

PROOF of FOREVER

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LEXA HILLYER

HARPER **TEEN**

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Proof of Forever

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First Edition

*For Ellen Byer Friedlander,  
who has always inspired me to read, to write,  
and to rage against the dying of the light*

PART ONE  
*HERE and NOW*

*“Your past is always your past.*

*Even if you forget it,*

*it remembers you.”*

*—Sarah Dessen*

# 1

## FRIDAY

*Just do it. Now, now, now,* Zoe thinks as she blows loose strands of her blond hair off her sweaty forehead. Don't frogs die like this, from too much heat? One minute they're sleeping, dreaming froggy dreams, and the next they're just . . . fried.

The rickety box fan propped up on the porch railing divides the sunlight into flashes and shadows, its thick blades hacking the sky—before, after, before, after—pulling in the smell of freshly cut grass. Zoe can't help but think of the propeller on a fighter plane. Except no one's going anywhere, and no one knows of the little war inside her.

In the deafening whir, she almost doesn't hear him say it: "This isn't working."

It takes a minute to realize he means the bike.

Calvin has apparently given up on Operation Revitalize Zoe's Wheels. Her bicycle has just fallen in a mangled-looking heap of blue and white metal, half on the porch stairs, half on the

concrete path that cuts his front yard down the middle.

“Shit. Sorry.” Calvin wipes his greased fingers on his cargo shorts as he straightens to his full height, then swipes his almost shoulder-length brown hair out of his eyes. He is the very definition of floppy. “The chain is too rusted, Albright. Not sure there’s much more I can do.”

“Well, thanks for trying, I guess.” Zoe forces a smile—the kind you give the dental hygienist while biting down on a cold, metallic-tasting X-ray slide. Her cutoff shorts stick to her thighs in the August heat. The maple trees along Jefferson Street wink green and yellow in the faint-but-not-nearly-enough breeze. Down the road, she can see the local church, where she used to go for the free doughnuts. If it’s a toss-up between believing in a cozy place in the clouds where you go after death, or doughnuts, Zoe knows which side she’s on. When you’re dead, you’re dead.

*Say it, say it, say it*, she wills herself. Normally she can’t stop talking.

Calvin comes over and kicks the side of her foot. “I can see if my mom will lend you her old one,” he offers.

“Don’t worry about it. The thing’s a piece of thrift-store crap anyway,” Zoe says. She feels like she can’t breathe. It must be the weather.

“Then what’s the matter?” Calvin shades his eyes with his hand, staring down at her from his six-foot-two frame.

“Nothing,” she says, too fast. She feels her cheeks getting warm and her throat getting tight. She wants to go back. She

wants to go back to three months ago, before prom, before all of this happened.

They were supposed to have gone together just as friends. But then there was the fumbling, sweet, after-party kiss. And everything changed.

Now things *need* to go back, somehow, to the way they used to be. And though she's not sure she'll ever be able to connect the dots and explain why, her unexpected call from Joy today has made this all the more clear. Joy's words still ring in her ears: *I need to see you. Will you come?*

Joy isn't the kind of person you can say no to. Not with that lilt in her voice, that way it has of breaking midsentence from soft to rough, from high to low. Not with that power she has to convince you anything is true, even the idea that life is okay when it really isn't.

Even when she abandoned you two years ago and you haven't heard from her since, until this morning. Even *then*, you can't say no.

Cal raises an eyebrow. "Nothing? Really? I've seen a llama spit more convincingly." He's full of odd phrases like that.

"No, you haven't," Zoe replies, pushing him out of her way so she can sit down beside her bike.

Then his face quirks into a grin. "I know how to cheer you up." He darts around to the side of the house.

"Cal, what are you doing? I have to tell—" Before she can finish, Cal reappears holding the end of the garden hose.

"Never send a human to do a machine's job," he announces, faux-menacing, quoting their favorite movie. He grins again,



big. That adorable crooked-toothed grin. Zoe's chest clenches.

"I will kill you if you—"

"Two words, Albright. Dodge this." Cal lets loose.

The water hits her like cold, hard bullets and in a second her top is soaked. She squeals and instinctively goes to tackle him. "No fair!" she cries, trying to wrestle away the hose.

He holds the hose above his head, gazing down at her water-logged shirt. All his references to *The Matrix* seem to vanish from his vocabulary. There's a pause. "You're wearing my favorite bra," he says. He reaches out to flick the neon yellow strap that's peeking out of her V-neck T-shirt, and in that moment she finally gets one hand around the nozzle. But then he grabs her and swings her around so her back is to him and her arms are trapped at her sides. On any other day, this would be normal. This would be fun. This would be fine.

But today Calvin is the only one laughing. "I give up," she says, feeling a sting in her throat.

He continues to swing her around, his face happy. But his expression changes fast when he sees hers. He drops the hose, and it gives one final gush into the grass around her feet. "Seriously, what's up with you? You've been weird all week."

"I just . . . I . . ." *Just. Say. It.* Zoe has done this before. Just not to anyone who mattered. Not to Cal. With Steve Hutz it was easy. Same with Jared Weinbeck. This is different.

"I . . . I don't want to lose you as a friend," she manages to say.

"What are you talking about?" His face turns guarded. "What is this about, Zo?"

*Do it.* “I don’t . . . I don’t want to be this. A couple. With you. I don’t want that.” Zoe takes a huge breath. She feels light-headed but much better. Relieved. She did it.

“What?” Cal blurts out. “Why?”

Zoe doesn’t respond. She just stands there, helplessly, wishing she knew. Calvin is her best friend. They’ve spent hours together, driving around in his Ford, listening to music and talking about nothing. He’s been her solace ever since the days when her friendship with Joy came to an abrupt halt. He was there when Joy wasn’t.

And yet all it took was one phone call from Joy this morning to send Zoe’s head reeling, convincing her that she has to go to reunion night, even though it makes no sense, even though she *promised* Cal they would get pizza tonight—one of their remaining few before college.

“I can’t believe this.” Calvin starts pacing the yard. “You’re *dumping* me? You’re dumping me.”

“Maybe I’m not made for relationships,” Zoe says weakly.

“Zoe, that’s bullshit. We’re good together,” he says, his hazel eyes big and round. “You’re seriously going to run away from it now?”

She feels a tiny tide of anger peak and fall. “I’m not *running*, Cal.” She moves away and starts fumbling to pick up her bike, but it falls again, the left pedal nailing her in the shin. “Ow. *Damn it.* I don’t, you know . . .”

“No, I *don’t* know.”

She has the bike righted now, the blue, paint-chipped

handlebars firm in her hands, which fails to keep them from shaking. “I don’t feel it. Anymore. Or ever. I’m not sure. Remember at graduation how you said I was your best freaking friend in the world? That I could always be your metaphorical front man even though I can’t sing for shit? What happened to that?”

Calvin stares at her for a second. “What happened to that?” He barks out a laugh. “I’ll tell you what happened, Albright. We started *kissing*. I started *liking* you. I *thought* it was mutual. But I guess I’m just your backup guy, right? Your King of fucking Convenience.”

“Cal, you know that’s not true.” She stands there, holding on to her broken bike, wishing she could run, wishing they had never kissed, wishing he wasn’t so . . . him.

“So that’s it?” he says dully.

She doesn’t answer. She swings her right leg over the bike seat and tries to nudge the bike forward, but the misaligned chain causes it to wobble.

Cal hesitates, then reaches forward to catch her. “Zoe, you can’t ride that. It’s completely busted.” He helps her off the bike and she lets it fall behind her, lets him wrap his arms around her. A beat passes where they both just breathe like that, and Zoe tries not to feel trapped.

But she always feels trapped.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispers into the messy knot of hair at the top of her head.

His damp T-shirt presses against her face.

“I should go,” she says. Her throat is raw, as if she’s been shouting.

Cal lets her pull away. His eyes are wounded, confused. “Let me give you a ride.”

“You sure?” Zoe’s stomach clenches. She wishes he would yell or something.

“You can’t exactly take *that*,” he says, managing a quick smile that doesn’t touch his eyes.

So she swings her bike into the bed of his old Ford truck, then slides into the passenger seat. As soon as he starts the engine, a mix she made for him pours out from the speakers. Calvin punches the music off quickly, and they drive in silence. Out of long habit, Zoe props her feet on the glove compartment, where there are permanent scuffs in the shape of her flip-flops, and stares out the window at the pastel clapboard houses of Liberty, New Hampshire—the town she’s known all her life—flashing by. With a population of about fifteen hundred, they don’t even have their own high school; they share Kennett High with a few other towns. *Tiny, tiny, tiny*. This place. This car. Her entire life so far.

“So, back home I presume?” Cal asks, automatically hanging a right onto School Road.

“Actually . . .,” Zoe says, then hesitates.

Calvin sighs heavily. “I hate how you do this, Zo.”

“Do what?” she asks.

He turns to face her. She can see the hurt in his wrinkled brow, the pinched corners of his eyes. “That thing,” he says.

“When you’re all broody, but I know there’s something you *want*. So just ask me already.”

Zoe picks at her frayed jean shorts. Why did she break up with Calvin? Why does she always screw everything up? They should be playing video games in his basement—the coolest room in the otherwise sweltering house. Ordering pizza and watching a *Doctor Who* marathon or working on one of Cal’s band’s songs, like on any other normal Friday night. Instead, she feels like a little kid who’s been put in time-out.

She begins to ramble. It’s what she does in uncomfortable situations . . . what she does in *most* situations. “It’s Joy. She wants to see me tonight.” There’s a pause—Calvin knows Joy from freshman and sophomore years, before she moved away and dropped all contact with her former friends. Cal always took Zoe’s side, protectively, claiming Joy must’ve lost her mind to want to ditch her friends like that.

“It’s weird, I know,” Zoe pushes on, “but that’s part of why I think I should go. It’s reunion night at camp. She’s drawing *all* of us together.” She knows he knows what she means—her, Joy, Luce, and Tali. The inseparable four. Once upon a time, anyway. “Except my parents are working. Mom’s been stressed. I could text Tali, but you know what the girl thinks of me these days. It’s too far to bike and my bike’s out anyway and . . . And I need—”

“A ride there,” Calvin finishes her sentence.

“Well, yeah. That.”

“So what you’re saying is you don’t want to date me, you just want to use me for my wheels.”

“No, Cal, that’s not—”

“Relax. I’m kidding.”

“Are you sure? Because you’re talking like a robot. Or Keanu Reeves.”

He smiles now, a little. They mutually hate Keanu but nevertheless consider *The Matrix* the pinnacle of late-nineties filmmaking. “I’ll drive you. All right? I’ve got nothing better to do anyway.” Calvin turns his attention back to the road.

Zoe smiles and punches his arm lightly. She tries to let the breeze from the window dry her drenched T-shirt, once again unable to get her phone call with Joy out of her head. The pleading in Joy’s voice. Joy never had to *ask* them to listen to her—they always just did. Followed her with a blind faith. She always seemed to be at the center of them, tying things together invisibly. They had this running joke that Camp Okahatchee—aka Camp OK—was the epitome of okay-ness. Even the good stuff was merely okay. “This is all just purgatory, I swear,” she’d say. “One day things will be better than okay. They’ll be Fantastic.” She always said “Fantastic” like it had a capital *F*, like it came with jazz hands.

But ever since Joy moved away the summer after sophomore year, right after camp ended, mysteriously dropping off social media and changing her number, it’s like they all fell apart. Tali and Zoe still go to the same school, but they drifted so effortlessly they almost didn’t notice it happening at first. As for Luce, it was easier to lose track of her as she became swallowed in her busy private-school life, even though her hometown of Wolfeboro is

barely a half-hour drive from Liberty.

It hits Zoe how much she misses Joy—misses all of them, as a unit. She leans back in her seat, hearing the vinyl squeak beneath her legs.

Calvin punches her arm back. “I said I’d give you a lift to camp so you would *stop* brooding. It’s seriously tripping me out.”

She makes a goofy face caught somewhere between a smile and an eye roll, causing him to snort.

He turns back to the road. “I mean, dude. What would you do without me?” he jokes, though there’s an edge to his voice. He taps the steering wheel like a drum.

Zoe shakes her head, watching her hometown turn to a blur. “Ignorance is bliss.”

## 2

*Absofuckinglutely not.* Tali slips out of her purple silk maxi dress, balls it up, and throws it into the corner of her bedroom. It lands on the pile of half-read magazines on her nightstand, then hits the floor, taking her iPhone with it.

She stares at herself in her floor-length mirror, in only her black push-up and pink and green thong. Sometimes she still can't believe how, well, *good* her body looks now, her long legs finally curved, slightly, in the right places, instead of the awkward, gangly colt legs she had to deal with for years. Her 32Cs look more like C-pluses (*thank you, Pink!*), and her face has just the right amount of roundness in her cheeks but angles everywhere else. Big, dark eyes and long lashes. Pretty, pouty lips. Smooth, brown skin. And hair that, after several rounds of Japanese straightening, shows practically no sign of its natural frizz.

*From high up, we all look the same.* That's what Tali's dad likes to preach over dinner—that is, when he's *around* for dinner and not



off wooing investors. She wants to believe him, but this is plain old Earth—Liberty, New Hampshire, to be specific—and down here it's every girl for herself.

She finally settles on her white skinny jeans—the ones with purposeful rips along the front of the thighs—and a tissue-thin nautical-striped T-shirt from J.Crew that slips off her shoulder. With a tiny bit of cream blush, mascara, and lip gloss, she looks like she's been hanging out on a sailboat all day, minus hairstyle-altering wind.

She puts a beaten gold cuff on her wrist and starts to step into her espadrille wedges, trying to recall if Blake is taller than six feet. Better not take any chances. She tosses them back into the mountain of heels in her closet and settles on her favorite open-toe yellow flats with the ankle buckles instead.

She grabs her iPhone, half-buried under a pile of discarded outfit options. The house is so quiet she can hear the beep of the dishwasher finishing its cycle from all the way on the east end of the first floor. Yrma must have turned it on before she left. Tali's parents are out of the country again, and she feels their absence like a weight. Even though her social life improved vastly over the last couple of years of high school, there's still no one who can make her feel more confident than her mom and dad.

*Unconditional love*, she told Ashlynn just the other day, when Ash was teasing her for still listening to old Britney songs, *is a blessing and a curse*.

Taking a deep breath, she clicks on Blake's face and types a message.

Still going tn?

She waits several minutes, her heart pounding in her throat. She feels like she's going to throw up.

*Beep!* New message:

It's like my backyard so prob. U?

She smiles, feeling a shiver of excitement. She spends eighteen minutes writing and rewriting her response.

Save a dixie cup 4 me? If cruz isn't being all stalin about the booze lol.

He responds right away. Right away!

haha. Good ole cruz. Sure thing bender.

He called her Bender. This basically seals it. He has called Tali this ever since she used to be into gymnastics. She did all the tumbling programs at Okahatchee for the third through sixth graders. And he remembered.

She takes a breath. Tonight it's going to happen. Blake Green and Tali Webber. Okahatchee's golden boy and ugly-duckling-turned-swan. *Finally.*

Half an hour later, Tali slows her new red BMW—a gift from Dad, symbolizing her strength and independence—and pulls off the highway exit just past Roxy's Diner, where for years she and her parents stopped for chocolate-chip pancakes before they left her at camp. The sun's only just starting to set, sending a cherry-red glare through her windshield; it looks briefly like the mountains are on fire, angry and majestic. Even though it's hidden by trees, she can actually *smell* the lake now with her

window down, that mossy, mineral scent that always seems even stronger at night.

Her phone beeps and her pulse reacts. But as she grabs it, she sees it's not a message from Blake. It's a text from a random 603 number.

Wait. A number she remembers. *Zoe*. She doesn't keep Zoe in her phone anymore, not after she rebooted all her contacts after she dropped her last phone in the toilet at the Goose, Liberty's one townie bar. This was sometime during winter of junior year, when Tali started spending more time with Ashlynn Dermott, and Zoe accused Tali of becoming too "cupcake" for her (all frosting, no nutritional value). But Tali's pretty sure their friendship actually expired around the time Zoe started flaking on every single one of Tali's invitations to hang out. It seemed like she was more into holding burping contests with bad musicians in the school parking lot and analyzing her geeky sci-fi novels than spending time with people like Tali, who preferred to, well, grow up.

Funny that she still knows Zoe's number by heart, though. Same with Luciana's and Joy's. Force of habit, even after all this time. She pops open the text with her right hand while steering with her left.

Joy called. She's coming 2 the reunion. C u there?

Tali feels a quick stab of envy. Of course Joy would call Zoe and not Tali. Even when all four girls were inseparable, Tali was always tumbling, or later, running track, while the other three girls were huddled together on Zoe's bunk bed, whispering.

She starts to type a response when her tires hit something and the car thumps. The wheel practically jerks out of her hand, and she gasps, dropping her phone, her heart staggering in her chest. She grabs the wheel, slamming on the brakes, while the car shudders like a wild beast in a panic. The guardrail races toward her as the car skids into the gravel on the side of the road and finally comes to a complete stop.

*Holy fuck. What just happened?*

The text. Zoe  *fucking*  Albright. Zoe and Joy, and probably Luce, too. They're all going to be there tonight. She did *not* plan for that. She had only planned for Blake. And now this. If Zoe hadn't texted her completely out of the blue, she wouldn't have been so thrown off, wouldn't have lost control.

Tali opens the car door and stands up. Her legs are shaking just slightly, but otherwise she's fine. No injuries. No big deal. But the car hasn't fared so well. The right front tire is totally busted—it looks like a saggy black carcass.

*Okay, think,* she commands herself. It's only a flat tire. *How hard can it be to change a flat tire?* She pops the trunk, but there's no spare in there. She remembers taking it out because it didn't leave enough room for her and Ashlynn's shopping bags.

*Crap.*

Her first instinct is to call her parents. She starts to dial, then remembers they obviously can't help; they're in Belgium. She's tempted to call anyway, but it'll just worry her parents too much—her mom cried before she left for Europe this summer; even though they're always traveling, she never seems to get used

to leaving Tali behind. But Tali's usually fine with it—she adores her parents, they've always been there for her when she really needed them, but it's kinda nice to have a big house to herself and the freedom to party and go out whenever she wants.

She sighs. The best option at the moment is to call a tow company and wait for them to come.

Luckily her phone has service. With a quick online search she finds the closest place and calls, keeping her voice steady and professional, like she's heard her mother do a zillion times when she wants something. After she hangs up, she gets back into the car, turning on her lights and radio to drown out the sound of other people racing by her, toward their own destinations, totally oblivious to the girl sitting alone as night comes.

The sun has completely sunk and Tali's starting to get creeped out by the time the tow truck finally shows, its wheels making a hungry crunching sound against the gravel. When the driver pulls over and climbs out, she's surprised to see he's not that much older than she is. Maybe nineteen or twenty. Scruffy facial hair. Clear green eyes. Grease-stained T-shirt and ratty jeans. Blue baseball hat. He smells like car oil.

He squints at her, then gapes a little.

"Don't I know you?" he asks as he loads up her car, then opens the passenger side of his truck for her.

"I seriously doubt it," Tali replies, hardly giving him a second glance. She climbs in while he's obviously getting a good look at her ass. Guys always say shit like that to her—ever since she

sprouted the twins, boys will say anything just to get a conversation going.

“I’m not hitting on you,” the guy says, looking faintly amused, and basically reading her mind. “You just look really . . . familiar.” She stares at him for a brief second. He’s actually a little cute, if it weren’t for the grease stains and facial hair, and there *is* something vaguely recognizable about his features, but she can’t pinpoint it. How *would* they know each other? He’s a tow-truck driver! It’s possible he’s hit on her before, at the Goose or somewhere, not knowing she’s a minor. In that case, best to let it drop.

When she still doesn’t respond, he shrugs. “My mistake.”

Tali ducks her head over her phone, both so that Tow Boy can’t see her blush and so she doesn’t have to deal with pretending to be nice to a random townie. Fortunately, Tow Boy gets the hint, and they spend the rest of the ride in silence.

The garage is closed, which means the car will have to wait there overnight. Of course. Just her luck. “Don’t worry about me,” she says to Tow Boy. “I’ll get a ride from here.”

“Whatever you say.” He shrugs and heads back toward his truck. She whips out her phone and calls Kingston Cars, where she has an account. Her parents set it up so she’d never have to drink and drive.

“I’m sorry.” The receptionist has a nasally voice and sounds bored. “The Webber account? It has been temporarily suspended. There was a problem with nonpayment.”

“Impossible.” Tali’s hand begins to sweat. She’s stranded a fifteen-minute drive from Camp OK and, more important, from

Blake. With her free hand, she fishes out her AmEx and rattles off the number.

There's a long pause. "I'm sorry, miss. The card is declined."

*What. The. Hell.*

"Run it again," Tali says desperately.

But after another short pause, the receptionist just sighs. "Declined," she repeats.

Tow Boy's truck door slams and his engine starts.

"It must be a mistake," she hisses into the phone before hanging up. Then she waves an arm at Tow Boy. "Hey, wait!"

He rolls down his window. "What's up?"

"Actually . . . if you don't mind, I could use a ride."

The guy raises his eyebrow. "Going somewhere special?"

Tali hesitates. She is not about to roll up to the reunion in a crappy tow truck. What if Blake sees? But she's not giving up on this night, either. No way.

She wipes her palms on her white jeans and squints out at the dark mountains, looming calm and definitive, like an enormous blanket tucked up to the neck of the navy-blue night.

Luciana lives nearby and is almost definitely going—after all, the camp director, Bernadette Cruz, is her *mom*. Even if Luce weren't forced to attend, she wouldn't want to miss an opportunity to show off all of her awards and prizes. Valedictorian of her high school! Nationally ranked debater! Princeton-bound!

But Tali is no closer to Luce these days than she is to Zoe or Joy. Luce has a billion and one extracurriculars at Brewster *and* a perfect boyfriend. And she's made it clear in a thousand ways, big

and small, that her old friends have no place in her annoyingly structured life.

Then again, anything is better than destroying Tali's last chance with Blake. So she takes a deep breath and climbs back into the grungy cab of the tow truck.

"I'll tell you how to get there," she says to Tow Boy, then sits back and stares out the window, watching the road curve beneath them like a black snake, winding its way into the mountains, and into her past.



# 3

Luciana lights the last of the standing oil lamps in the Cruzes' big, sloping backyard. It's cooler now that the mountains have devoured the daylight already—a harbinger of fall. *Harangue, harbinger, haughtiness. Angry lecture, indicator, arrogance.* The SATs are long over, but after hours of tutoring the juniors this spring, the mantras have stuck. She can't believe it's one of the last Fridays of the summer, before her life completely changes.

She carefully picks up a pile of rose petals that have clumped together on the iron garden bench and scatters them to look more natural. She lights the citronella candle in the glass hurricane lantern and centers it on the round, iron table. She swats a mosquito away from her face and straightens out her glossy black bangs, then steps back to survey her work. *Perfect.*

She checks her phone, loaded up with the playlist—or *sexlist*, as her friend Tanya has coined it—all primed and ready to go. It starts first with the sentimental songs, stuff she and Andrew have

sung together in karaoke or danced to at homecoming, plus the corny James Blunt song that was playing when they first said *I love you*. Then the smoother, subtle tunes, which were hardest to pick out. Since Luce has never actually had sex before, it's hard to imagine what kind of music's appropriate.

But tonight is the night. In just a week, Andrew will be at Bates and she'll be at Princeton, and the only times they'll see each other will be long weekends and breaks.

Quickly, as though someone might be watching, Luce checks behind the garden gnome to make sure the awkward, lumpy package of condoms is still there, tucked carefully into her bright yellow pencil case. Up until recently, she actually used the case for pencils—she likes them standardized-test perfect—and it still carries that freshly shaven No. 2 scent. She has a brief and disturbing image of a condom being not unlike a large eraser, then closes the case, heading back inside the house, marveling in the silence as she slides open the screen door. Dad's at work. Mom's at camp. Julian and Silas are also at camp, thankfully—she doesn't want to even have to *think* about dealing with her rambunctious twin brothers. Amelia's with her weekend sitter—even though she's twelve, and Luce outgrew sitters by that age, Amelia's a special case. Having a sister prone to seizures means having a mother prone to being too stressed and busy to handle everything all the time. Which means some things fall to Luce. A lot of things, in fact.

But not tonight.

Tonight is *her* night.

In the kitchen, the strawberries are halved and sugared and locked in Tupperware next to her mother's stack of labeled, premade dinners for the rest of the week, and a creepy-looking bag of pork knuckles her dad must have gotten for one of his "traditional" recipes. The Peppermint Patties—Andrew's favorite—are in the freezer.

The stove clock blinks 8:02, and she feels a nervous flutter in her stomach. Andrew will be here any minute. She hasn't seen him all summer—he's been at lacrosse training camp at Bates, trying to get a leg up on the competition, while she stayed in Wolfeboro for one last summer, helping out with Amelia, boning up on the reading list for Freshman Comp, and, well, planning for tonight.

And then the doorbell rings. Her stomach flutters again. *He's here.*

"Lulu," Andrew says, dropping his duffel bag when she opens the front door.

"Happy belated anniversary!" she squeals, practically lunging toward him.

Her inner butterflies instantly fly away as he wraps her in a hug, lifting her off the floor, then setting her back down and kissing her. She gives in to the familiar warmth of his lips as they do their usual—four kisses: one gentle, one deeper, another gentle one, and then a final parting peck. It's practically their secret handshake, except that she's pretty sure he doesn't realize they're doing it. Everything they do is kind of like that—it fits.

"I missed you so much," he says, flicking her ponytail. His

blond hair looks a tiny bit overgrown and the stubble along his jaw is still as faint as ever, which is just how she likes it.

“Me, too,” she says, feeling strangely shy. “I have a whole plan for tonight.”

Andrew smiles. “You always have a plan.” He wraps his arms around her waist. “I thought we were hitting up the reunion so that your mother doesn’t have us assassinated.” They got together at Camp Okahatchee, midway through that last summer, two years ago, (July 17, to be exact, three o’clock in the afternoon, during free swim, when he hit her with one of the little kids’ floaty noodles to get her attention), and it only makes sense for them to go back for reunion night. Also, her mom *would* kill her if she missed it.

“We are. But first I have a surprise for you outside.”

He grins as she grabs his hands and leads him toward the back patio.

“Close your eyes,” she orders, then directs him through the back door. “*Ta-da!* And I found this in Dad’s stash.” She extracts a bottle of white wine from a cooler hidden behind a big oak tree. “I don’t know if it’s any good, but—”

Andrew draws her toward him. “It’s perfect. *You’re* perfect.” He leans down to kiss her again, then takes the wine in his other hand and leads her toward the table. They pour wine into plastic cups, and he moves so that he’s sitting beside her on the garden bench. He wraps his arm around her and she leans into his chest, breathing in his familiar smell. The summer so far without him has felt like an eternity. She drinks more quickly than she would

normally, trying to calm her nerves—it's just Andrew, this is right, this is perfect—and a warm glow spreads from her stomach up through her head. Soon her cup is empty and she feels loose and happy and giggly.

She puts down her wine cup, then gets up and faces him, moving his cup aside. Then she sits down on his lap, straddling her golden-brown legs around him, and starts to unbutton her plaid shirt. She's not wearing a bra—she rarely needs one.

"Whoa," Andrew says. "Are you sure?"

"What, you don't want your anniversary present?" she teases him. This isn't so difficult. She can do this. She hasn't even *started* her playlist.

"No, no, I *definitely* want it. I'm just . . . happy. Happy *you* want it." He finishes his sentence with a murmur, kissing her neck, while helping her unbutton the rest of her shirt. There's a faint breeze on her collarbones. Andrew groans, low and soft, and she feels a tingle of heat in her stomach.

She runs her hands through his hair, then tilts his face up so she can kiss him again. Long, soft, trying something different. And then, she hears a rustling in the woods beyond the patio. She turns—just as a person stumbles out from between the trees.

"Oh shit!" Andrew stands up quickly as Luce shrieks, too loud, wrapping her now fully open shirt tight around her chest.

"Chill. It's me," says a slightly annoyed female voice. And then some branches part, and there, standing in front of Luce and Andrew in tight white jeans and a blue-striped top, is Tali, looking expensive as always, and even taller and more gorgeous than

her Facebook photos suggest.

“Tali?” Luce gapes, half-expecting her old friend to dematerialize again. “What are you *doing* here?”

“Sorry,” Tali says, not sounding sorry at all. “Am I interrupting something?”

Luce glares at her, trying to telegraph the fact that she is *obviously* interrupting. But Tali has already plopped down in a chair and picked up the bottle of wine. “Hmmm, I hate chardonnay but it’ll do if we’re pregame. It’s good to see you, Luce! And you, too, Andrew. Like the hair. Are there any more cups?”

“You came over to pregame?” Luce crosses her arms. She can’t remember the last time Tali came over. She can’t remember the last time she and Tali even *talked*.

“Actually, I had some issues with my ride to the reunion. You’re going, right?” Tali puts her feet up on the other chair and, apparently forgetting about her request for a cup, takes a slug right from the bottle. “My freaking tire popped and then this semi-hot grease monkey had to come to the rescue. My credit cards were acting funny so I couldn’t take a car service. I didn’t want to show up in a *tow truck*, and I figured since your place is close by we could just go together and I would look slightly more like a normal human being. I rang the bell for, like, an hour, but clearly you guys were too *busy* to hear it.” And taking another sip, she adds, “This wine isn’t that bad, actually.”

Luce feels the usual combination of envy and annoyance—*invidiousness*?—she always experiences around Tali. She really wants to tell Tali to leave. To stop talking to *her* boyfriend. To

stop drinking *her* booze. To stop resting her cute yellow peep-toes on Luce's mom's old patio furniture.

Instead, she clears her throat and says, "Well, you should probably call your credit card company and figure out what's wrong. Fraud is a big problem nowadays." Immediately, she hates herself. She sounds like a mom. Like *her* mom.

"What?" Tali squints at her.

"Your credit card company. You said your cards weren't working."

"I'll give my mom a call," Tali says, standing up. "And then we can head over to Camp OK. Yeah?"

Luce swallows a sigh. Her perfect evening—the flickering lights, the rose petals, crumpled from where she and Andrew squished them on the bench—all wasted. What's that saying about best-laid plans?

"Sure," she says, forcing a smile. "That sounds fine."

Tali heads inside, leaving Luce and Andrew alone again.

Andrew wraps her in a hug from behind. In her ear he whispers, "We can pick up where we left off after the reunion."

She tries to smile again but can't get it to stick. She knows Andrew's trying to be sweet, but right now his willingness to abandon the whole plan irritates her. "I'm gonna go get the keys," she tells him, gently extricating herself from his arms.

She heads toward the kitchen but freezes beyond the doorway in the dining room when she hears Tali's voice. Weirdly, Tali sounds much younger . . . and very afraid.

"What are you *talking* about?" Tali is saying. And then, after

a pause. “I don’t understand. Did Daddy do something wrong?” Another pause, while Tali paces the kitchen, and then, “*Investigation?*” A few seconds later, she blurts, “No, I don’t get it. I don’t believe you. You’re lying! I’m sorry, Mom, it’s just . . .” Another pause, as she nods, listening. “Okay, I’ll call you again soon. Okay, I love you, too. Okay, bye.”

Luce leaps back into the shadows of the dining room, bumping into the end table where all her debate trophies are lined up, almost causing a domino-style disaster. She takes a deep breath, righting the trophies. Then she clears her throat loudly, announcing her presence even before she enters the kitchen.

Tali whips around to face her. She looks as if she might cry. Luce knows how close she is to her parents—whatever’s going on now has got to be a big deal.

“Almost ready to go?” Luce asks gently, watching Tali intently, trying to figure out whether she should say something about what she overheard. It’s been so long since the days when she would have folded her into a hug.

But in an instant, Tali changes. She shrugs like she’s shaking off cold water. “Totally. Let’s do this thing.”

Seven minutes later, Luce is pulling into the parking lot behind the Camp Okahatchee main offices. She, Tali, and Andrew—who has gamely agreed to sit in the back for the short ride over—clamber out of Luce’s dad’s old Toyota and cross the familiar dirt-and-gravel lot toward the rec hall. From here they can see a good amount of the Okahatchee compound—between



the offices and the rec hall to the right is a sloping hill that leads toward both the lake and the Great Lawn.

Beyond the big grassy field that's home to so many Okahatchee sports, concerts, and group gatherings are a string of bunks where the younger girl campers are housed. Farther back, in the dense darkness around the far lip of the lake, are the older girls' cabins. And unseen around a bend, to the left and over a little bridge, is the sandy area where the volleyball nets, the tennis courts, a dusty baseball diamond, and the boys' cabins are all clustered together along the water.

Christmas lights and streamers have been strung along the rec-hall roof. Inside, a bluegrass band is playing. A couple of rides and a bouncy castle have been set up on the Great Lawn, with large footlights illuminating them eerily from the perimeter of the field, and a huge crowd of people is milling around. The sugary scent of cotton candy fills the warm air, mingling with the algae smell from the lake, which always makes Luce think of the color green, and of the silence of being underwater.

Andrew holds her hand as they walk toward the chaos and noise, which echoes off the surface of Lake Okahatchee in the distance, a smaller offshoot of Lake Tabaldak. Luce is struck by a wave of memories—of sneaking gummy snacks out of the camp kitchen with Zoe when they were nine; of holding Tali when she cried for hours after her dad and mom had that terrible fight in the summer before sixth grade and she thought they were going to get a divorce. How weird it is that this used to be her home every summer for nine whole years.

Just like that, things change—the faint, filmy bubble of summer pops, September’s cool breath whooshes in, and life moves on.

Next to the rec hall, someone with short hair is standing alone in the darkness, leaning against the fading red siding, smoking a cigarette, which Luce is positive is not allowed. The tip cuts an arc through the night, like an orange lightning bug or one of those phosphorescent amoebas. *Phenomenon, philanthropy, phosphorescent. An occurrence, charity, light emitted without burning.*

As they start to move by her, Luce gasps.

Tali recognizes her at the same time. “Holy shit. Joy?”

Their old friend smiles with her mouth still around her cigarette. She is even paler up close than she at first appeared, though she was always fair. She looks so much *older* without her long, light brown, wavy hair, which Luce remembers she used to wear in braids, sometimes woven around her head like a crown. Joy looks like a completely different person now: from her extremely short pixie cut, the tiny silver stud in her right nostril, and the dark red lipstick she’s wearing—which has left a stain on her cigarette—to her clunky green army boots, faded black jeans, and holey gray sweater. She takes her time dragging on her cigarette, then lets the smoke slip out between her scarlet lips like she’s hesitant to let it go.

Only her smile is the same.

“You came,” she says.

## 4

Everyone always says it's the little things in life that really matter: a gentle kiss, a just-opened tulip, a half-eaten peach, hearing someone you love laugh openly and freely . . . blah, blah, blah.

Joy has never really gotten that. Sure, life is one jumbled collage of moments that each play their modest role in the greater outcome, just like the body is made up of cells. . . . Nerves, arteries, and veins snake through us like tree branches. Capillaries. Muscle and skin. Marrow. Blood. Bone. Water.

But we don't *experience* things that way. It's the *big* things that matter; that's what Joy believes. Mountains and oceans. Encounters and accidents that forever change us. Ultimatums. Epic fights. Wars, even. Doomed love affairs. Death, especially: its mysterious blackness licking at the edge of existence like a tide creeping in at night, seeping into the sand and slowly taking over.

So when Joy showed up at Camp OK, she wasn't struck by the way the spice from the roasting nuts vendor tickled her throat,

or the way the needles of the tall firs on the outskirts of the lawn pricked the night with a sharp odor of pine just like a car air freshener, or how the paint on the main headquarters was starting to crumble, giving the buildings that look of classic New England rusticity.

Instead, what mattered to her, and what she still can't shake, is the *epicness* of it all: how when she stands back from the crowd, the lights and balloons and the rides twirling around and around all blur together over the Great Lawn in one big mess of sparkle and flail.

For a long time before tonight, Joy worried her old friends would be mad at her, if they came at all—that Tali would ignore her, that Luce would scold her about her absence from their lives over the last two years, that Zoe would have forgotten their secret handshake and inside jokes. Joy has changed a lot since that last summer at camp, but she hasn't forgotten a single thing.

At some point, though, Joy's mind started to clear and all those doubts and worries vanished. Tali could ignore, Luce could scold, Zoe could forget—she simply wanted them to be together again.

This, she thinks, is the whole point of reunion night—putting people together in the same place. It's like reopening one of those dorky, clunky, old puzzle boxes and dumping all the pieces into a pile, like her grandmother does during Sunday visits. Some won't fit together, but that's okay. There's a vision in there, a Big Picture somewhere amid the mess of jigsaw shapes and edges.

That's what she's pondering—the Big Picture—when she sees

them. Tali first: tall, put together, her crisp white clothes accenting her not-quite-ebony skin. Joy is struck by how much she looks like a *woman* now. Behind her is Luce: tiny, perky, in what appears to be an all-L.L.Bean outfit, including a plaid button-down, khaki short shorts, and sandals with a slight wedge. She's holding the hand of a slightly scruffy, well-bred-looking blond guy in a soccer jersey. Andrew. So they *did* stay together all this time. It gives her a small jolt. When Joy shut down her Facebook account, on some level she believed everyone else's lives would shut down with it.

But reunion nights are known for their miracles—the time someone opened a pesky vent and an entire nest of baby birds flew out. The time there was an upside-down rainbow that no one was able to capture on camera. The time, according to legend, that two Camp OK-ers, years ago, walked all the way across the surface of the lake, as though it were frozen, and found themselves safe and dry on the other side. Maybe tonight there'll be a miracle, too.

Maybe this *is* the miracle.

Joy breaks into a smile, even as Tali gasps and squeals and starts toward her.

"You came," Joy says, an incredible sense of power surging through her: She has done it. She has gathered the elemental forces from the corners of the world together tonight. Or at least, from the corners of New Hampshire and Maine. Close enough.

Now they just need Zoe.

She pushes off the wall with her boot and hugs Tali first, who

smells of Ralph Lauren Romance, then Luce, who smells like strawberries and jojoba—and slightly of lemon surface cleaner.

“Why’d you chop off all your hair?” Luce blurts, at the same time Tali asks, “So how’s life in Portland?”

Joy laughs. “Portland’s cool—the ocean’s right there, which I love. And yeah, the hair,” Joy says, touching her almost-shaved head with a flicker of insecurity. “Believe it or not, it’s kind of a popular look in the crowd I hang with these days. You know, moody, artsy types.”

Joy bends down to pick up her shoulder bag, which is heavy.

“Well, you *were* always an art freak,” Tali says.

Luce looks at her skeptically. “Yeah, but more of a make-your-own-lanyard-out-of-hemp artsy, not hack-off-your-own-hair artsy.” She isn’t trying to be mean, but Joy can see she’s baffled. Of all of them, Luce is the one who handles change the least well. “I mean, it looks cute,” Luce hastens to add. “I was just surprised.”

“It’s no big deal,” Joy says. There’s an awkward silence. Joy can sense the discomfort between them—not tension, exactly, but not coziness either. Her old instinct kicks in, to try to make it better. Only, for the first time she doesn’t know how.

“So.” Luce plasters a smile on her face. “We’re all here.”

Joy nods, starting to feel even more self-conscious.

Luce shrugs. “Who wants cotton candy?”

“I could use a beer if we can find any,” Tali announces, her eyes looking cloudy. “I sort of have someone I’m supposed to meet up with, actually.”

Luce is already waving at a figure she recognizes in the distance. Joy is hit with a sudden ache in her chest—it's clear the girls don't really *want* to be here. At least not for the same reasons she does. Already, the powerful feeling is slipping away. She doesn't want everyone to scatter, not yet, not so soon. This used to come to her so easily.

"Wait," she says. "We have to wait for—"

"HOLY. CRAP. Is that *you*?" Zoe is jogging downhill in her flip-flops, her messy blond bun coming undone. She's wearing cutoff jean shorts, a loose white men's T-shirt, and an overlarge zip-up hoodie—no makeup.

She fires off a dozen questions at once. "When did you get here? What did you do to your hair? Where have you been all this time? What have I missed? Is that Jason Moran over there with Holly Snegman? Do you think they're hooking up? How gross! Is anyone else *starving*?"

Joy laughs, which feels good. It eases some of the tightness in her chest. "Andrew, can you give us a second? Guys, there's something I kind of need your help with."

Tali looks up from her phone. "What kind of help?" she says, an edge of impatience in her voice. Joy can only assume the "someone" she's supposed to meet up with later is Blake. Old habits die hard.

"It'll be easy," Joy says. "You just have to follow me . . . for old times' sake," she adds.

There's a split second of silence.

"I don't mean to be rude," Tali blurts, "but I haven't heard

from you in, like, two years.”

Her words land like a pile of rocks at the bottom of the lake.

“Tali,” Zoe spits out, as if her name is a curse.

Luce jumps in to mediate. “Sure, Joy,” she says, with a smile that looks a little too forced. “For old times’ sake.” She speaks like she’s at a college interview, not talking to her old friends. But it’s enough. For now.

As they move down the hill and into the crowd, someone bumps into Joy and she temporarily loses her footing. Disappointment creeps in around her, chilling, like the damp of the grass seeping into her leather boots. Where has all the ancient childhood magic gone, the kind that seemed to keep her, Zoe, Tali, and Luce within its protective netting? It used to seem as if campers would simply part, Red Sea-like, so that the four girls could pass through them. Now she feels like an injured lieutenant, leading troops through the chaos of a battlefield, uncertain about whether they’re on the winning side or the losing. Uncertain what a victory would even look like.

The night is humming with activity, the din so loud you can’t hear the normally deafening chirp of crickets. When Joy was little, she associated the sound of crickets with stargazing. Her mom would take her out onto the back porch in their old Liberty house, shut off all the lights, and tell her to wait until her eyes adjusted to the darkness. While she waited, watching the stars blink their way into existence, she heard the crickets’ *chk-chk*, and believed it was actually the noise stars made when they clicked on at night, one after the other.



But now, with the many floodlights and blinking red and blue bulbs lining the rides, and the smoke from various food vendors filling the air, the night sky just looks like a blackboard, starless, smudged gray with a lifetime's worth of chalk. A little girl runs past Joy, trailing a bunch of streamers, which brush lightly across Joy's face as she pushes her way forward, their damp ends dissolving away like tears.

"So you want to tell us where we're heading?" Tali says, after they've left the crowd behind and crossed down to the sandy part of the shoreline.

"Almost there," Joy says, wishing she didn't sound so pathetically urgent, wishing she weren't the only one for whom this night actually *means* something. "Just trust me."

There's a deep ache in her chest, as if she has just smoked too much, too fast. These girls, with whom she once shared so many of her most significant moments—getting her braces off, learning to ride a bike, that time she almost drowned by Forest River Falls, countless slumber parties, the first time she got her heart broken by a boy, the list could go on and on and on—these girls are barely more than strangers to her now.

Her fault. All her fault.

They finally get to the Wellness Cabin, Okahatchee's optimistic name for its infirmary. Joy pulls them behind the boxy unit, leading them to the small wooden structure tucked into the edge of the woods next to the Agro Club's garden, which is really more of a sad, square patch of rotting squash vines.

"Remember?" Joy says now, turning around to face her

friends. This close to the lake, the air is cooler, the darkness thicker.

Zoe gets down on her knees on the forest side of the shed and overturns the pile of rust-colored rocks next to the leaning birch. From underneath the rocks, she unearths a silver key. “How could we forget?” she says, her face looking ghostly in the darkness.

“The Stevens,” says Luce, laughing softly, placing a hand on the shed wall as though to verify it’s still solid. Tali used to sneak in giant bags of the candy Luce’s mom kept in the main offices for the younger campers when they inevitably got homesick. Then they’d gather at the shed and tell secrets they didn’t want the rest of their bunkmates to hear, and they’d divide up all the candy evenly. Luce would insist that they share “even-steven,” which became their secret code.

“This is so surreal,” says Zoe, straightening up. “God, I haven’t thought about the Stevens since we were, like, Bunk Coyote.”

Tali raises an eyebrow. “I hope you’re not going to suggest we gather around on the floor like we used to. I’m wearing white.”

“I think the shed is actually *used* now, for storage,” Luce says thoughtfully. “According to my mom, Agro is actually becoming a *thing* recently. They just got some major funding.”

“Maybe Camp OK is finally becoming Camp Fantastic,” Zoe says wryly.

Joy smiles. It’s the thing she always used to say. It never even used to seem optimistic—that things would get better, that those summers at camp were only okay compared to what would come

next, compared to *fantastic*. It always just seemed like a given, a fact of the universe. Things are constantly spinning toward better and better outcomes, is what she thought. Now, as she thinks about the idea of fantastic, she can't help but shake her head, unable to believe she's the same person who once thought that. Unable to believe she was that naive.

She opens her bag, determined not to lose her nerve. "I brought some things . . . you know, things we made, stuff I collected—memories—and I thought we could bury it under that loose floorboard in there where we sometimes stashed notes to each other." She feels her face heating up and is thankful for the darkness.

"Like a time capsule?" Zoe offers, sounding skeptical.

"Exactly, a time capsule." Joy takes a deep breath. Even standing so close to the shed, she's hit by the musty smell of old garden gloves and moldy wood—the signature scent of the Stevens. "Let's face it. We've grown apart. We have," she adds bluntly, when Luce starts to protest. It hurts, but at least it's the truth. "Our camp years are forever behind us. I get that. But I know, deep down, that you guys have to be sad about that, too. That it meant something to you, just like it did to me. And this way, a little piece of our camp experience—of *us*—will live on in the future."

It isn't exactly an apology. Joy wonders in their silence if the girls resent her, if they will ever *really* forgive her for leaving, for dropping away. If she'll ever be able to admit why she did it.

For a minute, no one speaks. Then Zoe says, "What'd you bring?"

Joy reaches into her bag, into her stockpile of notes, wrappers,

bottle caps, ticket stubs, miniature toys, shells, friendship bracelets, and pictures. She removes a thin envelope and opens it. Tali pulls out her iPhone to see by its light.

Inside the envelope is a narrow strip of photo-booth photos, four in a row. They were taken that last summer of camp. In the photos, all four girls are posing for the camera with huge, goofy grins. In one, Tali is making a sexy-pouty kiss face at the camera while holding up a pair of Batman boxers, and Luce is tilting her chin up in faux indignation. In another, Zoe is sticking her tongue out while waving a gold medal at the camera, and Tali is stealing the tiara Joy is wearing in the two photos above. Luce has her merit badge proudly displayed on her shirt.

In all of the photos, Joy has her long, flowing, light brown hair down around her arms, her cheeks are flushed pink, and her eyes look big and tearful and happy. Even now, looking back at her former self, Joy feels a flutter of that old happiness in her chest, just a quiver of it really, but fastened down with guilt, like a pinned butterfly.

Tali, Luce, and Zoe huddle together around Joy to get a closer look. If someone were to observe them from afar, they might actually believe the girls were still best friends.

“Why are we doing this?” Zoe asks at the same time Tali says, “Ugh, I look like a freaking idiot.”

Luce touches Joy’s arm gently. “I *love* this idea,” she says, her voice soft but firm. Whether or not she actually means it, Joy can’t tell, but she’s grateful anyway. “It’s the perfect way to say good-bye to camp.”

Joy nods. "A way to say good-bye to all of it."

Luce takes the key from Zoe and steps forward to test it on the lock.

The key sticks. Luce gives it a hard shove, and the whole wall of the shed shudders, but the door doesn't give.

Joy's throat squeezes up. She didn't come all this way to have her plan ruined. She takes her turn trying the lock. Still no luck.

"Maybe we should just pick a different spot," Tali offers, looking antsy.

"Hold on." Zoe marches around to the side of the shed, getting the determined look on her face that Joy remembers so well.

A second later, they hear a grunting sound, followed immediately by an alarm.

"Zoe! What the hell did you *do*?" Luce cries.

Joy darts around the side of the shed, with Luce and Tali right behind her, to see Zoe sticking a pin back into her pocket, looking a bit guilty—and also a little amused.

"I thought maybe I could jimmy the lock." Zoe shrugs. "Cal showed me how . . ."

Joy wants to smile but her whole plan is spinning away, and it makes her almost dizzy with frustration.

Zoe throws her hands up. "Anyway, I didn't think it would be alarmed."

Tali snorts. "Since when is the Stevens so valuable? What are they keeping in there?"

"Dynamite?" Zoe offers.

"Cocaine?" Tali suggests.

“Guys,” Luce urges. “We need to get *out* of here! I’m so not getting busted for this. Come on!”

Joy has no choice but to follow them. The screaming of the alarm pierces her ears and brain like a bratty tattletale on the playground. *Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah*.

It used to be that the four of them were invincible. Between Tali’s charm, Luce’s practicality, Zoe’s cleverness, and Joy’s innocence, they could get out of *anything*.

But that was then and this is now.

They cut through a portion of the woods so as not to be caught, hurrying the opposite way around the Wellness Cabin, then skirting the sandy beach and racing back to the Great Lawn, where once again the bubbling sound of laughter and friendly shouting and the jingle of Ferris wheel music drowns out everything, including the sound of the Agro storage shed’s fancy new alarm. Including, too, the sound of Joy’s racing heartbeat.

Running out of breath, she slows down. It’s then that a sharp but familiar voice calls out her name. “Why, *Miss Freeman*, it’s so *lovely* to see you here tonight!”

Joy turns. Barreling toward her is the Cruz, aka Bernadette Cruz, in head-to-toe camp director regalia: khaki shorts and a matching tan, collared, short-sleeved shirt with the Okahatchee logo emblazoned over the heart, featuring an image of a green mountain, a blue lake, a yellow sun, and a totally un-PC Native American tomahawk. *Where all the right elements unite* is written in script over it. She is also carrying around her clipboard. Why she needs that thing for reunion night, Joy has no idea, but she

suspects it could be permanently attached to the Cruz's hand.

The Cruz smiles at her. "I'm so glad you came. I know Luciana has thought a lot about you since you both graduated from Okahatchee." The Cruz always refers to campers who make it all the way to the age cap as "graduates." Her eyes sweep over the other girls. "And Misses Webber and Albright, too! Looks like the whole gang's back together again. Now, where were you all scurrying off to in such a hurry?"

Luce, Tali, and Zoe hang back guiltily, avoiding eye contact.

"Mom," Luce begins, obviously trying to help. "We were just, um . . ."

Zoe jumps in: "Heading to the photo booth!" She pulls the old photo strip from Joy's hand—she's been clutching it since they fled the Stevens. "You know, for old times' sake," Zoe adds.

"That's a fantastic idea." The Cruz beams. "We could use more images for the memory wall. I'll walk you over there; I was just heading that way."

Before the girls can protest, the Cruz herds them toward the photo booth, with its steady stream of campers and alums alike filing in and out, their pictures spitting out of a small slot on the outer wall like a long tongue.

"Now go ahead," she says, giving Joy a slap on the back that actually stings. "Enjoy yourselves."

Zoe shoves Joy inside the booth and pockets the old photo strip. Luce pilots Tali inside after them with a final awkward smile at her mother, who is hovering there, waiting to see their photos come out.

The curtain swishes shut behind them. Inside the booth it's hot and sticky and as narrow as an upright coffin. It smells like bubble gum and burning rubber. Luce and Tali manage to claim space on the small plastic seat, leaving Zoe and Joy to hover uncomfortably on either side of them, cramped and piled on top of each other.

Joy's back hurts, her heart hurts, and it's all she can do to muster a smile. She notices graffiti all over the inner walls:

*Sammy & Gina, '12.*

*Dave is da bad ass.* Crossed out to read: *Dave is an ass zit.*

*Eat me.*

*Long live the Cruz.*

*For a good time call Emily Fargo.* (Poor Emily.)

*Indigo Perez is a ho.*

But her eyes are searching for something else. There it is:

*Z, J, T & L, friends forever.* She feels a pang in her gut.

Luce grabs the remote control tethered to the camera by a long cord. "Ready? Set, go!" she says.

Joy's heart rate peaks. *Ready, set, go.* Just like in the camp relay races they used to run.

"Luce, I wasn't ready!" Tali squeals, frantically readjusting her top and in the process jostling Joy with her arms.

*SNAP.* The first flash is blinding, and Joy blinks, trying to clear her vision, which has gone totally white. She can hear Zoe laughing, saying, "Redo! Redo!" It's hot and hard to breathe, but for a miniature second, Joy feels like it's old times again—the four of them goofing off while a line of other



campers builds up outside the booth.

Just then, they hear a whining sound and are thrown into utter darkness.

“What the hell?” Tali says, standing up and jostling the three other girls again. “Zoe, what did you do?”

“It wasn’t me,” Zoe says. “Ow, that’s my *foot*!”

Suddenly, it’s chaos inside the tiny space—a thick blackness tentacled with sixteen sweaty, sticky arms and legs.

“I think we broke it,” Joy says, as someone—Tali?—elbows her in the stomach.

“We are on a streak of destruction!” Luce exclaims. Then: “Ew, what *is* that?”

“My boob,” Zoe says. “You just grabbed it.”

Tali chimes in, “I can’t breathe. Let’s get *out* of this thing.”

Finally, the four of them manage to push through the curtain one by one. Joy squeezes out last, stumbling out of the confining space, gasping for air.

For a second, she thinks she must still be staring into the flash of the camera. She’s hit by near-blinding brightness. She blinks a few times and rubs her eyes, feeling dizzy.

The laughter around her has abruptly died out. All four of her former friends are blinking, silent, stunned.

The sunlight is blazing. It’s daytime.

She swivels around and gasps. The photo booth is nowhere to be seen. It has completely *vanished*, like some trick of the light.

“What. The—” Zoe turns a full circle.

“What’s going on?” Luce says in a trembling voice.

Joy starts to register that the campers around them are not waiting in line for carnival rides and cotton candy—they're *running*. Someone—a black-haired girl, faintly recognizable—whizzes past her carrying a Hula-Hoop. As Joy watches, the black-haired girl hands off the Hula-Hoop to another camper. She, in turn, starts running, tearing across the Great Lawn, where hundreds of other campers are racing and jumping around, tagging one another and wearing bright-colored T-shirts.

Just like they used to do on relay day, back at camp.

Joy feels like she might puke.

A loud whistle pierces the air. Joy's chest seizes.

Jeremy Farber, counselor and asshole extraordinaire, is marching over to them from around the side of the offices. "Get a move on, girls!" he shouts. "Stop slouching. You're giving the Orange team a bad name!"

"What—what's happening?" Luce's eyes are wide. She looks like she might cry, which is impossible, Joy knows, because Luce *doesn't* cry. Her life is too efficient for tears. "What *is* this?"

Zoe shakes her head, dazed. "Relay races," she whispers.

It occurs to her that they're all wearing orange T-shirts. Every summer, on the Monday of the final week of camp, they would divide everyone up into five color groups for the relays.

Jeremy blows his whistle again. "I said *move*. This is a race, not gossip hour!"

Just then, a camper named Petra Manger, whom Joy hasn't even thought about in two full years, is in her face. She grabs Joy's shoulders. "Joy! I *said*, Take. The. Baton! We're losing."

Instinct kicks in. Joy grabs the baton numbly. Her heart beats so hard it threatens to knock her over. Petra gives her a shove toward the center of the field. With no time to process, Joy begins to run; the only thing on her mind is the boy in an orange T-shirt, waving his arms at her, screaming, “Come on, come on, they’re beating us!”

Her arms and legs are moving, but her mind is stuck in mud, churning forward at a thousandth of the pace. As she runs, her footsteps pound out a chant in her head: *What. Is. Happening. What. Is. Happening. What. Is. Happening.*

She can see now that the boy in the orange shirt is Gene Yung. He’s waiting for her to pass the stupid baton.

Her neck is hot and she feels something clinging to her shoulder blades. It takes her a minute to realize what’s causing that sensation: her hair . . . at its full, former length, grazing down her back.

Just like she wore it every day when she was fifteen.

PART TWO  
REMEMBER WHEN

*“The past is never where you think you left it.”*

—*Katherine Anne Porter*



# 5

## MONDAY

Farber's whistle must have been perfectly designed to replicate the sound of Satan ushering a person into hell. The instinct to react when Okahatchee's jerkiest counselor blows his lid is immediate.

Zoe's thoughts jostle around in her head with every step, as if they're being dislodged by her pounding feet. What the hell is going on? It's like she had a complete blackout. The last thing she remembers, she was piled into a hot, sticky photo booth at the reunion with Joy, Luce, and Tali.

Did she get drunk last night during the reunion carnival and pass out? But her head doesn't ache, and she doesn't have that pinched feeling in the pit of her stomach that she got when she and Cal drank all of his dad's Jack Daniel's after a Lumineers concert last March.

As she hits the soccer field, she begins to recognize a whole host of other campers, shouting and waving their arms and taking part in the race, some in purple, some in yellow, some in green, some in orange. Samantha Puliver is leaping over the final in a series of hurdles and tagging James Larsing, who takes off in another direction, rolling a tire. Zoe's head is spinning. This is *definitely* the end-of-summer relay course.

It doesn't make any sense. None of it makes any sense.

As Zoe slows down, someone with long hair darts past her, and it takes her a second to realize it's Joy, surpassing her on the field.

Joy with long hair.

At this, Zoe stops completely, floored and confused.

"Move out of the way!" someone shouts behind her. Before she can react, the person rams into her from behind. She goes flying to the ground with Ricky Mandelson on top of her.

A sharp pain shoots through her right knee when it makes contact with the ground, and the wind gets knocked out of her. She rolls Ricky off her, disentangles herself, and sits up. Ricky has hit the ground, and his ankle is now twisted at a funny angle. "Dammit. Shit." He's gripping his ankle with one hand, his face contorted with pain.

"Are you all right?" Zoe asks—a stupid question, since it's obvious he isn't.

Now more whistles are blowing and everyone is shouting. Campers and counselors start crowding them, babbling, giving Ricky competing instructions—*try to stand up* and *don't move*.

Zoe feels like her head will explode. Two years ago, Ricky twisted his ankle during relays. That time, it was because he'd tripped on a hurdle. She remembers because Luce was the one to stop running and help him off the field, and in return she earned the merit badge on the last night of camp. . . .

*Wait a minute . . .*

As Ricky stands up, leaning heavily on two other campers, Luce, Tali, and Joy heave Zoe off the ground. Her head is spinning.

*Am I losing my mind?*

"Something's wrong," she croaks out. She stands up on legs that feel unsteady now. "I'm having the worst déjà vu. But it won't go away. What *happened* last night?"

"It's not just you," Luce says. She looks over her shoulder to make sure no one's listening, then lowers her voice. "It's happening to me, too."

"Same," Tali says. "What the *hell* happened in that photo booth?"

"I don't know," says Joy, "but I'm pretty sure I know what's happening now."

The three girls stare at her.

"Isn't it obvious?" Joy says when no one speaks. "We're fifteen again."

"WHAT?" Tali squeals, and Luce leaps up, trying to clamp her hands over Tali's mouth.

"Just calm down, okay?" Luce instructs her. "Let's all think about this rationally. . . ."



“*Rationally?*” Tali screeches as she twists away from Luce. “There’s nothing *rational* about this.” She whirls on Joy, eyes blazing. “Is this some kind of prank? Was this your big reason for getting us back together, so you could pull this stunt? Because it’s not fucking funny!”

Joy shakes her head, looking stricken. “I’m just as confused as you are.”

“No one thinks it’s funny!” Zoe practically hisses at Tali. *Why is it always about Tali and what’s inconvenient for her?* “Has anyone stopped to think Joy might be *right*? I mean, look around us!” She can’t believe she’s saying it. She clears her throat again, trying to keep it together.

Suddenly, Tali screams. “My boobs. They. Are. *Gone*,” Tali says, a sound of real terror in her voice, grabbing her chest like she keeps hoping her Cs will materialize from her shirt. “Oh shit. Oh *shit*.”

“And what about my hair?” Joy says, pulling on her long, light-brown ponytail as though it’s a foreign creature that has attached itself to her head.

Zoe stares at Joy. Her old friend Joy, who looks so much more familiar than the Joy of the present. Or the past. Or future. Whatever it is. Was. *This* Joy has all the same old vibrancy she had that last summer at Okahatchee. In fact, they all do.

“So somehow we went . . . back,” Luce blurts. “But how?”

“Okay.” Zoe tries to think it through, doing her best to stay calm, even though she feels like her brain hopped onto a roller coaster and it wasn’t properly buckled in first. “This is like this

one *Dr. Who* episode, where the professor travels back in time and—”

“Zoe, this isn’t a sci-fi TV show,” Luce says rather harshly. Zoe can see that her whole body is shaking. “This is *real* and it’s our *lives*. And we need to figure out how to fix it.”

“We need to get back to reunion night,” Tali says, growing semihysterical. “I had *plans*!”

Another wash of annoyance spreads through her. “Tali, I hate to break it to you, but this isn’t all about *you*.”

“Guys, let’s not fight,” Luce interjects. “Please! We’re in this together, so we need to just figure out what to do next. Okay? And let’s move off the field, where we can talk in privacy.”

She leads the way toward the line of trees behind the rec hall.

As they walk, Joy looks around. “Actually,” she says, her face going contemplative. “Maybe this isn’t as crazy as we think. . . .”

“What do you mean?” Zoe asks, hoping her input is actually helpful this time. Now that they’re hidden in the cool shade of a couple of oaks, she’s starting to feel less nauseated.

Tali gives her a slight glare.

Joy goes on. “What I mean is, haven’t there been strange things that have happened on past reunion nights?”

“What, like alums getting drunk and throwing up in front of their own kids?” Zoe says, fully aware that she’s babbling, that *she’s* the one being unhelpful now. She sits down on the grass, and the other three join her, gathering cross-legged, just like they used to.

“She’s right,” Luce chimes in. “There was the time Minna

Spencer's dog came back."

The memory, though dim, creeps back into Zoe's mind. "That's true—the cocker spaniel?"

"Yeah," Luce says, nodding thoughtfully. "It ran away when her parents dropped her off in June, and she was devastated that summer. Then it came back two whole months later, on reunion night."

Zoe sighs. "That's definitely a bit odd, but not quite up there with time travel."

Tali looks from Zoe to Joy and Luce, then back at Zoe again, as though she has just confirmed that time travel is real.

Which she basically did.

"True," Tali adds, "but there was also the time Petra fell off the spinning swings and everyone thought she could have broken her neck and died, but she turned out to be miraculously fine."

Luce nods. "She didn't even have a bruise."

"So," Zoe says, tugging a piece of grass out of the dirt and twisting it between her fingers. "What we're agreeing on here is that this is just some awesome reunion night *fluke*?"

"My mom told me once that Okahatchee translates to something like Water of Possibility."

Now it's Tali's turn to roll her eyes. "Next you're gonna tell me some brochure B.S. about the natives who believed photographs steal your soul."

"Huh. That gives me an idea," Joy says. She's doing her best to stay positive, and Zoe feels an instant wave of gratitude. She speaks slowly, as if she's working it out as she talks: "It all comes back to

the photo booth. It *must*. Remember how it short-circuited while we were inside it?"

"I don't get it," Luce says, looking panicked.

"We need to get back into the photo booth," Joy says. "Maybe we can somehow undo all this."

"But the photo booth isn't even *here*." Luce crosses her arms as if she's freezing, even though it must be mid-eighties. "Mom only brings it in for reunion night. And if today is the relay, then it's a Monday. And we still have five more days before the Friday of reunion night, when we can even *try*."

Tali gapes at her. "So . . . you're suggesting we hang around in the past for five days and then . . . take a bunch of glam shots in the photo booth and hope it works like a time machine in the other direction? And how do we know we're *really* in the past in the first place, not just some—"

"Alternate reality?" Luce fills in, wide-eyed.

Tali rolls her eyes. "I was going to say drug-induced hallucination."

"Well, we do look *exactly* like we did two years ago," Zoe says, fumbling in her pocket to see if the old photo strip—the one Joy had wanted to bury—is still there. "I'll show you."

She pulls out the photo strip . . . and gasps.

"What?" asks Joy.

"It's . . . it's . . ."

"What?" Luce asks.

Tali grabs the photo strip from Zoe's hands and says it for her. "It's . . . blank."

“The photo from two summers ago?” Joy asks.

“The photo from *this* summer,” Luce says slowly.

“Right.” Tali nods. “It’s totally erased. Gone. Like it never happened.”

Zoe stares at the blank photo strip over Tali’s shoulder. It’s true. It’s like some giant eraser has come and smudged out the images of their smiling faces . . . and with them, the last two years of their lives.

“It’s blank because it *hasn’t happened yet*,” Zoe says.

“What are you suggesting?” Tali frowns.

Zoe shrugs. “I don’t know . . . maybe we have to, like, take it again.”

“Take *that* photo again?” Luce asks.

An idea starts to unfold in Zoe’s mind, shining brighter and brighter, like the sun as clouds part to reveal it. “Yeah. Maybe we have to *re-create* the photo. Maybe we have to re-create our pasts in order to get back to the present.” It makes an insane sort of sense as she thinks about it. “The photo booth did this. Instead of taking a *new* photo of us, it caused some sort of glitch in the time-space continuum. It *untook* the old photo of us, thereby reversing time, and—”

“This is absurd,” Tali says, crossing her arms.

“How can we know it would even work?” Luce adds.

“Well.” Joy looks at all of them. “Do we have a better idea? Anyone?”

“True,” Zoe says. “It’s as good a plan as we’ve got. Although . . . if we have to duplicate it exactly”—Zoe realizes

what this actually means and feels sick—"I need that fencing medal from the photo."

"Oh crap," Joy adds. "I'll need that stupid talent-show crown! And Tali will need those boxers. . . ."

Luce adjusts her weight. "I was wearing the merit badge, which I earned for helping Ricky—*shit*. Shitshitshit." She squints back out at the playing field where the counselors are breaking down all the relay equipment. "Someone else *already* helped Ricky. How am I going to get that badge?" Her voice breaks again, and Joy reaches out and squeezes her hand.

"You'll find a way. You have to," Tali says bluntly.

"But we need to be careful," Zoe says. Of the four of them, Zoe knows in her gut that she's the one who really *gets* it. She didn't spend most of sixth grade obsessively watching and rewatching all of *Dr. Who* for nothing. If this really is the past—and she still isn't completely convinced of it—then it has become clear that *already* things are not going the way they did that last summer. And changing the past—no matter *which* sci-fi movie you're watching—is never a good idea. "Whatever we do, we've got to be sure not to rewrite history. If this *is* the past and we somehow got thrown back into it, then we need to do everything *just* like we did it before, until we can find a way to fix this. Do you guys understand me? This is important."

Tali nods. "She's right. We need to get to that photo booth and retake those photos. We've got to try. I mean, what if we end up getting *stuck* back in time? Would we have to relive the last two years all over again?"

Zoe shudders. “Possibly. I’m not promising it’ll work, but it’s not like we have much of a choice. We have to move forward, and hope this plan works. And like I said, we need to try to follow the past exactly like it happened the first time. Otherwise . . .”

“Otherwise what?” Luce demands.

Zoe wishes she wasn’t so afraid. She wishes it didn’t feel like the trees were closing in on them, like the world was spinning just a little too fast. Part of her keeps thinking: *This can’t be real, this can’t be real, this can’t be real*. But the words that come out of her mouth make it sound real as hell. “If not, then we could stay trapped in the past forever.”

## 6

There's something very "Circle of Life" about the dinner call at Camp Okahatchee: a blaring horn at exactly 6:30 p.m., which sounds like a mix between an enormous trumpet and one of those old-school conch shells, and then the ensuing flood of campers—the seven- to twelve-year-olds herded in organized lines from their bunks by their head counselors; the thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds converging from their afternoon sports and activities; everyone flowing together like tributaries into a larger river, headed toward the chaotic delta of the dining hall's barn-style double-door entrance.

Luce always had dinnertime down to a science: expertly navigating the steady stream of other campers, surging ahead so she could secure a spot at picnic table 17, the one farthest from the bathrooms and the busy food line, the table with the best light in the early evening.

But today, she feels like a leaf pulled along by the



current—undirected and uncertain, unable to stop. Unmoored. *Unmoored, unprecedented, unwitting. Without an anchor, never having happened before, unconscious.*

After the relay race was curtailed due to Ricky's injury—a fractured ankle, just like two summers ago (just like *this* summer)—the girls were eventually sent back to their cabin, Bunk Blue Heron. (Nobody knows, not even Luce or her mother, why the girls' bunks are named after animals and the boys' bunks are simply numbered.) Now she shuffles toward the dining hall—wearing the purple and yellow flip-flops she found tucked neatly under the corner of her bottom bunk, waiting for her like a pair of obedient puppies—as though compelled by a malicious force. She feels itchy and antsy, sticky and confined, as though she's been forced to put on an old, still-wet one-piece.

The other girls may be referring to what happened as another one of Okahatchee's reunion night “miracles,” but Luce personally does *not* want to be back, does not want to have to consider the repercussions this could have on the time-space continuum, as Zoe put it. She does not want to pretend to be someone she's not: her former self.

As soon as she steps through the giant entryway, inhaling the smell of limp pizza and squishy, mayonnaise-drenched pasta salad, Andrew calls her name.

“Luce! Hey, Luce!”

The relief is immense; his voice anchors her, finally, and she's so drawn in, she doesn't even bother to scan the crowd for Zoe, Tali, and Joy. Another thing she isn't prepared to do: pretend to

be close again, like they were that summer. *This* summer.

Luce weaves her way through the packed dining hall, careful not to bump into anyone's tray. As she nears table 13—square in the middle of the mayhem—Andrew's grin grows so wide it seems to take over his whole face. He looks almost exactly the same, except for his facial hair, which is basically nonexistent. Luce feels something pull inside her chest. She realizes that in Andrew's mind, they have probably been together for only approximately five weeks. Five weeks! The idea seems crazy to her now, after more than two full years. How is she supposed to act around him?

Will he know something's wrong?

*This* Andrew is still getting to know Luce. He has never seen how ridiculous she gets when watching corny old Disney movies. He hasn't yet held her hand while she cries, waiting for Amelia to undergo surgery. He hasn't even seen Luce's boobs. Second base is still a few weeks away, in his dorm room at Brewster. . . .

"Hi, babe—er, Andrew," she says, trying to seem casual. She's already completely unsure how to behave. Do they call each other babe yet, or did that start later, at some distant point post-second base?

Luckily, he doesn't seem to notice. He slides down on the picnic bench to make more room for her, then immediately throws his arm around her shoulders and kisses her cheek. She leans into him, marveling at how good it feels to be next to him. His smell is a little different—more sunscreen and less of the sharp spice of the deodorant she knows he'll switch to eventually.

“You aren’t hungry?” he asks.

She realizes that it didn’t even occur to her to get a tray for dinner.

“I guess not. Mind if I just have a bite or two of yours?” She reaches over his tray and grabs his plastic fork, skewering a slice of pepperoni straight off his pizza. It leaves a gooey trail of cheese behind, which Andrew doesn’t seem to mind. He never seems to mind.

“They didn’t have any pineapple,” he says apologetically. “I know it’s your favorite.”

Luce stares at him for a second, midchew. She *still* orders her pizza with extra pineapple. Usually she likes how Andrew tries to take care of her. No one else ever does—people always assume Luciana Cruz doesn’t need help.

But this feels wrong—shouldn’t there be those heady, crazy sparks between two people when a relationship is just beginning? Shouldn’t she be harder to read? What always felt wonderfully comforting and easy now feels *too* easy, like a downshift, or when they make those crappy PSATs that are way too unchallenging to be the real deal.

“So I heard the Orange team would have come in first place, if it hadn’t been for the Ricky thing,” Andrew says, going for a giant bite of his pizza.

“Yeah, well, we wouldn’t have won anyway, after I botched the whole baton pass. I was pretty, um . . . distracted, I guess.”

Andrew finishes his pizza in one final bite, his Adam’s apple bobbing like he’s a snake downing a mouse. It always amazes

Luce how quickly boys can put away food.

“Apparently the pain was so bad, Ricky actually started crying,” he says. “It’s broken, I think. Jade and Mark had to practically carry him to the infirmary.” Luce knows that Jade will go on to transfer to a performing arts high school for her senior year—she’s always had a flair for drama. In fact, she’s always had a flair for being at the center of *other* people’s drama.

Andrew finishes another bite of pizza. “She got the merit badge right on the spot.”

Luce’s heart stops. *Jade got the merit badge.*

He registers the look of complete shock on Luce’s face. “Hey, what’s the matter?” he asks, touching her back lightly. “Should I go get you some salad or something? You probably shouldn’t skip dinner after relay day.”

“No, no, I’m fine, it’s not that, it’s just—” Luce pauses, trying to figure out how much to tell him.

“Just what?”

“Just that I was kind of hoping *I’d* get the merit badge this year, is all. I really, *really* wanted it.” *I need it in order to undo a cursed photo booth incident and bring me back to the present!* “What am I gonna do now?” She starts to feel queasy. Briefly she toys with the idea of telling her mom. After all, if there’s one person who understands the mysterious workings of Camp OK better than anyone else, it’s her. But then . . . would her mom get mad? Would her mom even *believe* her?

It’s too loud in the dining hall; too hot. Zoe said they had to be super careful—they had to act exactly like they did the first

time around, but here she is, failing already.

*What can it mean? Will we ever get back to our real lives, or will we be caught in a time loop forever, permanently paused at fifteen? Will we have to start over from here?* The sounds of campers shouting and laughing and the clang of trays being slammed down onto tables and milk cartons being punctured by straws all converge into a single wave of sound, threatening to drown her.

“I’m sure you’ll get a different badge, Luce,” he says gently. “You get one every summer. ‘I do what I can to honor the values Okahatchee has taught me’ and all that. Right? So don’t put so much pressure on yourself.”

Luce gapes at him. “You remember that?” He just directly quoted her acceptance speech—the one she has repeated three summers in a row, once when she was an Eagle, once as a Hawk, once as a Wolf. And if all was going to happen like it was supposed to, she’d be giving that same exact speech again this year as a Blue Heron. It never struck her before how repetitive summer camp had been for her. Always the same badge, always the same speech, always the same tepid applause, always the mild sense of accomplishment that got quickly washed away like a shell by the tide.

Andrew smiles at her sheepishly. “I remember it all, babe. Everything about *you*, anyway. Besides, it’s one of the things I like most about you.”

“What, how freakishly predictable I am?” she asks, half-wondering if this is in fact what he means.

“No, Goofy,” he says, touching her nose. “How you always

do the right thing.” He touches her chin now, moving her face slightly closer to him, and starts to kiss her. The kiss is sweet—tender and nervous. An early Andrew-Luce kiss. He tastes of salty pepperoni, mozzarella cheese, and root beer. She tries to enjoy it. This is Andrew—*her* Andrew. The one she fell in love with two years ago and is still in love with to this day . . . whatever *this* day actually is.

But for some reason, his words bug her. *You always do the right thing.*

She has got to stay focused on her goal. Stay in control. Somehow or another, she must manage to win the badge back from Jade—do something so honorable that it forces her mother to change her mind and reassign the honor to Luce. There’s got to be a way to undo this mistake. It can’t be that hard. She can still fix this.

Luciana Cruz can fix anything.