

NOVA REN SUMA

IMAGINARY
GIRLS



DUTTON BOOKS

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CHAPTER ONE

RUBY SAID



Ruby said I'd never drown—not in deep ocean, not by shipwreck, not even by falling drunk into someone's bottomless backyard pool. She said she'd seen me hold my breath underwater for minutes at a time, but to hear her tell it you'd think she meant days. Long enough to live down there if needed, to skim the seafloor collecting shells and shiny soda caps, looking up every so often for the rescue lights, even if they took forever to come.

It sounded impossible, something no one would believe if anyone other than Ruby were the one to tell it. But Ruby was right: The body found that night wouldn't be, couldn't be mine.

We had no idea—this was before the blue-flashing strobe through the pines; the spotlit glare on water; the skidding over rocks; the grabbing of shoes, any shoes, of clothes, any clothes. Before we went running through the brush and the

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sharp sticks cut our bare feet. Before the heart in my chest went pounding, all the while wondering, *Is this really happening?* when it was, most definitely it was. Before all that—all we wanted was to go swimming.

The boys surrounded Ruby at the edge of the reservoir, some closer than others, some with flashlights that they let dance far lower than her face, though Ruby didn't smack them away when they did it—tonight, she didn't feel like doing any smacking.

In the distance were more boys, and a few girls, the group straggling along the edge of the reservoir and into the night, but this here was the beating center. This was where to find Ruby. She stood and stretched out the length of her foot to dangle one browned, pearl-painted toe in the water. She let the boys watch her do it. Let them watch her splash.

I was there, too, watching, but no one paid me much attention until she said my name.

“Chloe could swim this whole thing, there and back,” Ruby told the boys. She was talking me up, as she liked to. She was saying I could swim all the way across the reservoir—from our shore to the hazy shape of the one just visible in the distance—and she dared any of them to say I couldn't. I'd swim it, she said, and more: I'd bring back a souvenir.

The waterline was lower than usual that summer, since we hadn't seen a drop of rain in weeks. If you knew where

to look, the towns that had their homes in this valley were peeking through. Here where we stood was the edge of what had once been a village called Olive, and now Ruby was saying I could pay a visit while crossing the reservoir, that I'd plunge down to the bottom where the remains of Olive still stand, dig around in their abandoned dressers, and come back to shore draped in their jewels. If anyone could do it, Ruby said, her sister could.

The boys laughed, but they should have known Ruby wasn't making a joke of it.

"I swear," she said, "dunk her in and she turns half fish. She doesn't need air like the rest of us. I've seen it. Who do you think was the one giving her baths when she was three?"

She's five-and-a-half years older than me, so she has memories I don't, can put me in places I'd swear I've never been (Lollapalooza, Niagara Falls, the Ulster County Jail that one time, to visit our mother). If Ruby said I could swim all the way across, if she said I could dive down to the bottom no one's ever put a hand to, find what's left of Olive, touch the floorboards of the houses flooded in 1914, and come up kicking, a splinter of proof in one finger, then maybe I can. Maybe I have. Ruby could turn me from an ordinary girl you wouldn't look at twice into someone worth watching. Someone special, mythical even.

That's what I got for being her baby sister.

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The more Ruby talked about me, the more the boys looked my way. She made me come alive when she said my name; her words gave me color, fluffed out my hair. You could tell by the way their flashlights fell on me, by where they fell, by how long they lingered, just what her words got them thinking.

“Right, Chlo?” she said. “Tell them you can do it. Go on, tell them.” I couldn’t see her face as she spoke, but I’d know the smile in her voice anywhere. The tease.

I shrugged, like maybe I could do what she said, maybe.

I was on the lowest rock, the one almost submerged in water. I was down below the waterline, where I could sink in my legs and kick. Here at the edge, we might catch a glimpse of the old stone foundations, some still standing in places. A wall, crumbling. A cellar doorway, left open. Maybe we’d spy a chimney poking up out of the water, a church steeple. From shore, the dark night made it seem like I could wade across, but that was only a trick, as the bottom dropped a few feet in. This reservoir was deep enough to bury whole towns—and it had. It had destroyed nine of them. Ruby knew this; she was the one who told me.

So I could stay on this rock, getting just my feet wet, then my legs up to my knees, no more. I could do nothing and she wouldn’t be mad tomorrow. But what would we have to talk about then?

I was fourteen, way younger than the boys poking at me

with the beams of their flashlights. Hanging with Ruby's friends meant I had to be careful of who was looking, whose bottle to steal a sip out of, who to let sit beside me in the dark where they knew Ruby couldn't see. Less dangerous would be the reservoir itself, too large to keep track of in the night—an oil spill instead of a mapped and measured ocean.

That's why, when she stood tall on the bed of rocks and pointed out into the night to say I could swim it right now, this dark minute, I didn't protest. She meant the width of the reservoir, about two miles across, but it looked like she meant the night sky itself, that there was a universe of time unknown and I could cross it.

Most people weren't aware of our reservoir's history; they didn't think about what had been here before. At night, it was just this indescribable thing without shape or color. This thing that could only be felt around you, when wading in, when you bent your knees and gulped air and let it swallow your head. Once under, all sound cut off. The water thickened the lower you sunk—with what, you didn't think about, didn't want to know. You had to watch your toes, because the jagged bottom could cut you, and hang tight to your clothes, if you were wearing any, because the reservoir was known to take what it wanted when it wanted it. Not just loose change and car keys but bikini tops and piercings come loose from decade-old holes. Ruby once lost a ring a

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boy gave her, a ring handcrafted by his father, given as a promise she never meant to keep. So for Ruby the reservoir took what *she* wanted, almost as if they shared an understanding. Everyone else had to be more careful.

This reservoir didn't belong to us, though it lapped into our backyards. It cut through multiple towns across the Hudson Valley; it lined our roads. It was there past the trees, behind chains and No Trespassing signs, dammed up and shored in, but still sparkling in every kind of weather, calling us to drop our pants and jump in. It was part of the watershed that supplied New York City—just begging us to take advantage.

I loved swimming it, Ruby knew. We liked to think of them, the city people who assumed they had lives so much better than ours even though they lived stacked up tight in their gray city, locked in their boxes, breathing their canned air, taking their baths in the pool we just swam in.

It was illegal to swim in the reservoir, but I did it anyway—we all did, and more. It was the water we puked into, when we were too drunk to keep standing; water we pissed in, secretly, in darkness; water in which some girls gave it up, thinking they didn't need a condom; water where stupid girls did stupid things.

I'd been coming here since I was a baby. Besides, I knew I wouldn't drown if I tried to cross—Ruby said.

So there I was, standing up, and clawing out of my shirt,

and then I lost my shorts, and then I was wading into the water past my knees.

I knew what she wanted: a show, for the rest of them. Ruby said I could do an impossible thing and all I had to do was act like I was about to do it, make them wonder enough to think it real. Her friends sure weren't sober; they'd remember it however she wanted them to tomorrow.

I pushed forward, plunging in up to my waist. She wound them up for me, saying, "Chloe'll make it across, no problem. Chloe'll bring us back something from Olive, just watch. Right, Chlo?" And some boys yelled, "Yeah, Chloe, think you can do it?" And other boys yelled, "No way!" and "Let's see her try!" Flashlights dancing circles around me. My name on their lips, coasting across the water. My name.

Everyone was watching, it felt like. The night was mine now, as if my sister had handed it over to me, simply curious to see what could happen.

It had all started because Ruby had invited some boys to the reservoir, and then word had gotten out, as it always did, news of a party passed along from car to car at the Village Green, phones buzzing, messages flying, girls and boys we didn't even bother talking to in daylight saying, "Ruby wants to go swimming. Did you hear?"

I was only aware of how many kids had come when I looked back to shore. Then my eyes went to him, the one boy on the rocks who wasn't yelling. I could see him up

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on the tallest rock, a shaggy silhouette showing how his mohawk had grown out, the hard angle of his chin turned away. A pulse of light as he sucked in on one of his brother's smokes, then dark, when he ground it out, then no light. He was the one not watching. His brother was up there, and so was some girl in a white shirt, so white it was the brightest thing I could see from out in the water, and they were watching. Their heads were turned my way. Only his wasn't.

I stopped looking. I'd play along, since that's what Ruby wanted.

"Sure I could do it," I called out to the boys gathered by the water. "Totally I could."

Ruby didn't seem worried, not one bit. It was like I never had that Rolling Rock one of her friends slipped me, hadn't chugged from her bottle of wine when she wasn't looking. As if I were an Olympic-class swimmer and had done this before, diving down to ransack swollen dressers, as if any story she told about me or about the drowned towns at the bottom of the reservoir was true.

"So are you going to or not?" one of Ruby's friends called.

"Yeah," I said. "For twenty bucks." And Ruby smiled the slight smile that showed she approved, then held out a hand to collect the cash.

I could see Ruby lit up by a flashlight. This was the sum-

mer she was nineteen. She was beautiful, everyone said so, but that wasn't all she was. Her hair was deep brown and long down the length of her back. She had a smattering of freckles, just enough to be worth counting, across her nose. She wore boots every day, even with sundresses; and she never left the house without sunglasses, the kind with the giant, tinted lenses that celebrities wear while lounging on some distant tropical beach. When Ruby slipped the glasses up on her forehead to keep the hair from her eyes, when she let you see her whole face, she got the sort of reactions a girl from a magazine might get if she flashed what was under her shirt. The stopped traffic, the stares. Ruby just had this light about her that can't be explained in words—you had to see her.

I was an echo of her. We both had the long dark hair, the sometimes freckles. We shared not just a mother, but also preferences in sugary-sweet foods and slow, sad songs; tendencies toward motion sickness and talking in our sleep; our knees went purple in cold; our hiccups could last days; and our telephone voices were nearly indistinguishable, so she could pretend to be me or I could pretend to be her if we wanted to fool you into leaving a message.

More than that, we had the same recessive earlobes, identical pinkie fingers and toes. But those were inconsequential details. Who ever called a girl beautiful because of her toes? In reality I was a pencil drawing of a photocopy of

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a Polaroid of my sister—you could see the resemblance in a certain light, if you were seeking it out because I told you first, if you were being nice.

Only then, all those eyes on me in the water, did I wonder if this was what it felt like to be my sister. To be looked at this way, always. To be seen.

She was gazing down at me, down from a very long distance, but straight-centered into my eyes. “You ready?” she asked, and sent a smile that was meant for me only, understood to be mine. I’m not sure how she thought I’d manage to come back with a souvenir from Olive, but I couldn’t ask her, not now, not in front of everyone. I knew she was already gathering the pieces of the story she’d tell tomorrow—Ruby loved her stories—and here I was, the star.

“Ready,” I said.

This would be the story of my crossing, and with the twenty bucks for my effort we’d ignore the overdue phone bill and buy dinner at the Little Bear.

This would not be the story of how I drowned at the deepest point of the reservoir the summer I was fourteen—Ruby would never let it happen.

“Okay, Chlo,” Ruby called to me, “show them you can do it. Bring us back something good! . . . Go.”

The boys at the edge of the water were shooting waves in my direction, getting the current going, giving me my push. And they looked at me the way they looked at her,

because it was dark, because it was late, because they were confused or high or drunk or all three, and I didn't mind it, didn't mind it at all.

I started swimming.

It was night, so I knew there was no way they could see how far out I'd gone. When I was moving this fast, there wasn't a flashlight that could find me. I cast out quick past the point at which the rocky ground gave way, when I could touch my toe to the bottom and then when I couldn't, when it felt as if there was no bottom at all. I moved out into the depths where no one could catch me.

I could hear them back on shore, and then I couldn't. I kept swimming.

The water spread out all around me, familiar and warm. As I swam I didn't keep my eyes open; I knew the way. And then I felt it, all at once, how as I darted forward the water turned cold, seeming at least ten degrees cooler than before, and I knew I'd gotten close to where Ruby always said we'd find the center of Olive. Its heart, she used to say, was in the middle of the reservoir, at its deepest, bottommost point.

My legs got heavy as I kicked past the cold spot, as if the current had turned thicker there, a tugging downward pull.

It's true that a town called Olive used to be in this spot before the water got flooded in; that's in history books; that's not just one of Ruby's stories. Olive was one of nine towns buried because New York City wanted more water.

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The city bought up all the land and built its dam here. It dredged out this great big hole and gutted away every last tree. People's homes and farms were taken over, then flattened. Olive was dismantled and swept out of the valley like it had never been here at all. Like it got erased.

Ruby knew more about Olive than anybody. She knew things no one else did. She said the people in the town didn't want to leave, that the city of New York tried to buy their houses, their churches and schools, their farms and storefronts, and the people of Olive wouldn't sell. People in the other towns took the cash and scattered. It was only Olive that decided to stay. Only Olive that ignored the eviction notices, like that time we got a bright orange one pasted to the door of our apartment, and Ruby simply sliced through it so she could get inside. It was exactly like then, Ruby told me—except imagine if it looked like the world were ending because the city cut down all the trees and big machines roared and took the earth from under our feet and we had nowhere to go.

Olive wouldn't budge, even when the steam whistle blew for a full hour at noon on June 19, 1914, to show that the building of the dam was at last finished. It was only the people of Olive who stood in place on the land where they were born and waited for the water to come flooding in.

"But they did go," I remember saying to Ruby when she told me this story. "They had to."

“Did they?” was all she said then.

As I swam over Olive, I wondered.

Ruby used to say that, down in what was once Olive, you could still find the townspeople who never left. They looked up into their murky sky, waiting to catch sight of our boat bottoms and our fishing lines, counting our trespassing feet.

They weren't ghosts, she'd assure me when I used to shiver at her story; they were people still alive, having grown gills in place of lungs. They aged slower down at the bottom, where time had gone thick with all that mud. When I was little, she'd rile me up, saying they knew all about me, had noticed me the first time we poached a swim in this very spot. They knew me by my feet, she said, recognized me by the way I kept them kicking, and all they wanted was for me to act up, to throw the last tantrum she could stand, hoping she'd get tired and let them have me.

If she pushed me in, right away their cold, webbed hands would come reaching out for my ankles. But don't worry, she assured me, I'd have everything I needed down at the bottom. Reservoir ice cream was green, which made it mint, my favorite kind. Playing on the swings was way more fun underwater anyway. And having to remember to breathe took up so much time.

That was years ago, when she used to threaten to throw me to Olive, and she never meant it, not really. Sure, when

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she was fourteen and I was nine she had to take me with her everywhere, and she complained about it sometimes, behind closed doors when she didn't know I was listening. She told our mom that *she* should have been the one to teach me to tie my shoes, boil my boxed macaroni dinners, sign my permission slip to the dinosaur museum. She said all that, but it didn't matter; I knew Ruby didn't actually ever want me gone.

Like now.

She'd sent me out here, but she knew Olive didn't still exist—she'd only been keeping things interesting, telling her stories. Letting me have the whole spotlight for once.

She was on shore watching. I felt eyes keeping track of my movements, her eyes and her friends' eyes, and then more eyes even than that, eyes from below.

I looked back, or tried to, but all the water was in the way.

Everyone probably thought I was still swimming. I wasn't. I'd stopped—though I didn't remember stopping, or even slowing. I was drifting out in the open expanse, my legs feeling their weight.

The water was colder here, no denying it. And something was in my path, as if she'd made it appear there for me. A small rowboat bobbed in the water, unseen from shore in the deep night. I rested a hand on it, leaning my weight into its rusted side so I could catch my breath. The moon

up above showed half a face; the stars could be counted till morning.

I waited there, legs loose, hair swirling around me, and listened to her friends on shore. Laughing. Splashing. Dragging a canoe out of the woods. Breaking a bottle against the rocks.

No one called my name.

I wondered if they'd forgotten, if I'd taken too long. Or maybe they knew I never meant to do it. I didn't do everything Ruby said, not every single thing. I did what I wanted. I did things and then looked back to see what she'd say.

Maybe everyone knew this was a joke, a misdirection. Because surely she had to be joking—I did need air to breathe like everyone else; I did have only two legs and no fins. If anyone was a mythical creature here, it was Ruby, the one we all looked to and listened for, the one the boys loved and fought to be with, who couldn't be captured or caged. The stories she told about me didn't matter; the boys just wanted a chance to make up some stories of their own with her.

I could hear Ruby, far off in the distance. Miles away, it seemed, miles and miles. I heard her laugh—I'd know that laugh anywhere—a laugh flat and dry and cut short when others let theirs last far longer. She only really found something funny when she said it herself, or if I did. She'd laugh for me.

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My stomach was sloshing with wine, my teeth chattering from the cold, my nose starting to drip and run. Why wasn't she calling for me so I knew to give up and come back?

I couldn't hear her laughing anymore. I couldn't hear her at all. It was as if I'd only imagined the sound of her laughter, imagined her on shore looking after me. Maybe, once I swam back, I'd find she'd shed her clothes, left my twenty folded up inside for safekeeping, and simply . . . vanished.

I was about to let go and push back for shore when my fingers felt something strange. My arm was slung over the side of the rowboat, hanging down inside it. And whatever I felt at the bottom of that boat was far cooler than the water I was drifting in, and cooler than the mountain air. It was cold. Dead cold.

As my hand patted around, trying to get its bearings, to see by touch, the thing took shape. It had a long, mushy stem, a flat soft section. It had five thin pieces spread out in all directions. It had—oh God, it had fingernails.

Then I heard my name at long last. "Chlo!" Ruby was shouting. "Chloe! Chlo!"

Normally my heart would have leaped, hearing her call my name like that, wanting me back so loudly, so badly, so everyone could hear—but my heart wasn't even beating. I couldn't speak, didn't have the sound in me to shout back.

There was an arm in that boat. An arm attached to a cold, dead hand.

That's when the flashlights came. Close enough to reach me—I must have not swam out as far as I thought. Flashlights all over me, beams covering my face and neck and shoulders, showing I was here in the water, hanging on, still alive. But that meant they also lit up what was inside the boat so I could see it. That other pair of shoulders, the long neck, the face that wasn't mine.

A girl, lifeless eyes staring up at the half moon. A girl who left her body here for me to find it. A girl with pale hair, pale cheeks, paler still in a bright white shirt.

Then arms around me—bigger arms than Ruby's arms, she'd sent the boys—holding me too tight at first until they caught sight of the girl in the boat, and then letting go, letting go and shouting, grabbing for the boat and letting me go.

The face in that boat could have been mine; for a split second this thought rattled through me and then, faster than it'd come, it dropped away.

Because it was her face again, the girl's. The last thing I remembered were her two open eyes and her two closed, cracked lips. I recognized her. She was someone I knew.

Her name was London, it came to me. London Hayes. We had seventh-period French together; she was the same age as me.

After that, many more things happened, all too fast to make sense of.

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I remember the hard grip on my arm, pulling me back to shore. The shouts. The dragging in of the boat. Light, more light than was possible with even a horde of flashlights, enough light to drown in. I remember the chill that stayed with me, the ice in my gut.

We tried to run, but they caught some of us. They caught me. And once they had me, my sister let herself be caught, too. We were cited for trespassing, held for questioning, since at first—before it was ruled an OD—they suspected foul play.

No one would admit to giving London the drugs. No one would admit to dumping her body in the boat. Not one person had witnessed a thing.

All I knew was how I kept on seeing her face, even after they lifted her out of the boat and carried her away. How I kept hearing the slap of the water, like there were people still swimming in it, even though everyone had been made to get out and stand far, far away.

Then I was turning to my sister, who was there beside me in the back of the cop car, because suddenly we were in a cop car, and my sister, who never found herself in cop cars, wasn't fighting it, or clawing at the cage, or making any attempt to break free.

Her eyes were full of the night's stars and her hair was glowing with the police lights and she acted as if nothing at all was wrong—until she got a closer peek at me.

“What’s the matter, Chlo? You look so . . . scared.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t put it to words. We were sitting in the backseat together, but part of me was wading that cold spot in the reservoir, hanging on to the edge of the boat, shivering like I was there still.

She took my wet hair in her hands and wrung it out on the floor, to leave the cops a good puddle; and she brought my damp head to her lap, and didn’t care that I’d soak her skirt, and told me to close my eyes and sleep.

I don’t remember much else after that. Or I try not to.

That’s the summer I stopped living with Ruby. My dad in Pennsylvania took me, and then my hair grew out, and I lost my virginity in the back of a Subaru, and Ruby wasn’t there to tell it to. Ruby wasn’t there.

Only sometimes did I call and get her voice mail and hear the sound of her telephone voice—nearly indistinguishable from my telephone voice—saying, “Leave a message if you dare.”

I didn’t dare.

I thought about other things instead. Like how I could have made it to the other shore, maybe, if I’d kept kicking and didn’t stop to catch my breath.

How this could have been the story of that time I crossed the reservoir past midnight on a Thursday the summer I was fourteen. How I would have dove in, traveling under-

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water the entire way, a submarine in a mismatched bikini, a torpedo of hair and a flurry of kicking feet. Proof, she would have said, that I'm a creature built without need of lungs—inside me a safebox of air and scattered clouds: in case of emergency, break glass and breathe.

In the water, my legs would have formed a tail, my arms fins. Ruby had seen it happen, she'd say, those times all those years ago when she'd been the one to give me a bath when our mother was at the bar. She'd seen the silvery flash under bubbles, the quickly shifting skin, seen it with her own two eyes.

As Ruby wanted, I would have reached the cold spot and then gone deep. I'd touch my hands to the murky floorboards and abandoned roadways of the town no one could bear to leave, get my prints all over them. Then I'd come up with a piece of Olive in my fist: a rusted fork from a drifting dinner table, an algae-covered comb Ruby could rinse off and use in her hair.

And no one would have believed it, no one would have thought it could even be possible, not till they shined their lights on the other shore and saw me standing there, waving the comb at them like I was someone special, mythical even—just like Ruby said.

CHAPTER TWO

RUBY NEVER SAID



Ruby never said, “Stay.” Not out loud, not so I could hear. She came down to the curb as I was leaving for my dad’s and she simply stood there, eyes held back behind sunglasses, watching me go.

She didn’t do much to acknowledge my dad, who’d come all that way to take me. She spoke only to me, as if he were a blot on her shiny lens that she’d wipe off when she felt like it—and until then she’d look right through the speck of him like he wasn’t there.

All she said to me was, “I wish you didn’t have to do this, Chlo.” And then her voice got choked up and she backed away from the car and wouldn’t say one more word to me.

Two dark lenses between us, a rolled-up window, a hard right into the road. Then miles of highway, the phones not ringing, then years.

The dad I left with wasn’t Ruby’s dad. We have different fathers, so technically I’m her half-sister, not that we

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count in halves. She was there the moment I was born—literally, right there in the room, she'll say and she'll shudder. She saw me born at home on the futon, and though it may have scarred her for life, this means she won't ever forget it. Or me.

"I'll never leave you," Ruby used to promise. She'd cross her heart with me as a witness; she'd hold my hand hard in hers and hope to die. "I'll never leave," she said, "not ever." Not like Mom, she didn't have to say. Not like my dad, who left me, and her dad, who left her. No, she'd promise. Never.

I guess we didn't expect I'd be the one to leave her.

Away from the town where we lived, I tried to forget the details of my life with Ruby. I had a new life now. Wednesdays, I no longer snuggled up on the couch to mock girl movies or laced on old roller skates to ride the ramps behind the Youth Center; I spent my hours alone doing homework. There were no weekend sprees for new sunglasses, no taking turns with the scissors to slice out fashion models' painted lips and eyes from magazines to tape to our walls. After the last bell at school, there was no white car waiting for me—no detour down the old highway alongside the real highway, no windows open wide so the wind could dread my hair. I had to take the bus.

But I thought of Ruby constantly. Of being with her, of what we did.

How at all hours we'd lounge on the hard stone benches on the Village Green, which marked the dead-center point of our town, watching the cars go around, watching them watch us, and only now did I wonder if Ruby sat there just to be seen? Did I know how the universe revolved around the spot wherever Ruby happened to be, be it out on the Green or at home, or did I pretend I didn't know, like a sun that's gone lazy and slips down from the sky to lie out on the rooftop in her favorite white bikini only because she can?

I tried not to think about that.

I thought about our town. The exact blue of our mountains, the certain green of our trees. The Cumberland Farms convenience store where Ruby worked, pumping gas and filling in at the register, her hand dipping in the till, shortchanging tourists. Her apartment by the Millstream, her big, old-lady car. The store where she got her signature shade of wine red lipstick, how they held her color behind the counter so no one else could wear it. The rec field where we took to the swings, the spillway where we had parties. The reservoir, worst of all the reservoir. Every night I walked the unmarked path to Olive's edge and couldn't stop if I tried.

Always, in my dream, it was dark. Always the stars above held the same pattern, because it was the same night, and time had wound back to let me take my place in it, where I belonged.

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I had the same aftertaste of wine coating my throat, could hear the same voices echoing from shore. My body made the motions to swim that great distance, even though I knew I'd come to the cold spot soon enough.

Even though I knew I'd reach the boat. And her.

But the cold surprised me each time. The fear felt new.

Because there she was, the girl in the boat, drifting at the exact point in the reservoir where I'd stopped swimming the first night and stopped swimming every night I dreamed it since. Ruby always said she'd protect me, but I couldn't keep myself from thinking the worst thing I could, since she wasn't around to bend my mind her way.

She didn't protect me that night.

The girl who'd been buried could have been me.

The longer I stayed away from town the more I thought about the girl who sat in the last row of my French class, London Hayes. How she'd cut her hair right before the summer, chopped it off like a boy. How I'm pretty sure she had long hair before that, long and without bangs like so many of the girls in town because that's how Ruby wore her hair. But now I remembered how London's ears stuck out after she'd chopped it, like maybe she should have considered her ears before going ahead with that haircut and I guess no one thought to tell her.

London once got called to the front of the classroom be-

cause Ms. Blunt, our French teacher, had spied what she was doodling in her notebook. She made London show the entire class: through a crosshatch of shaded scribbles, a naked girl with bloodthirsty eyes and sharp, serrated ribs, nipples dangling like extra fingers, toes black with disease.

It was grotesque, offensive even. Ms. Blunt glared at the lined page, the blue ballpoint put down so hard it left gashes, and in her dramatically accented, overloud French she asked London, “*Qui est-ce?*” Violent pointing motions. Enunciation galore. “*Qui est-ce?*”

And we all racked our brains trying to remember what that meant—this was remedial, not Regents-level French—but London knew the question and knew how to answer. She shook her head sadly and said, “*C’est moi.*” It’s me.

Something was wrong with the girl—clearly.

Other than that, I didn’t know too much about her. There was this rumor that she once took five hits of LSD and went to school on purpose, like a walking biology experiment, which I guess failed because she didn’t make it through fourth-period gym. She started drinking in sixth grade, people said, too, but that was mostly a compliment.

I must have seen her outside school sometimes. She knew Ruby’s friends, could be spied in the backseats of their cars as they spun their way around the Green. Plus she was friends with Owen—I couldn’t help but notice—the boy I

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tried hard not to hold in my heart as he barely ever looked my way. Also, I'm pretty sure one time she borrowed my pen and never gave it back.

I knew she was at the reservoir that night, even though she wasn't invited.

That's all I knew.

Just weeks into living at my dad and stepmother's house in Pennsylvania, my mom mailed me a package. She was sober again and must have realized she should show a stab at missing me, for, I guess, my sake. But the box was no attempt at amends. It was more a junk drawer than a care package: a spilled cache of feathers and beads from the craft store in town where she worked weekends; a rock from, I figured, the Millstream, dusted in our town's dried mud; some menstrual tea (seriously?); a dog-eared book on power animals (hers was the sparrow, she said, which she'd also taken on as her new name; Ruby said it was actually the vampire bat); and nothing whatsoever from Ruby.

You might say my mom was harmless if you didn't know any better. Hair down past her waist like she was going for some world record, beaded necklaces, gypsy skirts. She really did force people in town to call her Sparrow. But that was only the role she liked to perform for whatever audience hadn't slipped out the back; it was her aria in the shower for whoever needed to pee and got stuck listening.

In reality, my mom had a hard side, made of tin and pounded flat to deflect all emotion, thanks to the poison she poured down her throat. That's why, in the care package, she'd also included one last thing: the obituary. Like she wanted to make sure I didn't forget.

Ruby would have shipped me the severed tip off her own finger before sending that. She would have guessed about my reservoir nightmares: the rowboat bobbing, knowing that at any moment the floating inhabitants of Olive could pull London down to their waterlogged Village Green by her rotting, black toes, and then my toes, and then me. We didn't need to talk about it for her to know the last thing I'd want was a reminder.

My mom barely knew me. If Ruby hadn't witnessed me come out of her body, I would've thought I'd been picked up on the side of Route 28 in the spot where we found that couch.

The obit had been neatly scissored out of a newspaper from the township across the county line. My mom had gone out of her way to get this one for me special, going so far as to cross the Mid-Hudson Bridge to check the papers there. In it was a photo of London with her former long hair and the complete absence of a smile. You couldn't see her ears. The text about her was short and vague: lost too soon, mourned and by who, in lieu of flowers donate to this cause, the usual. No mention of how she died, or where.

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It didn't say what kind of drugs she'd been on; that was tacky to tell the world, I guess. It was also tacky for my mom to send it to me.

Ruby, she would have torn the obit to shreds and burned it in the fireplace. She would have cranked up the stereo to forget it, played something vintage, like Rick James or 2 Live Crew, something raunchy and loud and undeniably *alive* to get those words out of our heads. She would have, if I'd stayed.

That was the last I heard of London for a long time. My mom didn't send another care package—she slipped off-radar, as she tends to—and Ruby's sporadic text messages filled me in on other subjects entirely.

dreamed we rode wild horses dwn the mntain. u lost yr hat but i found it don't worry

dreamed we shared a phantom boyfriend & his name was Georgie. cute but made of vapor. smelled like lemons

dreamed we lived in a big blue blimp. the clouds had berries for snacks & u were always hungry

my boots miss your feet

my head misses your hairbrush

my car misses your warm butt

And sometimes, deep in the middle of the night when she had to know I was sleeping, she texted a simple two characters: xO

I missed her, too.

My dad never spoke of what propelled me to move in with him after all these years. Still, he'd look at me sideways sometimes, as if waiting for the first sign of mutation. Like at any moment I could hiccup, have a spasm, pop out an extra head, and then he'd have one more mouth to feed. There was therapy, for a while—the freebie kind with the school guidance counselor—and there were chores. Taking out trash. Cleaning the garage. Dishes, landfills of dishes. Distractions, all.

The physical labor worked for a time, though when I was elbows deep in soapsuds, scrubbing at a stubborn pot, I was reminded of Ruby's way of doing dishes—leaving them piled in the sink and on the stove for a week at a time until there was no other option but to crate them over to the bathtub for a good soaking. Then how, after we gave the dishes a bath, we'd sail them like Frisbees to the couch, and if any dishes broke in the tossing that was just fewer to have to wash next time.

This would have been my life. At my new school, I was nobody special; I wasn't even related to anybody special. I could have stayed there, gotten mostly Bs, the rare B+, studied through study hall, dodged balls through gym, blanked

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out on my locker combination, passed Algebra I, passed Earth Science, six points away from failing art. Sat on the bleachers and didn't dance at the Halloween dance, stood in the corner and didn't dance at the homecoming dance. No story worth telling past next Tuesday.

And soon enough, as time passed, I let myself forget the details of that night. Why I'd ever been so scared. Even why I'd left town in the first place.

That's when she made a move.

One day, Ruby reached out and shook me. Even from across state lines she could.

The day it happened began like any other (bus stalled on the way to school; pop quiz in first period; ball to the face in gym), but then the stars shifted. The backdrop got picked up and moved offstage for the scene change. That must have been when she decided it was time, the weight of her decision sailing out of our town in the Catskill Mountains, beyond the reach of our river and our roads, finding me in this flat valley of highways and fast-food signs built taller than the treetops, this new town where I'd come to live.

Because this wasn't a day like any other day.

During lunch, a random cheerleader smiled at me. My art teacher called my lump of clay "inspired." My locker popped open on the very first try.

It was late afternoon when I stepped out of Music Ap-

preciation to find the boy in whose Subaru I'd left my underwear, a glimmer of recognition in his eyes.

We hadn't talked for weeks, yet, after all that time, here he was. Waiting for me.

The way he looked at me—it was as if I'd stepped into Ruby's body, slipped on her longer legs, her greener eyes. As if I'd taken possession of her, or she'd taken possession of me.

"Hey, Chloe," he said.

The rest of my classmates streamed out around me, leaving me alone in the music hallway. He moved closer, and I moved away, and soon he had me backed up against the wall. Was this sexy? Was I supposed to go with it, arch my back and part my lips a certain way? I tried to channel Ruby, but I lost her for a second there when his eyes took hold of mine.

"Long time no talk," he was saying.

I was going to say, "I know." Say, "So how've you been?" Dumb things to say, dumb, dumb. I don't know what would have come out of my mouth had the thought of Ruby not turned me. Because what I said instead was, "Really?" Like I hadn't even noticed how long it had been.

It was as if she stood beside me, whispering deep into my ear. *Don't tell him how you waited by the phone for three weeks,* she breathed. *Don't say how you cried.*

I thought of that windy February night up on Cooper

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Lake Road when her big white Buick ran out of gas. How we'd never run out of gas before in that car, even when the needle got stuck on *E* for days and we had no clue how much gas was left, so that was strange enough. But stranger still was how Ruby insisted we go on foot to the closest gas station—like she wanted us to really feel the cold. I thought of how our legs under our long coats prickled at first from the biting air, then burned. How, the longer we were outside, trudging through old snow, the sooner our thighs lost all feeling and went perfectly, senselessly numb.

In time, it felt as if we were hiking the road beside the icy lake on two sets of beating wings. We could barely tell we had legs at all.

It felt like we could have made it to the station in seconds, flown there and back with a canister of gasoline, our eyelashes glistening with frost, our bones weightless from cold. But then a truck stopped for us—some guy Ruby knew. And the heat in the cab brought our limbs back to life, stopped our teeth from chattering. We would not have to amputate our fingers due to frostbite; neither one of us would lose the tip off a nose.

We were grateful for the ride, but there was something to be said for the bodiless feeling that came after the cold. Something I would always remember. When you forget how bad it hurts, you feel so free.

This was what I was thinking as I stood there in the

music hallway. I made my heart go numb, listened for the wind, and on it what she'd want me to say.

"You didn't call," he said.

I kept listening.

"You said you'd call," he said. And then—the cinderblock wall at my back slick with its own sweat, or with mine—I remembered. Maybe I did say I'd call. Maybe he said he'd call me, and I said no, no I'll call *you*.

Anyway, that's something Ruby would have done.

He was still here, blocking my exit with a clutter of music stands and an old bassoon.

I surveyed him as Ruby would, had she been there across the corridor, near the cracked viola and crate of dusty sheet music, taking stock. Definite points on the hair: It was cut crooked and fell into his eyes. But his pants were too tight and slung too low. And his shoulders were set too cocky; he thought having me that one time meant he had me still.

He was talking, saying I'd been the one to ignore him, not the other way around. Acting like it's the boy who's supposed to stop talking to the girl after unmentionables are traded in the backseat of a car, not the girl. He'd obviously never met anyone like my sister.

"What's the matter?" he was saying. "Didn't you want to?"

I shrugged one shoulder. (Ruby, should I say I did?)

"You didn't say you didn't want to," he reminded me.

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I shrugged the other shoulder. (Ruby, should I say I didn't?)

"So." He took a breath. "What're we doing tonight?"

That's when my phone vibrated from inside my pocket. I was able to slip out from under his arm, through the jumble of music stands, past the bassoon, into the center of the hallway, to freedom. I checked my phone to find a text.

don't get too comfy. im here 2 spring u. ps what's up w yr room? where are the wheels?

It was Ruby—and somehow she'd figured out where I was sleeping at my dad's: a tiny camper without tires set up on the back lawn, bed cavity overtop the steering wheel that looked out onto the flower garden, a net between me and the bees. It was pretty convenient; I'd even strung an extension cord from the garage so I could watch TV.

I wasn't sure how she knew, and wondered if she'd been talking to my dad, or my half-siblings, or my stepmother, to find out that once the weather turned warm I'd vacated my room in the house in favor of the camper.

And what did she mean she was going to spring me? Was she here?

My answer came immediately after, with another text:
my pink glasses! been looking 4 these 4ever chlo!

No one had told her about the camper. She was *inside* the camper, going through my stuff. She must have found the sunglasses I'd swiped the summer I left—the ones with

the pink-tinted lenses that she said made a person happy to see through, like a drug you could wear on your head.

The boy—his name was Jared—was eyeing my phone suspiciously, with a protectiveness he didn't deserve. "Who's that?" he asked.

"I have to go," is all I said, because Ruby was here.

I didn't know how things could be the same for anyone, how we could still be having this conversation, how anyone could be having any conversation, didn't know how I could pretend to be content living my days in this ordinary life, in this ordinary hallway, with this ordinary boy, now that she was here.

CHAPTER THREE

RUBY TRIED



Ruby tried to convince my dad. She tried in all the ways she was used to trying: her eyes staring him down until no light could escape and there was nowhere else to look but straight at her.

She tried with misdirection and misleading topics of conversation, with the subterfuge no one ever saw coming until days later, when they went searching for their wallet and thought they remembered it opening wide for one quick moment in Ruby's hand. She tried talking low; she tried talking loud. She tried being sweet; she tried being mean. Behind the closed door, where I couldn't see, I know she tried.

I waited outside his home office with my stepmom. She wasn't anyone special—if Ruby and I ever happened upon her in conversation, we avoided calling her by name.

She had two children who, since we had the same father, carried half my blood in their veins, just like Ruby did, the

exact same amount, though I didn't feel connected to them in any real way.

They were like any two people I might pass in the halls at school. One boy, one girl. You see them and wave. Maybe you have on the same color sweater and you're like, "Hey, look. We're wearing the same color sweater." But there's nothing else to be said beyond that, so you each keep moving. You know you'd barely give it a thought if you never saw them again.

This is how I know blood is meaningless; family connections are a lot like old gum—you don't have to keep chewing. You can always spit it out and stick it under the table. You can walk away.

Ruby was my sister, but she was so much more than that. She loved me. She loved me more than anyone else in the whole entire world loved me. More than Mom, more than Dad. More than friends. More than any guy ever had, because no guy had. No matter how far apart we'd been these past two years, there was no question she did.

My stepmom cleared her throat. She did things like that, she had to, or else I'd forget she was there. "Are you sure you want to go away with this Ruby?" she said.

"Ruby is my *sister*," I said. "She practically *raised* me."

"Well, this is the first time I've ever seen her."

I didn't feel like explaining how Ruby never left the state of New York, let alone the confines of our wooded county.

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Mostly she stayed in our town, where everyone knew her, where all you had to do was say her name and anyone in hearing distance would snap to attention, wondering if she'd been sighted around the corner and was coming this way.

Not just the boys but the girls, too. Did Ruby like this song? Then everyone had to hear it. Had Ruby worn this jacket? Then everyone wanted to slip arms into its sleeves.

Back at home, I got used to people knowing about Ruby, peppering me with questions about her, saying how this one time they talked to Ruby about really old French movies and did she say anything about it, do you think she likes Godard? How Ruby pumped their gas last Tuesday; how Ruby bummed their smokes, but they didn't mind; how years and years ago Ruby saw them play live at the old Rhinecliff hotel, and how, after the show, they let her bang away at their drums.

Pennsylvania was a strange state. No one knew who Ruby was.

"It's odd that she didn't visit all this time and now here she is," my stepmom said.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess. But that's Ruby."

"We invited her for Christmas and she didn't come."

"She doesn't like Christmas. She says it's too obvious. Plus she hates all the red together with the green."

"Besides the fact that she never calls . . ."

“Ruby has this thing with her ear. Telephones make it buzz. I don’t mind if she texts instead of calls. I know all about her ear.”

Defending her came naturally. Usually no one asked such questions about Ruby, but I guess I had some answers lying in wait in case they did.

My stepmom, though, wouldn’t let it go. “All of a sudden she drives out here, without warning, lands on our doorstep, wearing . . . I’m sorry, but was that a nightie? Did she even bother to get dressed this morning? And then she marches in to tell your father she’s taking you with her. Just like that?”

“Yup. Like I said, that’s Ruby.”

“Did she even ask if you wanted to go?” my stepmom said, pushing.

(She hadn’t.)

“Didn’t she think there was a reason you came to live with us in the first place?”

(There was . . . but what was it?)

“And why now? Why today?”

(I hadn’t asked Ruby that, either.)

“Chloe?”

Ruby wasn’t here to tell me what to say or remind me of what I wanted. Maybe she should have coached me before going in to talk to my dad.

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All I knew is she'd landed in Pennsylvania so suddenly—appearing in my camper, hoodie sweatshirt on over summer negligee, a new freckle I didn't recognize on her nose, the pink sunglasses I'd stolen and she'd stolen back perched on her forehead, standing there sucking down the bottle of tropical fruit punch she'd found in my minifridge—and I hadn't had a chance to decide how I felt about it.

If I wanted to go with her.

If I was allowed to go, if I even would.

But, before I had a chance to answer, Ruby emerged from my dad's office. This was down in the basement of the house, wood-paneled and lit with dim, dull bulbs so it looked like we were lost in an alien forest, walled in on all sides by flattened trees.

She walked out and stood before me and my stepmom near the jaundice-colored couch. She didn't sit. It wasn't the kind of couch she'd ever sit on.

From the cloudy expression on her face, I knew it hadn't gone well. She seemed . . . there was no other word to call it but surprised. He must have said no, which didn't happen to her often. She probably had no clue what to make of it.

One time, I remember, a boy she was sort of seeing tried to say no when she told him she was craving a slice of cheesecake and he needed to go get her some, like right this minute. "Where's the best cheesecake in the whole state?"

she'd asked him, and when he'd said down in the city, she'd said, well, that's where he needed to go. She was testing him, I knew, doing it only because she could. But he had to work early the next morning, he said. It was late, he said, too late to drive two-and-a-half hours to the city just for cheesecake and two-and-a-half hours back so he could make it to work on time, especially if she wasn't going to ride with him.

She gave him the eyes first: green in the way nothing else in the world is green, green to stun you, venom green.

She moved closer to him on the couch, lowered the volume on the TV. Then she took a single finger, just the one, and traced the line of his chin—accomplishing two things at once: a reminder that he really should do something about that stubble, but also of who he was dealing with, who she was.

“Don't you like cheesecake?” she asked him innocently, and I'm trying to remember if his name was Raf or Ralph or Ray, because then Raf or Ralph or Ray said, “You know I do,” and she said, “Do I really?”

She leaned on his shoulder and mumbled something into his ear that I couldn't make out from across the room.

She'd had him at the chin, I could tell, but she'd also made him late to work a few times already and I knew he had that on his mind, too. Being fired was apparently something that normal people concerned themselves with.

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Ruby herself was always late for work at Cumby's. She ate M&M's free off the vine in the candy aisle and popped the cap on her gas tank to keep her car full up on unleaded, but she wasn't fired, not even close. Then again, no one else in town lived a life like Ruby's.

Raf or Ralph or Ray was trying to make a decision. Then he saw me looking.

I was thirteen then, maybe twelve. He saw me across the room and smiled. That's how I knew he'd risk getting fired for Ruby; lots of boys in town would.

"You up for some cheesecake, Chloe?" he asked me then, because if a guy wanted a solid shot at Ruby, he had to make an effort with her little sister. And I said yeah sure I wanted some cheesecake, and with cherries, and before you knew it he was heading south for the Mid-Hudson Bridge, trying to beat the 1:00 a.m. weekend closing at Veniero's, some bakery in Manhattan that he assured us made the best cheesecake in the whole state. We didn't even give him gas money, though Ruby donated a nickel for the tolls.

And I honestly don't know—didn't care—if he got fired the next day or not.

How easy it had been to convince him. He could have said no; he'd made a valiant effort. But in the end he didn't. He physically couldn't. And I don't think he even liked cheesecake.

My dad, though, he seemed to have a strength that boy

couldn't muster. Or else Ruby had lost a touch of her magic in the years we'd been apart. My dad came out of his office all beard and big head, like he held all the power, like no one could tell him what to do, and I hated him a little bit then, hated him a lot, for thinking he could deny Ruby what she wanted.

"So it's all settled," my dad said. "I assume Ruby's staying for dinner?"

"Oh no," Ruby said. "I'm staying, but not for dinner. I'm on a liquid diet, you know, a cleanse. Shakes only, the fruit kind or the milk, and I don't want you to go to any trouble with the blender."

She nodded politely at the man who was my father, though he'd skipped out on me before I could walk, and then she nodded politely at the woman who was married to the man who was my father, and pulled me by the sleeve up out of the basement to get the hell away from them both.

I should have known she'd come for me at some point. I should have been waiting. Ruby was impetuous. She did things like head down the driveway to check the mailbox, wearing only rain boots, a hoodie, and a summer slip with a jam stain on the lace hem, and end up across state lines, hours from home, telling my dad she'd come for custody.

I don't know what happened during her walk down the driveway that made her decide she had to have me back immediately—she didn't say. It must have been really im-

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portant to leave right then, though, because otherwise she totally would have put a dress on over that slip.

Once Ruby decided on a thing, it was like, in her mind, it grew legs and turned real. She could write on a piece of paper the color underwear I'd have on tomorrow and fold it up a dozen times and hide it down deep in the toe of her boot, and even if I searched through my dresser drawers blindfolded, picking out a pair I hadn't worn in weeks, she'd have known, somehow, that I'd pick red. Almost as if she'd willed the color on my body by writing down its name.

"What did my dad say?" I asked. We'd convened in my camper, climbed up to the bed compartment wedged over the wheel, even though it was pretty humid up there, to discuss in private.

"He said you have school," she said, wrinkling her nose.

She pressed her palm to the screen of the porthole window that looked out over my stepmom's garden and, outside, a bumblebee flew up close to it, then flitted away. She tapped the screen, but it didn't come back, not even to be near her.

"I do have school," I said. "For three more weeks."

"He said you have finals and if you don't take them you'll fail out or whatever and have to repeat the tenth grade." She flipped over to study me. "You lost your bangs."

"They grew out like a year ago," I said, but softly, because I wasn't mad. I was thinking that this was the mo-

ment she was seeing me after all this time without bangs, and I'd always been thinking about this moment, wondering if she'd like me this way.

"I'll cut them again for you if you want," she said.

She folded up my hair and held it above my forehead to create the illusion of bangs, that curtain over the eyes to hide things you don't want to have to see. The world closer in, less inhibiting, easier to deal—and that was all she had to do to make me miss them.

"When we get you home, that's the first thing we'll do," she said, "cut your bangs, then get veggie lo mein at the Wok 'n' Roll, and I'll give you all the baby corns like always. There's been no one to eat my baby corns. I've had to throw them away."

"I thought you were on a liquid diet. A cleanse."

"I wouldn't need to cleanse anything anymore if I got you back."

She let her hand fall, and my hair was the same length again. My eyes could see all. I made a face. I was thinking of driving into town, where the Wok 'n' Roll was, of who we might see—or not see. "We don't have to get lo mein . . ."

"What, you don't want Chinese? Do you want pancakes at Sweet Sue's?"

"That's a drive," I said. "You mean the place way out past the high school, right?"

She looked at me funny. "You don't remember Sweet

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Sue's? The pancakes at Sweet Sue's? The strawberry-banana pancakes?"

I did—I remembered everything about the town and about Ruby. Or I used to. Maybe it was being so close to her now, but I felt like I'd been spun around and around with my head bagged in a mosquito net and then asked to give street directions.

"I remember . . ."

I was going to bring her up. London. That's who we were talking around, not haircuts and what to eat for dinner.

The girl who died.

The reason I was here in the first place.

London.

The girl whose name I couldn't make my mouth say.

So to Ruby, what I said was, "Yeah. Of course I remember Sweet Sue's."

We were talking like I was already coming back, like my dad hadn't said no. Like I had no dad and there was no such thing as no. Like I would be stuffing myself full of pancakes tomorrow.

"Also . . ." she said, eyes on me now, eyes in all my wrinkles and corners, eyes up inside my clothes, "something's different about you, and it's not just the hair."

I let her look, though I wondered what she was seeing.

"What size do you wear now, a B?" she asked.

“Um, yeah,” I said, blushing. She was looking at my chest.

She smiled softly. “Well, you *are* only sixteen. Don’t worry, that’ll change.”

I flipped over onto my stomach so she couldn’t keep looking. But she was sitting up now, staring deep into me, her body between me and the ladder, the only way down.

“Don’t tell me his name,” she said. “I don’t want to know.”

“Whose name?”

“Don’t say it. Just thinking about it makes me want to murder him. You cannot let me in the same room with him, Chlo. I can’t be responsible for what I’d do.”

“Ruby, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the boy you lost your virginity to—don’t say his name—who else did you think I meant? Is there someone else I have to kill on your behalf?”

I looked away. She looked away. We looked away together out the porthole and stayed like that for a long while.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she said at last.

“What, like in a text? ‘Hi, I just slept with this semihot guy Jared from sixth-period study hall. TTYL’?”

“I told you not to say his name,” she said. “I should absolutely not know his name.”

“Oops,” I said, though she sure knew I’d done it on purpose.

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“*Semihot?*” she said, with some small concern. “How semi?”

“Oh, you know. Cuter in the dark.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Then, quickly, before she could ask more questions, I added, “It was no big deal. What happened, I mean. I’m glad I got it over with.”

She let out a breath. Clearly she was *not* glad, not one bit. And here would be the time to ask the questions big sisters were supposed to ask after a secret like this had been revealed—about protection, for instance, all the slimy stuff no one wants to talk about. Force herself to say the word *condoms*, to make sure we used one. Ask did he treat you all right? Ask how do you feel now, you okay? Say it’ll be better next time. Next time it won’t burn so much, next time you won’t want to sock him in the eye for not going slow.

Big sisters had to do it, when the mothers weren’t sober enough to string five words together and say it themselves.

But Ruby told me a story instead.

“My first time,” she said, “was right on the edge of the water, on the rocks. I had on these little silver hoop earrings, like three in one ear, and when we were doing it they starting humming and my ear got really hot—like that time with the iron on the bed when you thought you unplugged it first and don’t make that face it didn’t hurt that bad really—and then the earrings were flying out of my

ears, these shiny, silver whirling things high up over the water, they'd come totally alive and, wow, was it something."

"So you lost your earrings?"

"Yeah, they fell out. I guess I wasn't supposed to have them anymore. The whole thing sort of ruined the idea of earrings for me. I mean, you'll only lose them. Why bother wearing them at all?"

I wasn't sure what she was trying to say with this. Ruby's stories didn't have morals. They meant one thing in the light and one thing in the dark and another thing entirely when she was wearing sunglasses. If she was disappointed in me, for what I did in that Subaru, she wasn't showing it.

"This was at the reservoir?" I asked.

She ignored that. "I remember looking up and seeing these silver swirls in the sky, bright like stars, brighter even than the moon, which was full that night . . . well, almost. I bet that was them flying over the mountains—and what's on the other side, the big mall in Poughkeepsie?—and you could see them for miles and miles." She sighed. "That was the best part of the night."

"Who were you with?" I asked. Because she'd never told me.

"Some guy," she said. "So, *anyway*, your dad's all hung up on those final exams you have to take at school, and also, FYI, he called me irresponsible, and I said that's our drunk mother not me, and he said our mom's an alcoholic

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and it's a disease and we should not make fun of her because she has problems, and I said he's got no idea what kind of problems, and he said only over his dead body could you go back upstate with me, and I told him he didn't own you, and he said actually he did, that's what child custody is, and you're technically still a child until you're eighteen, and then I stuck my tongue out at him like this." She stopped talking, to demonstrate.

"You didn't!"

"Kidding. Well, only about the tongue."

"What else did he say?"

"He said I'm a bad influence and got you mixed up in drugs. I said you don't do drugs because I won't let you, and if he knew me at all he'd know that."

Now I rolled my eyes. She was right, though.

"Because if *anyone* knows how to look out for you, it's me. He has no idea what I'd do for you. No idea."

This was true; then again it wasn't. It was true because I wanted it true, made it so by stowing it in a picture frame on the wall of my mind where I reminded myself of things, the things I knew about Ruby, the things I knew about myself. One and the same, all hung on the selfsame wall. But it also wasn't true because I was here. She let me stay here in Pennsylvania, and it had taken her two years to come.

"If he says I can't go, I can't go . . ." I told her. "He's only remembering what happened to London."

I had finally said the name and I swear, for a second there, she stared blankly back at me as I had when she'd uttered the name Sweet Sue's. She just stared.

"London," I reminded her.

Nothing. Her stare was especially intense, like she was trying to shove a noise signal into my head—but I could think and hear just fine.

I tried again. "What happened . . . with London?"

She blinked, broke the stare, and said, "Oh, yeah. That."

"That's why he doesn't want me to live with you. Even for the summer."

"Hmmp. What happened to that girl could never ever happen to you. Like I said, I wouldn't let it."

I'd turned away from her here, somehow, on that narrow bed stuffed up over the wheel, the compartment so small our four feet were hanging off the end. But she wasn't letting me stay turned away; she wasn't letting me not face her. She wanted me to look at her, to see her mouth as she spoke. She climbed over me, she rolled into me, she did a series of swift jujitsu moves on me that tangled me up in her arms and locked me to her, elbow-to-elbow, one bare foot held fast in the crook of my neck, and then, calmly, hardly even breathing heavy, she said:

"I wouldn't. Let it happen. To you."

She rolled away. Far enough away that I immediately wanted her back.

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“I want to go home with you,” I said, the words coming true the moment I said them. I didn’t do everything she wanted, not every little thing. But I wanted to do this. “I want to,” I repeated.

“I know,” she said.

“I’m going.”

“Not tonight. You’ll have to sneak out. After finals. Whenever you’re ready, when they’re not looking—that’s when you’ll go.”

“Like how?”

“I dunno,” she joked. “Hijack a hot-air balloon?”

Ruby had a thing for heights—being up in them and looking down. She liked imagining herself soaring through the sky higher and higher until she was so high up she’d need a telescope to look back to ground.

Even so, she’d never been on an airplane. And there were no high-rises in our town, so she couldn’t dangle out their windows to count the dots of cars and people below. She didn’t bother to climb our tall, spindly pine trees, since that was an awkward feat to maneuver while wearing a dress.

The highest Ruby had ever been on this earth was Overlook Mountain, which at its summit showed off a bird’s-eye view of our town and not much beyond that, since all the trees got in the way. She once wanted to rent a hot-air balloon to test out our town’s clouds, though I told

her that I was pretty sure, from science class, she wouldn't be able to poke donut holes through them like she hoped to. She wanted to be able to spy on everyone, she said, from the cloud cover, and shoot them with jets of rain when they misbehaved.

But we could go anywhere, I remember saying. If the hot-air balloon was ours for a whole day, imagine how far we could travel. We could make it to the ocean maybe, or up to sightsee the clouds over some cool northern state like Maine.

But Ruby didn't like to travel far—she needed to be able to see home, she said. She had to stick around, just in case.

She believed this wholeheartedly, which was why it was shocking to see her here, in Pennsylvania, untied and cut loose from her usual haunts upstate. And it also explained why she wanted to get home right away. With me.

“Be serious,” I told her. “Please.”

“Okay,” she said. She took one last look up and I followed her gaze, like together we could cast our eyes skyward and see the way out of here—but mere inches above our heads was the camper's plastic pockmarked ceiling, and the camper itself had legs of cinder blocks, not wheels.

She dropped her eyes back down to me and let her mouth perk up into a smile. “Forget the balloon,” she said. “You know . . . you could always take the bus.”

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“The bus? How much would that cost?”

She let the smile have her whole face. “Don’t worry about that. You know the Trailways stops right on the Green.”

Maybe she’d lost her grip on everyone all around her, maybe the Ruby I remembered wasn’t the Ruby who was here now, but she had enough of an influence on me to make me sure. I would go. Balloon or bus or thumb out on the highway, I’d head home to her.

I didn’t know then that she hadn’t lost anything. Not me—and certainly not what she could do. It was only the physical distance. The farther she got from her blue mountains, down away from her green trees, the less she was herself. She couldn’t do anything she wanted, not like she was used to, not while she was all the way out here.

Back home, though—that would be another story.

That night, my dad wouldn’t budge, and my stepmom—not like we cared—backed him. On hearing the definitive decision, Ruby wouldn’t set foot in the house again. But she didn’t leave the state yet, either. She said she’d go when she was good and ready and how’d my dad like that?

All that happened that night was Ruby and I drove to the Wendy’s, then to the KFC, because there isn’t much in the way of dining options off Route 80 in Pennsylvania, and then we drove back to the camper to drink our milk shakes—we’d both ordered chocolate—plus spoon each

other mouthfuls of mashed potatoes because we figured they were liquid enough to keep Ruby cleansed. We spent the night in the camper with the screens wide open, listening for mosquitoes instead of bees once the dark had fallen, and by morning she was gone: a wrinkle on the sheet and a long strand of hair, like I'd imagined her.

I wouldn't have believed she'd come at all if I didn't get this text:

look under yr pillow xo

And there, under my pillow, like how all those years ago she'd snatch and reward my teeth, she'd left probably every cent she'd had in her purse: six twenties, two fives, eleven singles, seven quarters, ten dimes, one nickel, and twenty-seven pennies, totaling up to \$144.07. Not enough to rent a hot-air balloon, but more than enough for a bus ticket home.

CHAPTER FOUR

I WANTED



I wanted to skip the good-byes entirely. Skip all the hours of every night that came after, skip the entire three weeks.

Time sped up, calling me closer to Ruby, but it wouldn't run fast enough. Back in my dad's house, it felt like she'd never been there at all. She was a hazy vision in boots and jam-stained slip, guzzling down my bottle of juice. Only the wad of cash in my pocket let me know she'd come for real.

I wanted school to end so I could go. To skip the math final, the science final, the final count of all our sit-ups and pull-ups in gym.

I would have skipped the fight about my grades in the kitchen, definitely. The half-siblings—one boy, one girl—knocking on the door to my camper, asking why won't I come inside the house to eat. The moment Jared did or didn't call eventually and if I made like Ruby and tried not to care either way.

I'd skip the last night in the camper, propped up on cinder blocks, unable to sleep. Skip sneaking out over the fence the next morning.

Skip the longest bus ride of my life — please.

Skip all thoughts of London, or try to.

I would have, if I could have.

Far easier was avoiding thoughts of my mother, because who knew where she was spending her nights these days, and it's not like I felt like calling to tell her I was coming home.

I landed in the Port Authority terminal in New York City, to change buses. That meant I was less than three hours from Ruby.

I wanted to skip the layover. The woman taking a bath in the sink. The hours spent in the basement level of the bus depot and the pretzel vendor who tried to grope me. The free pretzel when I threatened to scream.

Then the Lincoln Tunnel, which cuts through the Hudson River to escape the city. Skip the worries of being trapped in that tunnel, the gush of relief at seeing the light at the end.

Skip the entirety of New Jersey.

The New York State Thruway at night even though that's the best time to drive it.

The familiar turn to exit 19.

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The traffic circle, where Ruby once got pulled over and convinced the cop not to search her and then laughed maniacally when he let her go.

We were getting closer.

The bus turned onto the first highway that led toward town and passed the spot where Ruby blew a tire and got three guys to pull over and offer to fix it, though she ended up fixing it herself, while they watched, and then let them watch her drive away. The bus turned onto the second highway, where Ruby liked to ignore all signs noting speed limits and, sometimes, if there were no trucks coming, jammed the gas and raced with headlights dark, fingertips guiding the wheel.

The bus took the left turn toward town.

There was the tattoo shop where Ruby got her eyebrow pierced, then decided she didn't want her eyebrow pierced and instead got her nose pierced, then decided she really didn't want anything pierced, not even her ears.

Cumby's, open twenty-four hours a day. Even so, there was no point asking the bus to stop there, since Ruby's car wasn't parked out front.

The rows of storefronts, shuttered and dark, and how Ruby could walk into any one and come out with whatever thing she wanted on layaway, which to her meant getting to take it home with her and never bothering to come back and pay.

Soon, the bus was pulling up to the Village Green, the center of the town where I was born and where Ruby still lived. The bus doors were opening and I was climbing down the stairs with my bags and retrieving my suitcase. The bus doors were closing and I was left standing on the Green with my bags at my feet. The bus was pulling away.

It was a Saturday night, late June, and there was absolutely no one here.

I texted Ruby: **guess where i am**

No response.

I texted Ruby the answer anyway: **im here**

almost didnt survive bus ride

bus driver had rly small head. wondered if he cld even see road

drove us off bridge

I waited for some time, then tried again.

kidding abt bridge. u still live @ Millstream?

want me 2 go there? or u pick me up???

My phone was silent, not a beep or a buzz to let me know.

When I last lived in town, our mother had a place back behind WDST, the local radio station, but Ruby said the classic rock the deejays insisted on playing filled her head with near-total boredom, and had on occasion put her to sleep while standing, which was terribly dangerous, like when she was getting the mail at the curb and “Stairway to Heaven” came on *again*. So that’s why she rented her own

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place on the opposite end of town, near the stream—that and the fact that she couldn't stand our mother. My school papers said I lived at my mom's, but all my things were at Ruby's. Or they had been.

The Millstream Apartments weren't far from the Green, but I had my bags and my suitcase and there was that hill.

So I waited for her to pick me up. She'd be here. She knew tonight was the night. It was her idea, after all, that I come home.

I sat on a prime bench in the center of the diamond that made up the Green and took it all in: these trees, that sidewalk, this place imprinted on every surface with thoughts of Ruby as if she'd gotten her greasy hands all over everything and trampled the lawn and dirtied up the benches with her muddy boots.

Only, it was too quiet. I'd never seen the Green empty in warm weather, not once, not in my life. On summer nights, there was always someone out: a random townie tripping too hard to operate a motor vehicle; some tie-dyed tourist who hitched here all the way from burning things up at Burning Man to camp in our shrubs; a few kids from the Catholic high school the next town over who never got invited to our parties but still came here hoping; or that guy Dov Everywhere who lived somewhere out in the woods, no one knew where. He took care of the town's stray dogs, collected sticks to walk with, and always gave fair warning

when it was about to rain. He also barked for no reason and threw his sticks at cars, so you had to be careful on what night you caught him.

Not even Dov was there on the Green that night.

I would have thought time had stopped completely, leaving the town untouched since I'd left it—if the wind didn't snatch the stub of the bus ticket out of my hand and shoot it across the Green, plastering it against the window of the empty pizza place, then flip it back down the stairs to flutter and gasp at my feet.

The wind would have stopped, if time had. Time would have had to stop for Ruby not to come meet my bus. So where was she?

My suitcase rolled itself too fast down the hill that led to the Millstream, and I had to run to keep up. I knew where to find Ruby's key, as she tended to use the one hidden on the windowsill more than the one on her key ring, but when I got the door to her apartment open, I saw an empty room with takeout menus for the Wok 'n' Roll and the Indian buffet scattered over the floor. The windows had no curtains and the sink had no dirty dishes. There was a mattress left behind in her bedroom, but it had no sheets.

It was like a home abandoned before the floodgates opened and the water came spilling in. She'd gone away and wasn't coming back. She'd gone away, and she didn't tell me where to find her.

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I saw the few things she must have forgotten: an orange zip-up sweater bunched up on a hook behind a door; a toe ring in the sink drain; a book of matches blotted with the dark pressed smudge of her lips, one full row of matches left to burn.

Dusky impressions on the carpet showed where her furniture had been. This here a table, that there a couch. The air was stale, unbreathed. The refrigerator had been pulled from the wall, fat black cord dangling. Inside the fridge was a perfectly preserved plum, petrified around the marks of her teeth to show where she'd taken one small bite, then let the plum be, like it might get sweeter in a day or two. She often sampled fruit this way, even in the supermarket.

"Ruby?" I called out. Her name echoed through the empty apartment, bouncing back at me from the ceiling, and when I looked up, I saw her scrawl:

R u b y

Like anyone could forget she'd once lived here.

That's when I heard the screech of tires outside. A car had come to a sharp stop in the parking lot below. I stepped to the edge of the second-floor walkway outside Ruby's apartment, my heart beating fast, but the car wasn't an old rusted Buick on its last legs; it wasn't even white and she wasn't in it. Then I recognized the person lurching out of the driver's side door bellowing my name.

The guy was one of Ruby's ex-boyfriends, and there

were many. This one, Pete, had shaggy hair, a scraggly chin, and wore a pitted Pixies T-shirt so old I could see through to the sweat shining on his skin. Years ago, Ruby had dumped him as she'd dumped all the others, but he never did seem to get the hint and go away.

"She said to look for you here if you weren't on the Green," he was saying. "She said to drop you at the party and she'll meet you there."

"Ruby sent *you*?" Still, I started down the stairs.

"Thanks," he said once I reached him, "thanks a lot."

"Why didn't she come get me herself?"

He waved that question away as if it were a puzzle he sure couldn't answer, one of those mysteries of the universe that scientists chase after their whole lives, like the Big Bang and if it really happened, or life on Mars.

"You know Ruby," he said. "C'mon, get in the car. The party's way out at the quarry and we'd better get there before the beer runs out."

I did know Ruby. I knew her better than anyone could possibly know her, the way no guy could come close to knowing, no matter how long he was with her and what, behind closed doors, he thought they did.

I'd seen her in ways no one else had. I'd heard the names she called every boy she'd been with, names that would haunt them forever if they knew. I'd seen her happy. I'd seen her sad. I'd seen her when we both hennaed our hair, the mud

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mixed with paprika and egg yolk that dripped down her scalp and turned her ears orange. I'd seen her laugh so hard she peed a little. I'd seen her so mad, she punched a hole in the wall. And I'd seen her after, her knuckles scratched and swollen, but her eyes clear and wide open, when she said it didn't matter—nothing mattered but her and me.

Yes, I knew Ruby. But even I couldn't understand why she wasn't there to meet me and had sent some random ex in a sweaty nineties T-shirt instead.

It wasn't until I got closer that I realized someone else was inside the car, sitting shotgun in the shadows.

"You remember Owen," Pete said, motioning at his younger brother. "Aren't you guys in the same grade?"

"Not exactly," I said, eyeing his silhouette. "He's a year ahead of me."

"Same difference," Pete said.

I felt it as soon as I piled my bags in the backseat and scooted over to sit behind Owen. That intense craving to be in his orbit, close enough just to see him—even around a corner would do. I felt the hope crawling under my skin. The thrumming pulse. The hot stars crowding my eyes and tightening in a lasso around my head.

Oh, Ruby.

Did she have anything to do with this?

She must have. She'd sent Owen's brother, Pete, to pick me up, figuring there was a good chance Owen would be in

the car. Though I'd been careful not to say it out loud, how I felt about him, I'm guessing she'd always known. No secrets could be kept from her, not anymore, is this what she was telling me?

She had to know I'd be inches away from him for however long it took to drive to the quarry. That maybe I'd have to talk to him, that maybe he'd talk back. I could see the shape of her smile hovering in the seat beside me, so very smug and amused.

Only, there was something Ruby didn't know: Not even she could make Owen like me.

"O," Pete said, "you remember Chloe. *Ruby's* sister."

Owen took a second to respond. He let out a breath, which I didn't know how to read—a sigh of annoyance or a grunt of acknowledgment; it could have gone either way—and then with great effort he turned a millimeter in his seat and said a word to me, just one, "Hey."

He didn't turn any more than that, so my only view was a partial profile and the back of his neck. In the time I'd been gone, he must have given up on another mohawk and let it grow in again, because his hair was sticking up, longer in some spots than others. It was too dark to see what color he'd dyed it now.

"Hey," I said back. Then his brother gave the car some gas and pulled out of the parking lot.

Ruby would want a story of the drive to the quarry;

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she'd expect it. What she'd want was something fantastic: an action-adventure moment to get our hearts pounding.

I had to imagine one, there in the car. Imagine something worth telling.

First, we'd have to get Pete out of the picture—a given. Ruby wouldn't want Pete in the story, so maybe we could stop for gas and he'd take forever to pump it. Or we'd be driving along like normal, but then we'd hit this patch of road where the sky opens up and this shadowy, flapping thing we wouldn't know what to call would swoop down and pull him out by the throat, and Owen would have no choice but to take the wheel. Something impossible like that, pure fiction. Something to hold Ruby's attention.

Pete would be long gone, who cares how, and I'd slip up into the passenger seat next to Owen, the only things between us the Big Gulp in the cup holder and the stick shift.

It would be when we were speeding down Route 212 that Owen would look at me, like really *look at me*, for the first time since forever. Maybe he'd remember how he ignored me in school, and he'd feel bad about that.

I knew I shouldn't care. I was like my sister, wasn't I? I was made of her snide comments about what all the boys were after and her brick walls built up and up to keep the boys out. I should act the way Ruby did with a boy she no longer wanted, like her heart had crawled up inside her rib

cage to die, and you'd never know it was up there, as it had climbed so far in, you couldn't even smell it rotting.

But I didn't want that.

If this were a story I was telling, if it were *my* story and Ruby let me tell it, Owen would turn in his seat and he'd say—

A buzz sounded. I looked down to find my phone blinking.

didnt forget you chlo. just wanted u 2 come see

See what? I was in the backseat and Pete was still driving and all I saw of Owen was the back of his head.

When we reached the quarry, Owen leaped out as soon as we stopped. A jumble of cars crowded the gravel lot out of sight of the main road, but Ruby's big white Buick wasn't among them. Knowing her, she'd volunteered some poor sap for the position of designated driver and secured us a ride.

There was smoke in the air—faint, I could feel it in my throat—and a flicker of warm light filtering out through the woods. A bonfire.

I left my bags in Pete's car. I had to: The party was deep in the quarry and the only way to reach it was down a freshly trampled path through the trees. Pete led the way, with me close behind, and then Owen. I stopped short once, and Owen, who was nearer than I expected, stepped on the back of my shoe.

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“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Sorry,” I mumbled back.

And in the night beneath oaks and pines and other trees I’d never bothered learning names for, he and I were closer than we’d ever gotten, close for three, four, five countable seconds, until he stepped away and went slipping past and his arm brushed my arm and he smelled like cigarettes and I wished he smelled different and he was gone.

I’d lost Pete, so I walked the rest of the path with my arms out, feeling my way until the trees broke open. My feet found gravel and the noise hit and I started sliding down the declining slope toward the bottom. It was a pit, a cavernous hole filled with people I used to know. Or people who knew Ruby, so they had to at least pretend they knew me because I was her sister. Here, back home, that’s the first thing I was.

Ruby was near—somewhere. I could sense her in the dark.

I reached the bottom of the pit and looked up at the other slope, a gleaming red crest in the night to show where the bonfire was burning, and where I’d find her.

Waiting for me.

Waiting to hear about the cold shoulder I gave the state of Pennsylvania. She’d ask, I’d tell, we’d be in sync again, and then the summer would get started, picking up where

we left off two years ago, on a warm night like this one, before it all went so wrong.

I was almost up to the top of the other slope when someone stopped me. A hand drawn closed around my ankle. Pulling me down.

“Chloe! I heard you’d be here!” some girl said. She was stretched out on the gravel slope with a few of her friends, and I guess we knew each other, or used to. Then other girls were there, and guys, and remember-this and remember-that, and was I living with Ruby now? and really? and wow and, hey, did I want a beer?

My pocket buzzed. Ruby again. **ur here!**

She was somewhere in the dark—she could see me, but I couldn’t see her.

Then another text: **im SO thirsty**

And one more: **meet me up at the keg xo**

Which was strange, because she didn’t exactly like beer—it fizzed. And maybe this should have been my first clue that she’d set me up. I should have known meeting her here had nothing to do with some party, because Ruby didn’t care about showing her face at parties, even her own.

But all I could focus on was finding that keg in the dark, and, as I did, climbing over the people sprawled out on the slopes, trying not to step on anyone’s hand.

It was up at the keg that my eyes finally adjusted to the

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low light. I could see where we were: either an old construction site or a place where gravel was stored. There was a crane in the distance, blocked off by stacks of concrete slabs. The air was thick with dust, brushed up by all these trespassing feet. The trees, they were everywhere around us, and the mountains, they were out there in the dark, pale imitations of the ones found in day.

I could see clearly, and then I couldn't.

It felt like I was looking up at the surface from deep below. I was down under, and getting sucked deeper, covered in bubbles from all my thrashing, lungs blowing up tight with unbreathed air. So familiar, like I'd been there before.

Time pooled around me, spun me in a washer, jerked to a stop. And I was back here, as if it hadn't happened. I was here.

And so, it turned out, was *she*.

"Hey, Chloe," she said. "Long time no see."

She was at the nozzle, controlling the flow of beer. I could see her hand holding the plastic cup she was filling, red plastic, the foam rising, white foam, the cup tilting to sift the foam, the hand holding it, the five fingernails on her hand.

"Take it," she said, passing me the red cup. "There's not too much left in the keg anyway, so you may as well or the guys'll hog it."

She wasn't who I expected to find—not now, not here.

But I didn't say that. I took the cup, put the cup to my lips. Opened the lips. Held out the tongue. Tipped the cup back. Took one swallow.

"See you later?" she said.

"Yeah." That's all I said, all I could say. Because the girl who was talking to me wasn't a girl I thought I'd ever be talking to again.

Was I even at this quarry? Standing at the edge of this gravel pit? Holding this cup?

I'd turned away, taken a step in some direction, because I wasn't beside the keg anymore and now two familiar arms were around me, a familiar voice in my ear.

"Chlo! You're here!" Ruby cried. She pulled back to take a look at me.

I must have been making a peculiar face because she laughed and snatched the cup from my hands and poured out the rest of my beer. "What are you doing!" she said. "You *hate* fizz."

Ruby looked just as I remembered, as she had three weeks ago, but she was a stranger to me all of a sudden, red-eyed in the firelight, weird.

"That's—" I choked out. "That's—" I pointed toward the keg. I couldn't get control of my mouth to make it say the name.

"Pabst," she said. "Tastes like puke before you've puked it, I know. Don't worry, you don't have to drink it."

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“No, no. Not the beer.”

“Oh no, that bus ride was worse than you texted, wasn’t it? Did you really almost crash? Did you get lost on the thruway? Did you hit like a whole herd of deer?”

She was distracting me, trying to get me to tell a story about something else when the story was right here.

London.

But that couldn’t be London filling another cup of beer from the keg, I was positive. Not London talking to that boy. Not London with the stripes on her sleeves, a hand up to her mouth to keep from laughing. Not her hair chopped more uneven than I remembered, bleached closer to white than before, though still showing off both her ears. No. Not London’s laugh, though it sounded like hers, lifting up over the bonfire and echoing through the quarry. The dark night, the party noises were tricking me, the fire was making me see things, I was the one who’d gone all weird.

Then London looked up and met my gaze. She smiled. And it was her—it couldn’t have been anyone else.

London, who was buried close to two years ago, was somehow still alive and standing right here.

I looked to Ruby to get her confirmation, but we weren’t alone anymore, so we couldn’t speak freely. “Petey,” she was saying, “watch it with the hand.”

Pete was there with us. He was shaking out his hand, like he’d been slapped, saying, “A guy’s gotta try, right?”

Ruby glared at him. “No,” she said, “not twice. Not with me.”

“But, Ruby,” I said, and I wasn’t talking about Pete and where he put his hands.

She knew. She was looking at the keg, too. Then loudly, for Pete’s benefit, she said to me, “You know that girl London from school, right?” Her mouth said those words, but her eyes said something far different. Her eyes had the red lights in them. Her eyes were telling me to not say what I wanted to say.

I had the reins of the story then; I could have turned it in any direction I wanted. Back down to the bottom of the pit, or straight-flash into the bonfire, or up into the tallest of the tall trees. The story you choose to tell isn’t always the story you believe. So, out loud, I said, “Yeah, I know her from school.”

And Ruby smiled, placated, and closed her eyes. All at once she seemed tired, a little wobbly on her feet like she had to sit down. Pete reached an arm out, even if he’d get slapped for it, as if she might need to lean on him. But she didn’t. Quickly she shook her head and opened her eyes to show the green I remembered, the green she was known for, her bright and searing green, and said, “That’s what I thought. You had French class together, right?”

“Right,” I said, my voice faint.

“So you want a beer?” Pete said.

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“Chloe doesn’t drink,” Ruby snapped, silencing him.

She took a step closer to me. Her arms were around me again, her elbows and wrists and fingers slung tight at my neck to keep me with her. She could have put a hand over my mouth, but she didn’t have to; I wouldn’t say a thing.

She hugged me close and I swear she breathed these words into my hair as she did, “See, Chlo? It’s just like it used to be.”

And—suddenly, without any explanation or mystery needing to be unraveled from any undiscovered corner of the universe—it simply was, and I had no idea how.

Because, look: There was London, like things were back the way they’d been before. Like it had never even happened. Just like Ruby said.