do you . . . you know, are you planning on lots of Addison family dinners during the year?" I say it kidding, but his tone is serious.

"Every Sunday night." He clears his throat. "With a jacket. And a tie."

"Sounds—" I don't get out the thought before he blurts out his.

"Can we not talk about them right now?"

I nod and think *but he is one of them*.

Now we look head-on. "At first," Charlie says, "I have to be honest—I wasn't . . . I didn't think . . ." He blushes.

"You thought I was going to be your hot little summer thing, didn't you?" I make a flirtation out of it to hide my incredible slice of pain that comes when you realize you and your beloved are not on the same page.

"I did," Charlie says. "I figured, I knew you—kind of—that we'd started something—and now we had the summer to see where it led."

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"You make it sound like it's over," I say, and the sting makes its way to the forefront of my mind. Forget that Chili's party is waiting, that Chris and I are semifighting about things unclarified; I couldn't walk away from this without knowing where we stand.

"Do you want it to be?" Charlie's expression tells me nothing.

"All I want to know is what's going to happen," I say.

"Spoken like a true writer," he says. "But you know I can't tell you that."

"No, but you can tell me what you want, what you think," I say. My voice is verging on pleading, which I hate, but honest, which I like.

"I like you, Love," Charlie says. "A lot. I hated being away from you when you were in LA and that was—what—twenty-four hours?"

"A bit longer than that."

"Fine—but my point is that I'm not good with separation. I know Hadley is all of fifteen minutes from Harvard, but it's a world away otherwise."

"I get it," I say defensively. "You're all college-oriented and you think I can't keep up, but I can."

"Oh, I have no doubts you could attend Harvard this year and blow off your own senior year with relatively few problems."

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“So, what then?” The wind pulls my hair from my shoulders to my face where I scratch it away. Maybe it’s the force of wind, or maybe it’s the salt air, but I feel the tears rise and pray they won’t reveal everything by slipping out.

“Oh, no, Love.” Charlie hugs me tightly to him. “I didn’t mean to have this kind of talk. It’s not a breakup conversation.”

I speak into his chest. “It’s not?”

“No.” He pulls back so I can see his face while he speaks. “The opposite. I don’t want to get burned. I’m . . .” He suddenly looks pale, like he might throw up or pass out. “I’m totally in love with you.”

Chills ripple over my bare arms, legs, up from the willowy bottom of my pink dress all the way to my hands, which start to shake. “You are?”

“You’re going to make me say it again?” he asks, smiling just a little, but still nervous. I shake my head. “I just wanted to make sure you—you don’t have to parrot me, okay? You don’t have to feel everything that I am; I just want to know that you’re prepared.”

“For . . .” I raise my eyebrows, waiting.

“For the work—it’s awesome, of course it is. But being at different places, having summer end—that easy hanging out spontaneous stuff? After Labor Day, it’s done, you know?” Then he coughs. “Not done—it’s not like we lose all the magic and turn back into pumpkins, but . . .”

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“I know,” I say. Relief spreads over me, pushing me into him until we’re kissing. I only stop to tell him I’m ready for fall—or ready for the part of it that includes him. That we can visit on weekends—or even afternoons. I don’t mention the boarding school parietal system and how he’ll have to get permission to visit me each time and how by the handbook’s rules we have to have three feet on the floor at all times and the door open at least three inches, because he knows this already and because it only further indicates the chasm between college life and mine.

“We should go to Chili’s,” I say and start in that direction.

“Together,” Charlie says, making the whole word so full, so real that I know exactly what he means.

Chapter Thirteen



Night air, ocean thick but breezy, sets the tone for Illumination Night. With my hand wrapped in Charlie's, I breathe it all in: the multicolored lanterns swinging from every cottage porch, the hush of everyone taking in all the beauty.

"I feel like I'm in *Peter Pan*," I say. "That scene, when they go out to the pirate ships?"

"Pretty amazing." Charlie nods. He does seem to like it, to appreciate how distinct the night is from all others.

Music plays in the central green, families relax with picnics, and before stopping by the Pomroys' place, Charlie and I take our turn at being one of those enviable couples—the ones splayed out on the lawn, her head in his lap as familiar music wafts over us. I can't help but hum along, fighting the words from escaping my mouth.

"You're allowed to sing, you know," Charlie says, looking

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down at me. His hands play with the long strands of my hair. "I love this." He grabs a handful of it. "Red, gold . . ."

I blush. He loves my hair. This is not, I repeat to myself, the same thing as loving me. He's *in love* with me. But is that love? Maybe my hair has one-up on the rest of me. "I've grown to appreciate it," I say and twist it up off my neck when I sit up. "After enduring brutal names as a kid and dreading the required uniforms from sports and camps." Charlie raises his eyebrows to ask why. "Color clash. But now . . ." I snuggle into him. "Now it's good."

An hour and a tray of finger food later, Charlie is debating theories of order with Haverford, Chili's scurrying around helping her parents, and Chris and I are giving one another the not-entirely-silent treatment on the porch.

"Nice party," he says.

"Yes. Lovely."

"We sound like we're in a play," he says.

"Yes," I say, keeping the tone clipped, "*Look Back in Anger?*"

"I was thinking more *She Stoops to Conquer*."

"Oh, give me a small break," I say and put my hands on my hips. He faces me and rubs his eyes. "Allergies bugging you?" I know him too well—a single gesture and I know what's up.

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"Yeah, it's been bad," he says and rubs more.

"Use your drops," I say.

"Maybe."

"Just do it," I say. "You always wait and put it off when you know what's best for you is to treat the problem right away." I stare at him, hoping he'll pull the bottle out from his pocket and squirt it in the offending eyes.

"Are you talking about allergy medicine or something else?" Chris stares at me with his mouth squeezed tight. He knows I know.

"I thought he was still with Ben," I say with no segue.

"He is." Chris looks over his shoulder, then back at me.

"And you're . . ." I raise one eyebrow, a trick I found is genetic—one I'm assuming comes from Gala. I guess I'll know soon enough.

"And I'm . . . taking what I can get."

"Isn't that a bit crude?" We start to talk fast, quiet but heated.

"It's a bit honest. Which is more than I can say for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I narrow my eyes and push my hair back from my face. It won't stay put in its twist and seems to defy me on purpose.

"Nothing . . ."

"Look, Chris, I've been nothing but forthright with Charlie. He knows about Jacob. That he's my friend. Unlike

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you—I'm not cheating. I'm not breaking up a couple. Aren't you at all concerned for Ben Weiss?"

"That's just like you—to worry about him and not me." Chris shakes his head, pissed off.

"That's not fair, Chris. Of course I'm concerned about you—it's just . . . I've been cheated on. And it sucks. Why be that person? Plus, you're worth more."

"You don't get it, Love. I *like* him. It's not a crush. I like him. You think it's all set—bam, I come out of the closet, hook up with Alistair as my first boyfriend thing, and then all is fine in Gayworld. Hell, I'm kind of mayor of that village, what with the GSA. But it's not easy. To find someone . . ."

"I get that. Or, I get it enough . . . but it doesn't mean you have to settle."

"Who says I'm settling?" Chris snags a turkey-and-brie roll up from Chili's tray as she walks by. She gives me a grimace and I make my eyes wide to tell her yeah, this is serious.

"So he's going to end his two-year thing with Ben and go right to you?"

Chris looks away, anger still causing a ruddy flush on his cheeks. "I don't know. But I'd just like a little excitement. You haven't exactly been supportive."

I think back on the past days, weeks, month. I don't feel

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as though I've been remiss, but maybe. "Support I can give you. And excitement, too. If that's what you want. But not free of warnings. I think you're running a huge risk of getting caught. Not just by Ben. But getting caught with a guy who cheats—not good. And hurting an innocent person—Ben. Mostly . . . just killing the purity of your crush." When I say this, it occurs to me that I could be displacing my own relationship insecurities onto Chris.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean . . . liking someone—whether they return the feelings or not—is pure. It's real."

Suddenly his voice gets angry. "Oh god, Love, shut up, will you? You sound like freshman poetry class."

"Don't be mean." My voice cracks. Chris and I have never fought like this. I push my hair behind my ears and take a breath. "We both need change, to let go—I already have—"

"Not really." Chris is smug, his face full of disbelief. "You don't let go of anything. Think of those stacks of journals in your room at home, of all those memories. Jeez—you haven't even read the letter Gala left you—and that was over a month ago."

"So?"

"So, she's coming in a week. . . ."

"Ten days."

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He touches my shoulder and I flinch, so he pulls back. “I don’t know. . . .” He looks through the narrow turquoise doorway where Haverford is laughing with Charlie. Both guys wave to us. “Probably I will get hurt. But I might not.” He looks at me. “And isn’t that what we’re all doing it for? The *might not*?”

I reach into his pocket and hand Chris his eyedrops, which he puts in without pause. “I don’t know what’s good for you, Chris. I just have visions of you this fall, watching Haverford from afar with Ben—or worse, being a third wheel. Or even worse—”

“Just how many worse scenarios are you listing here?”

“There’s the one where you’re the other man . . . the one who breaks up a couple and then gets scorned by all parties. . . .”

Chris nods, wiping excess drops from his eyes. It’s a flash-forward, maybe, to him being upset about his love life. Or maybe he’ll get lucky and it won’t end in ruins. “And you? You’ve dropped the Coleman crush?”

“Is that what you meant by leaving things in the past?” I tell him about Charlie, that we’re officially a couple that will last from summer into the next season. “And he likes me—I mean, the kind of like that means more.”

“That’s great,” Chris says. He means it, but with a tinge of sadness, the kind you get when you realize your best friend’s

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romantic life is full and yours is fractional. “And Jacob? Just a page in your journal?”

I nod as Charlie comes toward me. “Something like that. I’m sure we’ll be friends. But there’s nothing else there.” Chris and I lock eyes at this last statement of mine and then, like the lantern light around us, let the words—and our argument—swing and fade.

Over the counter a day or two later, Chris and Chili hint but don’t ask about the status of my prior night with Charlie.

“Did you . . .” Chili stops herself.

Chris nudges her. “Have pasta?” Chris asks, covering up for their sexual snoopage.

“You guys . . .” I wipe the counter and hand them a broken cookie. Sometimes, Arabella and I would break one intentionally so we could eat it. Eight days and she’ll be here. “I’m in total countdown mode. . . .”

They both fight grins and elbow one another again. “Countdown to . . .”

I sigh and flick my wet rag at them. “No, no, no. Not like that. I’m not counting down to the night of passion, you lustful losers. I don’t even know if that’ll happen. Not in the next week, anyway.”

“Why’s that?” Chili picks up the molasses cookie pieces and licks her fingers free of crumbs.

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I exhale so my breath makes my lips flutter. “He has to go to Cambridge—to Harvard—to meet with the dean again. And take some language placement test.”

“Ah, college beckons,” Chris says like that means it’s just the beginning of trouble. Not that I think Chris is against me and Charlie, only that he wants to have the same wariness about something in my life that I have about his behind-the-scenes fling with Haverford. According to him, they’ve kissed only that once, and it’s unclear what—if anything—it meant. He’ll have to deal with him soon enough, though, since Haverford is in his dorm. Ben’s a day student, which comes with its own set of pros and cons. Thinking of him reminds me of my own change in status.

“I can’t believe I’m boarding,” I say, the reality of it landing with a thud on my good mood.

“Welcome to my world,” Chris says.

“Our world,” Chili corrects. “At least you know what you’re doing. I’m just a lowly sophomore.”

Chris and I wink at her. “Just watch out for the infamous SSHU.” I say it phonetically.

“Shoe?” she asks. Chris laughs.

“No—SSHU—senior-sophomore hookup. It’s inevitable and never ends well,” Chris says.

I take this moment to give him a pointed glare. “Many kinds of hookups don’t end well. . . .” I go back to serving

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people before he can comment. But as I whip up a blended blueberry freeze, it occurs to me he could say the same thing about me and Charlie. I guess there are lots of relationships that have the odds stacked against them one way or another.

Chapter Fourteen



The worst part of summer's end is the speed with which it slings by. One day you're shucking corn for a barbeque in sunshine that never seems to fade, and the next that dappled morning light appears—the kind that says Labor Day is a mere four days away and another season has cycled through.

With Charlie off-island, I've been working doubles during the day to put the funds into my sagging bank account and hunkering down at night. Chris and I have been having tangential evenings in which we overlap food, media, and conversation. For example: watching *Mystic Pizza* (Julia Roberts, pre-need to be Hollywood thin, and way 80s preppy boys) while eating it and making up bizarre topping combinations. Two nights ago we rented *Blue Lagoon*, perhaps the cheesiest (nods to pizza) movie ever, while spooning blue-

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lagoon ice cream into our mouths. We made the ice cream by mistake, when Chris dropped a few blueberries from the farm stand into a pint of Mad Martha's vanilla and then we blended the whole thing up into a murky blue mess. Then, to top it off we dropped in red fish left over from my post-college essay trip to the candy store and gummy worms from our first accidental tangential evening when we listened to music relating to sweetness while eating penny candy from the pier and talking about love.

Now we're sifting through the last of the leftovers and realizing that no matter how carefully you select the contents of your penny candy bag, there are always pieces left at the end that no one wants.

"Yuck, a mushy chocolate coin," I say. "Mable gave me a bag of these once for Chanukah."

"I didn't know you guys celebrated Chanukah," Chris says as he unwraps a piece of ancient bubble gum. "This is so hard it'll break my teeth." He puts it in his mouth. "And yet I'm going for it, anyway."

"That gum's no good," I say and shake my head. "And I didn't know we celebrated it, either. I guess those quasi-religious holidays have always been murky in my family."

Chris wrinkles his brow both in thinking and trying to chew. "What are you?"

I raise my eyebrows to him. "I believe I'm human. And a

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sucker for sarcastic boys, poetic lyrics, and prone to malted milk balls.” I take one of the last on my list and bite off the chocolate exterior. I always eat like that, nibbling around the edges of things—brownies, candy bars, muffins—and then eating the center after.

“No, I mean, Buddhist, Presbyterian, Jewish?”

A look of bafflement crosses my face—I see it in the mirror. “I don’t know. I guess Jewish. At least my dad is. I mean, we had a menorah—and I remember lighting it with Mable and making potato pancakes.”

“Latkes,” Chris says.

“Oh, like you’re the expert on ethnic cuisine.” I lick my fingers. “Maybe I’m . . .” I stop. Maybe it’s yet another thing I have to ask Gala. Or never thought to ask my dad.

Chris watches me. “You know, you’re not going to get everything out of this first meeting with her. You know that, right?”

I shrug. “I guess . . . I just keep thinking that we’ll meet and then we’ll just . . .”

Chris guesses, “Know each other?” I nod. “It doesn’t work like that, I don’t think. It’s got to be more like piano lessons. . . .”

“Are you using music as the analogy here because I’m supposed to relate to it?” I grin.

“Yeah—also to remind you that you can’t drop it com-

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pletely from your life. . . .” He chews a gummy lobster. “You know how you show up for that first lesson—piano, drums, art, whatever—and you think, when I leave here today, I’ll be able to play the piano? But then you have a whole hour or thirty minutes and you get out of there with the sudden knowledge that you’re just scratching the surface.”

“So with Gala I’m apt to learn scales? The basics of sight-reading?” I slide my feet into well-worn flip-flops. They won’t last another season. Mable got them for me and losing anything that’s attached to her is still hard. Like throwing out the shoes only highlights that someday there will be an entire wardrobe in my closet she never saw, books on my shelf she never read, journals I write that don’t have her in them.

“I think, Love, that you have to just let the weekend happen, and not do your usual predictions. You might learn do re mi, or you might figure out how to play a whole song, but you might also see sheet music and think—what the hell kind of marks are those?”

“You’re a good friend,” I say to Chris as I get ready for my next shift and Chris gets ready to meet Haverford at the beach for swimming, surfing, or who knows what. “Really.”

My cell phone rings and I’m sure it’ll be Dad or Gala, confirming our dinner plans for the night after next. The weekend ahead is jam-packed. Arabella arrives tonight; Gala arrives in about forty-eight hours—and I’m the one

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meeting her at the ferry in Vineyard Haven that morning. We have a day together (cue big nerves and silent scream from me) and then meet up with my dad at Homeport for an outside casual dinner with good sunset views to fill up the space in case it's totally awkward, then an open morning on Sunday, and the Silver and White event on Sunday night. After that, all I have to do is snap my fingers and school's in session. I report to Hadley Hall as a boarder on Tuesday.

But I have so much to get through—and hopefully enjoy before then. I grab my phone from the counter. Chris and I have been cleaning up, packing, generally getting ready to shut down for the season the surfer paradise that Arabella created. The end result is tidy but rather depressing.

“Hello?” I say without checking the number. I sit in my favorite spot—the tiki stool that affords a view of the street below. Couples hold hands (and I'm psyched that I'm one of those couples you kind of envy and loathe on Main Street), and best friends laugh aloud the last few days before returning to the land of homework. My best friend is coming here, and I can't wait.

“Love!”

“Bels!” I'm so excited to hear her voice and about the thought of seeing her that I jump up from my stool, knocking the whole thing over. “Wait till you see how clean this

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place is. All your stuff is folded, courtesy of Chris and his retail years, and I'm only semilosing it with Gala arriving. . . ."

"Love."

"What? Sorry, I'm blathering," I check my watch. "Did you get in early? Where are you? I hear noise in the background."

"Uh," Arabella says, "I'm not at Logan." She was meant to fly to Logan and get on the bus that goes directly to Wood's Hole. "Love . . ."

"Oh, Bel, you sound sad," I say. "Was it Chase?" She tends to get close with guys kind of fast and then it ends abruptly, but she doesn't usually show much emotion about it.

"No, Chase is nothing. A fun time, maybe. That's all." She draws a long, deep breath. "It's bad—it's . . ." She starts to cry, which is a rarity, and I get nervous.

"Tell me."

"I'm at O'Hare, in Chicago," she says, pronouncing Chicago with a *Ch* rather than a *shhh*. "It's the fastest flight back to London, and you'll have to ship my crap back. I'll pay for it."

"Arabella—come on, that's fine—just explain—" I picture her on a pay phone at a big loud airport and feel guilty that I'm not with her.

"Dad had a PE," she says.

"I don't know what that means," I say.

"I didn't either until a few hours ago. I would have called

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sooner, but Mum booked my flights and it's all a bit crazy. It's a pulmonary embolism. Not good."

I know her so well; I can envision her mouth pulled down, sad at the corners, her posture flagging, her eyes brimming. "I love you. I'm sorry." I don't want to ask if Angus Piece's prognosis is good or bad or somewhere in between, because it doesn't matter and won't help. When Mable was sick, people asked that all the time—like knowing information would make it all okay. "What can I do?"

"I don't know . . .," she sighs. "And I feel really horrible. I was meant to be there for you. This is such a big weekend and here I am deserting . . ."

"You're not—don't for a second think that. You're doing exactly the right thing. I'll be okay," I say, sounding confident, though inside I'm wavering. "Promise. I'll tell you everything and you'll know I'm thinking of you—"

"And that I'll be doing the same," she says. "So—just . . ." She pauses. We're both stuck on the fact that we were supposed to have not just one weekend where she supports me through meeting Gala, but one more chance to be together before our years of being side-by-side are stopped.

"I already miss you," I say.

"Me, too." She sniffs. "Are you crying?"

"No," I say. "But I could. I just keep thinking that I'll see you—you know? Like on that first day of school."

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“Your first last day,” she says. “God, I hope he’s okay.”

We sit there, not saying anything, just breathing and thinking our own thoughts until an announcement comes on in the background. “I think that’s my flight. I have to go.”

“Give my love to your family,” I say, meaning Monti, her mother, Angus, her dad, and her brothers—Clive and of course Asher, my ex.

“I will,” she says, not mentioning anything about Asher specifically, and then she hangs up.

Maybe she, too, is getting a slam course in change—how fast it hits you, even if its toll is gradual.

“You know what I think?” Chris asks, rolling his head to the side so we can talk better. He slept on the couch last night and I slept on the floor on a red air mattress that isn’t so much holding in air as it is slowly expressing it. I wound up with my head nearly on the hardwood.

“That it’s silly to sleep on the ground when there’s a perfectly good bed—correction—beds—right here?” I ask, pointing to the bedrooms in the apartment. We both fell asleep while watching another round of rentals to try and make me forget about Arabella’s dad (who is still in the hospital in critical care) and my upcoming onslaught of events, and my own familial wanderings. How is it that we come

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into the world fairly simply and the longer we stay here the more complicated everything gets? How could I go from being a simple girl with a dad to having one of those modern families documented in magazines under headlines such as, “Half Siblings and Sudden Mothers—How It Works.”

“Anyway,” I say, twisting my back so it cracks into place, “my body’s not pleased with my choice of sleeping locales.”

“Well, that’s not what I was going to say, though it is a good point.” Chris sits up and swings his legs over the side of the couch. His hair sprouts from the back in raised fronds, giving him the appearance of a messy-on-purpose rock star.

“Your hair’s out of whack,” I say and touch it.

He grabs a chunk of mine, studies it, then lets it go. “You know what I think? Seriously?”

“What?” I lean back onto the couch while Chris goes and pads around the kitchen. Humming to himself, he returns with coffee, which I gratefully accept, and something cold and metallic, which I feel on my neck. “What’re you doing?”

“Trust me?” he asks and displays a pair of shears.

“Oh, no, no way . . .” I paw at my hair, protectively clumping it together. It’s really long now, longer than it has been due to my lack of salon visits and the way I’ve been ignoring the state of my physical self.

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“You yourself said we all need to change, right?” Chris points the shears at me, then realizes he looks slightly menacing, so he points with his eyes instead.

“I meant inside, not superficially.”

“But don’t you agree that often physical change is a good predictor of other change? That, say, a haircut could precipitate the new regime of love, family, college—senior year?”

I think of my summer, of the labor of it all, the fun and romance and heartache, and give the smallest of nods. Part of change, of not just letting it wash over you, but rolling it up and making it a part of you, is giving in, becoming one with it so you don’t feel split inside.

I tip my head forward, creating a hair curtain in front of my face, looking at the shades of red—some lighter from the sun, the underside still winter-auburn. Then I flip it all back, shampoo-commercial style. “I’m closing my eyes, just so you know.”

“Good.”

Chris opens the scissors and the next thing I hear is a long snip that culminates with my red hair—my signature sunset-hued locks—in my lap. “Sit still,” he cautions. “The big chop is easy—it’s the smaller changes that take more time.”

Chapter Fifteen



With my newly cropped hair, I bring my packet of mail onto the apartment's small roof deck. Actually, calling it a roof deck is perhaps an overstatement both of the function and regality of the space. Set between two eaves, there's just a small flat area big enough for me and my mail, but it's all I need to enter a bubble of privacy so missing from the rest of my life right now.

I touch my hair—for the millionth time—and flip through the mail that Dad sent in one large white, Hadley Hall-crested envelope. Chris did a decent job—not perfect, but it's not the panic-inducing nightmare I anticipated. In fact, I'm liking the feel of wind on my shoulders, not having to twist my hair every two seconds to keep it from getting in my eyes, and his main point about my mane—it's a change. Longer in the front, with the most forward pieces just below

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my chin, the rest is shorter, neck-revealing, and blunt. I may regret my first big haircut in years by the time fall rolls in, but for the next few days—what's left of summer—I like it fine.

Plus, having something superficial gives me a perfect excuse not to obsess over Gala's arrival. What do people normally do the night before they meet the parent who has never existed? Bake cookies? Watch bad television? Flit restlessly into a broken sleep? Maybe I will do all of those things, or perhaps none of them. But one thing is certain: She is coming, we are meeting, and I will hear my mother say my name for the first time.

Correspondence included in my dad's packet in no particular order:

—A bill from the bookstore, which my dad says I have to pay—good-bye to more of my summer earnings, even though I'm fairly sure the items I purchased fall under his jurisdiction of school things.

—A postcard from Sadie, whose writing looks nothing like mine—not that I thought it would, but then again maybe I did. It's all of three sentences:

Love—Coming to the East Coast (October? Thanksgiving? Not sure) and hoping to crash chez vous. Is that legal in dormland? If you're looking at schools

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here, let me know—otherwise, I'll see you sans surf-board.—x Sadie

It's short, but then again how much more can you fit on a postcard? Maybe I can convince her to wait until Thanksgiving. Momentarily, I snap forward to a bizarre family feast—with Gala, Sadie, me, Dad, and Louisa. Then I shake it off and move on to:

—A letter from Lindsay Parrish, the kind that would normally be Xeroxed with names inserted in pen, but because nothing the girl does is normal, it's handwritten on her personal stationery. The card is thick, cream-colored, outlined in red, which seems to highlight her viciousness, and set with a script LP in the center, which makes me think of those names Chili and I came up with. *Lame Piranha. Lustful Predator.* Then I remember she hooked up with Jacob and feel queasy for a minute. It's not so much that she's mean to me, but that he'd be swayed into being physical with such a cliché. I sigh, reading her note, taking solace in the fact that they didn't do much. By all accounts, he was drunk, she was easy, and it was one heavy petting session that unfortunately took place on the quad in full view of the student body. But I digress.

*Dear Love Bukowski, [as if there's another Love?]
Hello from the Hamptons! [Leave it to Lindsay to*

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be friendly yet announce to everyone her elite location] *As you know, I've been lucky enough [or scheming enough] to have been named co-head monitor for the upcoming year. Along with fun, exciting plans—fall carnival, college crash courses, winter formal [read: I look pretty in an icy way and let people fawn over me] and so on—I'm also initiating some more serious events.*

She mentions social initiatives, which sound good and charitable, but which reek of college apps, and then a very worrying “new regime” in the dorms. Specifically what this entails, she doesn’t say. She slips one final sentence into the letter and I wonder if it’s everyone’s note or just mine.

As autumn approaches and we head back to Hadley, it's important that we understand how everything works there and remind ourselves that once that first bell rings, that carefree time of summer is over.

Thanks for the reminder, LP. Of course, my dad has stuck a Post-it onto Lindsay’s card:

Sweet note! Hope you're as jazzed up about dorm life as I am for you—it'll be great, sweetheart, really.

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Dad is clueless or naïve enough to call Lindsay sweet and keeps talking up the boarding life as if at some point I'll suddenly cave and announce he's right and I am thrilled to be joining the ranks of the castoffs. I give him credit for trying but take off a few points for his use of the word *jazzed*.

Two other items of note:

—A letter from Mrs. Dandy-Patinko, who informs me of a couple of college visits. I'll need to line up a few more once I'm back in Boston, but it feels so far off, those interviews and tours. That choice. The waiting to see if I'll be accepted by the place I want—like having a major crush until April. From where I sit looking out at the pink sky, enjoying the heat radiating from the blacktop roof, it's another world, and quite frankly, I'm happy in this one.

I save for last a letter on paper so thin it hardly fits the name. On blue airmail paper I read about Nick Cooper's adventures this summer. He's a semifriend of Asher Piece's—one of those odd situations where the person that you meet through your friend (in this case, Asher) turns out to have more in common with you than the introducer. We've written a few times since I came back from London, and he made a donation to the Avon Walk I did with Chris, and even though I don't think of it daily, I look forward to his letters. We don't email. We don't call. We don't know one another like that. It's more travel, or thoughts, or theories. Books

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we've read and what they made us think. As I explained to Chris once (who is the only one I've told about them—not that writing to Nick is a secret but just not something I want to draw too much attention to), they are very thinky. Chris said that maybe we write the way writers do, in that old-fashioned form of communication that's timeless and kind of special.

Nick's letter details his travels to Iceland, to visit an aunt in Berlin, and then to Morocco. Reading his descriptions makes me jealous—not only of the places and his travels—but of the words. Of his writing.

Just like that, I write a letter by hand to Mr. Chaucer, head of the English department, and beg him (albeit in an eloquent way) to let me take the advanced creative writing class even though I haven't taken the prerequisites. Why I never thought to do this sooner is a mystery. Maybe he'll give me credit for studying with Poppy Massa-Tonclair and doing her writing project, or maybe he'll stop me in my tracks and say no way—not even for senior year. The class is intensely competitive. I'm glad to have thought to ask, but add the outcome to a list of unknowns that spurs on some stress. If I did get in, it would give me a place to work on what to say for the Beverly William Award—if I even apply for that. Maybe Nick Cooper will have advice about that. Make a mental note to write back to him and ask.

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I put all the papers and letters back into the envelope, sealing my thoughts in there, too, and then hear a knock on the open window. I stay seated and wait for the knocker to appear.

“Want some company?” Jacob asks. His curly hair announces his entrance before I can say no. He sits on the only space available—a small spot next to me—while the sun starts to sink.

“What if I said no?” I ask, grinning.

“You’d be stuck with me, anyway.” He gets up right after sitting down, leans as far into the window as he can without falling back inside, and reemerges with his guitar.

“What’s that?” I nod to the thing.

“It’s an instrument. Stringed. You’ll like it.” He smiles and tunes up, the notes floating into the air around us. “So . . . I’m leaving tomorrow.” He doesn’t look up from the neck of the guitar as he says this, and I don’t register the info more than to say:

“Then we’re back to school.”

Jacob will leave the island to go home to Connecticut until Hadley starts. I will be here, doing family stuff and packing up, then the Silver and White event, then back to dry land. Then the summer selves we see now will be hauled into the school-year bravado with all those weird feelings that whatever did or didn’t happen over the summer counts. It does, though, right?

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"I thought . . .," he says, strumming aimlessly and finally looking at me, "that even though you're all . . ." He puts on a mock-surfer voice. "I'm giving up tunes and I'm into writing now and whatnot. . ."

"You know I hate *whatnot*."

"I do know that. That's why I said it. . . ." He smiles. Then he starts to play a familiar song. "You've got Charlie . . ."

I blush. "Yeah. He's . . ."

Jacob cuts me off. "And I've got Chloe." His green eyes meet my blue ones, not that I can see my own eyes, just reflections in his.

My nod is the only gesture I make—no words—to say oh, you're together now? One kiss in the tunnel of hell and now they're a couple? It's not my business. It's not a big deal. It's just . . . "I guess that's the way it is, huh?"

"But . . .," he says, his fingers plucking strings that resound in my chest. "There's no law saying we can't still sing together, right?"

I nod. "Right."

As he strums away, the sunlight dims so that we are both surrounded by filmy hues that people call the golden hour. We look it; golden, that is—young, together, happy, unmarred. "Hey," he says, his hand stuck in chord position, "how come you don't sing as much?"

I put my arms up to the sky, remembering that my dad

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used to tell me to “tickle the sky” when I was little—I wonder now if Gala knew those kid tricks, if she did the same ones to Sadie, or if everything was split after she left and nothing of my growing up resembles the alternate one in California. “I think it’s all the same place, you know? Like the creative energy. Wherever that comes from. So the time—not just the actual minutes, but the feelings—I used to put toward singing and wanting to perform is all channeled into writing now.”

“So you’re writing up a storm then? Novels abound?” He looks at me and smiles. Not all the way, but from one side of his mouth. Then it hits me. All summer long I’ve been waiting for Charlie to have that expression—when I put my fingers to his mouth that night and tried to get him to grin halfway—and all along it’s been someone else’s move. Jacob’s.

“The mind is so weird,” I say but don’t explain the pre-thoughts that spur on that statement. Jacob nods. “It’s not like I’m sitting here every day and pounding out pages. But it’s just . . .” I pause and think, soaking up the rippling light rays that cast a pink sheen on my already rose-toned skin. I feel pretty right now, that elusive satisfaction with my body, my face, my being. Random, but nice.

“We have only a certain number of words.”

“Exactly. All those ones I sang are now in my mind for plot or description or dialogue.”

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He stops playing the guitar, the side-grin back on his face. "Think you could spare a cup of them? The words, I mean." He watches my face while I sigh and start to protest. "I'll tell you what. You sing for me now—with me—and the next time we're due to have a conversation you won't have to participate."

"Why's that?" I let my legs unbuckle from their crossed position and lean on the roof's eave.

"Because—I'm making you use up extra words and creative energy now, but it's okay because you know you'll make up for it at a later date."

I tilt my head and twist my mouth. "Okay." He smiles. "One song." It's not that I've grown stingy with my voice or that I like music any less—only that it seems to be occupying a smaller space in my life and brain. Where once I just quoted, or struggled with lyrics, sentences are building in me. If only I have the time to put them on paper—maybe pleading with Mr. Chaucer will produce results.

"Which one?"

Jacob resumes strumming and I hear a thousand songs in all the notes. "Oh, I don't know. With your knowledge and mine we could probably sit out the night up here starting songs or trying to choose the right one."

"That we could," he says. Then he looks only once more at me before his fingers begin.

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"A lovestruck Romeo . . . ," he starts. He begins to play "Romeo and Juliet," but it feels too much like we're making a statement. The time was wrong. I don't want the time to be wrong with him, with Charlie, with Gala, with Angus Piece.

"No, not that," I say. "Even though I love that song."

"Got a better idea?" He clamps his hand over the strings and there's sudden quiet.

I nod. "Richie Havens." I can almost hear the music in my head. "His cover of George Harrison's—"

"'Here Comes the Sun,'" Jacob finishes for me. It's intimate when someone completes your sentences for you—how many people in your life really can and do it with great accuracy? Could Charlie? Will my mother ever be able to? Does it mean something? Does it mean everything?

Jacob's playing is immaculate, as though he's practiced for this request and this time with me on a borrowed rooftop of a place I'm leaving in three days. I listen to his intro—it's happier, more buoyant than the Beatles' version, faster. When it's time for me to sing, I falter at first, but Jacob doesn't flinch; he just lets me keep going until I'm there—fully into the rhythm and the words, feeling maybe for the very first time what George Harrison meant, no matter what the tempo. It will be alright. It's not sad, this passing of what was, what you had or missed; it's part of you and who you are. The song

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sings of winter, which it's not now, and being lonely, which I'm not either, but the mood fits: me and my old friend, one whose definition is blurred at the edges (and I do love edges), and that's okay.

I sing loudly at the end, and Jacob's guitar-playing picks up. Then, when it's over, we sit with the hum and buzz, the intimacy that feels to me even greater than sex, but then again what do I know about that act, really, having melded our voices, up here, away from it all.

"You ready to meet her?" Jacob asks, his voice breathy. He doesn't say her name, and I'm grateful for that.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I say, and before I can second-guess that statement, I go back into the song—not singing it—but living in it, right now, here.

Chapter Sixteen



Here is what it's like meeting someone you've never met, even if they come with a giant, important label like *mother*: just like meeting someone you have met. Even though Gala brought me into this world, even though her biology formed half of my being, when we stand in front of the ferry terminal amidst pairings of other people, it's not a big bang. It's a small burst.

After a morning filled with coffee and a churning stomach, I slide into my favorite beige shorts, the ones with frayed edges, and a classic navy blue T-shirt that can't be construed as too tight, too loose, too anything; in fact, that's my goal—not to be definable. I don't want Gala getting here, seeing me in person for the first time since infancy, and categorizing me.

I position myself near the front of the ferry building near

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where the cars drive off, where in a mere three days I'll be returning with my own car's coveted Labor Day reservation back to Wood's Hole. Before I push my hands in my pockets, I tuck the long strands of my hair behind both ears, and then, thinking that makes me look too young or too eager, I shake it out so some is in front of my eyes, true teenage style.

Then I see her. It's clear that she sees me, too, right away from the ferry ramp. But she doesn't wave and neither do I. As she approaches, my insides dip and rise like the shoreline, and for a minute I'm so lightheaded I could pass out. Then that feeling leaves and I'm calm, feet firm on the hot tarmac.

She stands a couple feet away from me like we're trying to figure out if she's the person I'm meeting, like I'm a tour guide and she's signed up for a ride, which maybe she has. I allow myself one good look at her—the white linen sleeveless shirt, the pants in some color I don't know a name for, only that it reminds me of cut dried grass, and a mouth and face that reflect an older version of me. I always thought I looked like my dad—when you have only one parent I guess that's what happens; you find resemblance or connection where maybe there isn't so much. Now I'm standing here at this point of returning and leaving knowing I'm gaining a parent.

“Hi,” I say. It's obvious who she is, from her hair that

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would have to be the twin to mine had I not cut it. Maybe I agreed to the snippage for that reason: so I wouldn't match her.

"Love." She steps forward and then stops. "Can I . . . ?"

I swallow. I always pictured that she'd have the upper hand—she was the leaver after all; I was just the person left. But now, right now in the chilled air and pull of fall, I realize that's not true. I get to decide. I'm the one who can reject her now—she already did the damage to me.

"Go ahead," I say and let her hug me. She doesn't cry then, just pulls me into her chest the way she might have done when I was an infant, but not again since. I hug back, but with a degree of detachment. She doesn't pat-hug, which is a point in her favor.

"Thank you," she says, and we go to the car. In her words I think I'm meant to understand an apology, a connection, but I'm not sure if this is my inference.

I can't help but study every motion—how she walks, toes slightly out in her wedge espadrilles, how her head cocks to the side when she's asking a question, which she does frequently, and her eyes, how they contain parentheses to everything she says.

"I do that," I say when she leans forward to the radio in my car and begins to flick through stations.

"Really?" Gala looks at me but keeps scanning. "I drive

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everyone crazy—Sadie . . .” She stops, as though mentioning the daughter she stayed with could ruin anything we’re starting.

I overlook it, wanting to show her she can say whatever she wants and it won’t change what happened. “It’s funny, it’s only here—on the Vineyard—that I leave the radio tuned to one station. WMVY. I just put it on as soon as I’m closer to the bridge than to Boston and keep it on until I’m on the way back.”

“Sort of your announcement to yourself that you’re on vacation and then the subtle back to reality?” She turns it to my station and sits up in her seat.

“Yeah.”

“They always play new stuff,” I say, “but they also cycle through ten songs I love that never make me wince. . . .”

“Like?” She looks at me, obviously taken with the fact that we’re together, in a car, and it’s not overtly terrible.

I turn the volume up. “Like this.” The song is “You’re So Vain,” Carly Simon’s infamous ode, and I immediately sing along, remembering how Jacob and I sang the same song this past spring at school. Gala does, too, and a wave of nausea and sadness comes over me when I hear her voice. It’s like mine, which is like hers.

“We sound . . .” She looks at me in the middle of the song and we both know what she’s about to say, so she switches

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tacks. "You have a great voice. It's no wonder you're destined for a career in music."

I signal left, onto the road to Edgartown so we can go to the cottage. "I used to think that," I say, feeling just a little powerful as I shrug off her preconceptions of me. "But now I'm not so sure."

"No? What then, art? Soccer?"

I give her my twisted mouth and shake my head. "Do I look like I'm headed for Olympic glory?" She laughs. "Not that."

She doesn't ask what then and I don't volunteer the information. This, I suspect, is how the weekend will go—careful conversations, both of us skirting on the edges in case—like skating on a possibly frozen pond—we sink without warning.

After a marathon of Q&A ranging from third grade social issues (Tanya Oberman dropped me like a hot potato and never explained why) to the seventh grade talent contest (I placed second, robbed of the top place title by Greg Anthony's rockin' anthem played on the electric keyboard), Gala and I finish our lunch before we get caught up further to the present.

"You know this place has been here as long as we've owned the cottage?" she says, pointing with her chin to the

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fried clam shack—the same one where I met Charlie. I spoke with him last night and he suggested going here with her, saying it's casual and cheap (so I don't feel weirdly indebted to her for a fancy lunch) and there's lots of distractions. He was right about that—and I'm thankful for his advice.

"Who is *we*?" I ask, sliding a ketchup-covered fry into my mouth.

"Oh." She looks embarrassed. "David. Your father and I . . ."

"I know who David is," I say. It slips out fast before I edit and it sounds pissy, but maybe that's okay. Maybe it would help us both if we get past the niceties and into the murk so we can—eventually, hopefully—climb out of it. "And it seems to me there isn't really an *us* there concerning the two of you. Is there?"

It's offensive to have her say that, like they're a couple or something. Like there's a coupling between any of us except me and my dad.

Gala takes this in stride; probably she's a little prepared for this. "You know, you're right . . . aside from the fact that once you have a child with someone, you are always linked to them. No matter what. We conceived you and you are ours, like it or not."

I open my mouth to protest, but she goes on. "You feel like his. And I accept that. But he and I had a life together

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before you, and though it's distant, and mainly irrelevant now, it's the truth. Our union brought you here."

I don't jump into this right now. I don't launch a tirade, because it would be halfhearted and because I know she's right, at least in theory.

"So when I say *we've* owned the cottage, it's because most of my memories of it are tied up with him. David." I wonder if he's told her about Louisa. I decide he has; he's got to have at least wanted to wield that as some sort of evidence he moved on.

"But I thought the cottage was yours."

"I suppose it is, technically. That's why I left the keys for you. So you could"—she sips her drink—"come and go as you please."

"I have a place." I'm not trying to alienate her, but I don't want to be wooed with keys, either. "I love the cottage—Mable and I stayed there a lot. . . ."

"Mable." She pushes her food away and swings her long hair back so it's away from her face. Near us, families with children are huddled in groups, waiting to order, or packing up their cars to beat the long weekend crush. Families, I imagine, who never fell apart. "She was a wonderful person."

I swallow and wipe my mouth on the waxy napkin. "I don't know that I can talk about her with you."

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"You're angry . . .," Gala says. She looks at me and taps her foot, which shouldn't annoy me but does. "It's natural, I'm expecting this. . . ."

"You've planned it out? You know how I'll react?" I shrug. "I didn't say I'm angry. I just said I don't want to talk about Mable with you. She told me how your friendship basically imploded. . . ."

Gala nods, the smile fading from her face, and she wipes each one of her fingers clean. "We'd been growing apart for some time."

"She told me," I say, and feel kind of proud, like I knew something she didn't. Then I realize sadly that I knew lots that Gala didn't—all of Mable these past years, all of me, all of my dad. "I feel like there's the proverbial elephant in the room."

"Is it purple?" Gala sighs. "Sadie always asked that—if there were purple elephants."

Hearing her say Sadie's name makes a tumble of questions come out. "Is she coming? I mean, do you want us to know each other? Why didn't you tell me about her—or contact me sooner? Why? Why?" My *whys* get progressively higher-pitched, and I clamp my mouth closed.

"Don't you mean . . . why did I leave you?" Gala's voice is calm, not detached, but placid, like she's rehearsed this. "I've thought about how best to answer this, Love." She pauses after saying my name, maybe amazed at how few times she's

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said it in her life. “And I want to be honest with you. It’s all I can give you now, that honesty. I can’t do anything about the past.”

“I know that.” I look at her and then away, at some little kid tugging on his dad’s shirt. I used to hold my dad’s pinky, because his hand was too large. “For the record, I just want to say that my dad did an incredible job. He more than made up for . . . for not having . . . and also Mable. She was basically a mom for me. You should know that, too.”

Gala nods, her eyes filling up with tears that recede after she thinks a minute. “Maybe I did that on purpose. She was always going to be a better mother than I was. . . .”

I interrupt. “But you never gave her the chance, did you? You took that away from her, left her to raise me pretty much with my dad—her brother. She didn’t have a normal dating life. She couldn’t.”

“That was her choice.” Gala’s eyebrows crimp together. “I never demanded she drop everything and be with you.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t suppose you would do that. Not really your style.”

Gala crosses her arms. “I’m not asking to suddenly fill the void in your life that was filled by Mable—ironically which was a void created by me in the first place.”

“Then what are you doing, exactly, Gala?” I call her Gala because it’s what comes out, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

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“Sadie’s leaving for college soon—just like you will be—and my marriage is breaking up. I’m selling the house, which you know from my letter. . . .”

Blush and an alarm race through me. I never read her letter. All that time, I had it. And I let it sit there, festering while I worried and got excited and angry and worried some more. “I didn’t read it.”

Gala looks surprised. Then impressed. “Really.”

“I meant to . . . I think,” I say and lick my lips. The salt from the food is still on them and stings a little.

“Maybe you didn’t want to hear what I had to say.”

Now my voice is calmer, and I’m ready to speak. “I think that’s true. I came back here and you left—obviously a sore spot—and I didn’t . . . don’t . . . want the excuses.” I look at her to see what her reaction will be.

She reaches out and touches my hair, but I move back instinctually. “I thought it would be long.”

“It was . . . until very recently.”

“Well, it suits you,” she says, and then adds, “Not that I’m in a position to say that. I know this”—she gestures to herself, then back to me—“is up there with talk show craziness and . . .”

“You know what would help?” I ask. She holds up her hands to ask what. I go on. “Just tell me why, and then we’ll go on from there, okay? I don’t need a . . .” I stop short of

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saying *mother*, because who would turn that down? I had that with Mable, but I don't want to lose Gala before I've gotten her at least partly. "I'm not saying all's forgiven or that I'm not harboring some deeply screwed up abandonment issues that I'm sure will plague me throughout my life. . . ." My tone is semilighthearted but Gala winces. "But suffice it to say I'm fairly well-adjusted, all things considered." Saying that aloud, I know it's true—I could have been a total mess, but I know I'm not. And this brings a cloud of confidence into my chest.

We walk from the food shack down to the Chappy ferry, going nowhere but needing to keep moving. Gala looks at the water, the pavement, the docks, anywhere but my face as she speaks. "Now they'd call it postpartum depression. Not just baby blues." Her voice is melodic as she tells this, and I can hear the fringes of song in it. "You were small, long . . ."

"That didn't last," I say, patting my head to show my short stature.

"We lived in this little apartment."

"The one in Cambridge? The one on the corner?" I remember Mable showing it to me and picturing my parents in the first throes of having a newborn there.

We walk past the harbor, up the street, circling so we're

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near Lighthouse Beach. The waves are small here, lapping rather than crashing, and the sand is littered with carcasses of horseshoe crabs and small fish. It's like we're walking amidst the debris of the years gone by.

"That's where we lived right after I had you," she says, the emphasis on *had*.

"You say it like you knew you wouldn't keep me."

Gala looks up to the sky, searching for clouds or answers. "I don't know. We went back to that funny little place—the main room was triangular, which sounds cool, but really it meant that no furniture fit in it. Not that we had much, but what we did have just sort of floated. . . ." She pauses, and I wonder if she's thinking that she and my dad were like that, floating in their early marriage, unsure where they might wash ashore. "The apartment overlooked the square, all the students scurrying around on their way to greater knowledge. Or, that's how it seemed to me. But it was loud there. Too loud. So we moved to Kenmore Square. It added on