

THE SHALLOW END

The summer after sophomore year, my friend Emily had a miserable crush on this guy Steve from student government, which is how we wound up at that party where the hockey player got shoved into the pool and broke his neck.

The cops came to Emily's house the next afternoon. We were sitting in her basement rec room in our pajamas, eating frozen grapes and pretending we were too cool for the *iCarly* rerun her sister was watching. Emily was using the flatiron on my hair. She flatironed both of us every day that summer, filling the afternoons with the warm smell of steam and burning—it was this thing she had us doing, along with wearing boat shoes and rope bracelets, because she thought it made her look less Jewish and me look less Italian. It didn't, but that didn't stop Emily from trying.

She was only half-finished when her mother came careening down the stairs, weirdly fleet despite her considerable bulk: "Were you at that *party*?" she shrieked. In addition to eavesdropping, which she considered her right as a parent, Mrs. Birnbaum watched Channel 12 incessantly, *as local as local news gets*; odds are she would have sniffed us out eventually, even without the aid of the two Sleepy Hollow detectives standing patiently in her cool, dark foyer. We'd told her we were going to our friend Amanda's to eat brownies. "I swear to God, girls, don't you dare try and lie to me."

"Oooh," crowed Tovah, Emily's little sister, her skinny legs hanging off the arm of the leather couch. Emily's eyes were wide and disbelieving. I could feel my heartbeat pulsing thickly in my throat. "You guys are in trouble."

We weren't, really. At least, not with the police. We sat at the Birnbaums' dining room table for half an hour and answered their questions with the cowed deference of two habitual rule-followers who'd played against type and gotten caught: had we in fact been at Morgan French's party on Birch Street the night before, along with roughly fifty of our classmates? Had we witnessed and/or participated in underage drinking? Did we know Greg O'Halloran, the junior who was now in a coma at Westchester Medical Center, and did we have any idea who might have shoved him into the pool?

"I had Chem with him," Emily told them. She had reached for the closest thing to fiddle with, this bowl of fake Pottery Barn seashells her mom kept on the table in the summertime, and was dragging the jagged edge of a bro-

ken sand dollar under her thumbnail. Both of us were honor-roll kids. My dark hair was still only half-straight. "But other than that, no."

I'd never talked to Greg either, this benignly likable kid with a noisy laugh and a pretty girlfriend; he wore cargo shorts even in the winter and a hemp necklace with a clay bead on it printed with the letter G. I thought of Fiona Blake, the most popular girl in our grade, and wondered if the cops had come to sit at her dining room table, too.

"Are you going to press charges?" Mrs. Birnbaum asked when they were finished, gathering themselves to go. One of them had written down everything we'd said in a little green spiral notebook. "For the drinking?"

"I'd say that's unlikely, ma'am," one of the detectives, not the note-taker, told her. His nose was big and red in a way that made me think of a strawberry. "We're more concerned with piecing together the events leading up to the assault at this point. There were a lot of teenagers in that house."

Mrs. Birnbaum nodded grimly, a look on her face like *teenager* was possibly synonymous with *ferret* or *grenade launcher*. She thanked them three different times before she closed the door. "You," she hissed at Emily once they were gone, her expression livid. "Get upstairs until I can look at you again." Then she turned to me. "And you can stay right where you are, Gabby. I'm calling your mother."

"Her mother's not going to care," Emily pointed out as she was crossing toward the staircase. She sounded pissed, though I wasn't sure at whom. It was a bold move, I thought, playing snotty at that particular moment. I wouldn't have been ballsy enough to try.

"Emily, I don't think I'm *talking* to you," Mrs. Birnbaum snapped, but I shook my head.

"She's right," I said. This was when I was fifteen, after my father lost all of our money in a bad New Jersey land deal and confessed that he'd been having an affair for seven years, but before my parents actually sold the house and got divorced. It was not an exaggeration to say that my mother, that summer at least, didn't care one way or the other about much of anything. "You can call, though."

Mrs. Birnbaum looked at me for a long minute. She'd known my family since Emily and I were in kindergarten, when she and my mom used to do playground duty together; she'd cleaned up my barf on two separate occasions. Finally she sighed and shook her head. "Are you staying for dinner?"

she asked me sharply, and I nodded. She stalked into the kitchen without another word.

“Do you think this is going to screw up Avalon?” I murmured later, as Emily and I set the table. I’d spent the final two weeks of the summer at Avalon Beach with the Birnbaums every year since the start of middle school—sleeping on the bottom bunk in their mildewy-smelling cottage and wave-jumping in the freezing-cold ocean, Emily and I wandering down to the boardwalk for fried dough every night. It was the best part of the summer, always; this year it was basically the only thing I was looking forward to at all. “The cops and everything?”

Emily stared at me like I was insane. “*That’s* what you want to know?” she demanded. “Everything that happened at that party, and you want to know if it’s going to interfere with your *vacation*?”

I frowned, stung. “What happened at the party?” I asked dumbly, then: “I mean. Besides the obvious.”

Emily bumped the silverware drawer closed with her hip so hard that it sprung back open again, spoons rattling. “Nothing,” she said, shaking her head like I was perpetually a step behind her, like I couldn’t possibly begin to know. “Forget it.”

“What?” I asked again, and it came out a lot shriller than I meant it. Emily just reached for the plates.

I slipped out the back door of the Birnbaums’ house after dinner, mumbling a sheepish *thank you/sorry* to Emily’s parents before I went and got my bike around the side of their house. I was halfway to home when I started to cry.

I figured I’d just keep going—it wasn’t the first time this had happened that summer, these humiliating bawling jags coming on out of nowhere, at work or in line at cvs—but eventually it got to the point where I couldn’t see so well, and I almost flattened a cat that scurried out into the road, so I pulled over and toed at the kickstand, tried to catch my breath. My jeans felt clammy, sticking to my skin. The warm air smelled of kitchen exhaust from the burger place across the street, and I was still standing there a couple of minutes later, sobbing like an idiot right there on the yellow curb in front of the public library, when Shay Hamilton pulled up in an old Volvo station wagon.

“Hey, Gabby,” she said.

I blinked. Shay was a just-graduated senior headed, I knew from the yearbook, to Barnard in the fall. She had this pale brown hair that she kept cropped short around her face like a pixie, a little silver hoop in her nose. I'd been the only sophomore in her senior English class. She'd never said a word to me except "thanks" when I passed a stack of handouts back through the row, but once when I gave an oral presentation on "Her Triumph," she'd looked at me for so long and seriously afterward that I started thinking maybe I'd mispronounced "Yeats," even though I knew objectively that I hadn't. She was looking at me like that now.

"Hey," I said, clearing my throat. "I just..." I shrugged and trailed off sort of helplessly, hands drifting in front of me like birds. "Um."

"It's okay," Shay said easily, as if there were nothing unusual about this at all, like she made it a habit to brake for hysterical underclassmen and I was the fourth or fifth of the night. I could hear the low, modulated drone of the stereo coming out of her window, Joni Mitchell maybe. I wiped under my eyes with one thumb.

"It's just been kind of a weird day," I said.

136 "Yeah, I bet." Shay smiled. She'd been at the party, too, I remembered suddenly. I'd seen her in the kitchen with a couple of the other theater kids, drinking Jameson out of red plastic cups. She'd nodded at me as I passed through looking for the bathroom, vague recognition flickering over her deerlike face. "Did you have to talk to the police?"

"Yeah," I said. I'd stopped crying by now, thank God. "But that's not even—" I broke off. My whole head had that clogged, cottony feeling, like there was gauze shoved into my sinuses. "I'm fine, honestly. Sorry."

Shay nodded. Moths were fluttering around the lights outside the library, flinging themselves at the glass over and over without knowing any better. "What are you doing right now?" she asked.

I thought of the summer reading I hadn't started yet, the endless mausoleum quiet of my parents' tiled house. I hesitated. "Nothing," I said.

"You want to come over and hang out?"

I chewed my lip, not sure how to answer. This was literally the first conversation we'd ever had. Still, there was something about the tilt of Shay's dark, curious head, the way her face was only half-lit. It made me feel like I could tell her things. "What about my bike?" I asked stupidly.

Shay shrugged. "It'll fit."

Shay's family lived in a spectacularly shabby Victorian with four floors and a view of the Hudson River, French doors and rooms and rooms full of built-in bookshelves. There was a widow's walk up on the roof. Threadbare carpets were layered on the scuffed wood floors, and we sat on an old corduroy couch and played Scrabble while the coffeemaker gurgled in the background. I had no idea what I was doing here, exactly, but I knew it was preferable to going home.

"My parents'll be back in a bit," Shay told me, laying out her tiles to make *gazelle*. She'd taken her shoes off as soon as we got inside the house and had one leg curled up underneath her. Her toenails were painted a deep, deep purple. "Both of them are teaching night classes for the summer."

"They're professors?" I asked, and she nodded. My mom had worked in a bank, once upon a time.

"Uh-huh," Shay said cheerfully. "Classics and women's studies, down in the city." She grinned a grin I recognized from my friend Amanda, the grin of somebody who legitimately liked their parents. "They're super bougie, but they're good eggs." The coffee machine beeped in the kitchen, and Shay scrambled up off the sofa, long limbs everywhere. "You've got a little sister, right?" she asked when she came back with two steaming mugs. She'd put milk and a lot of sugar in mine, like she suspected maybe I wasn't somebody who drank a lot of coffee, which was true. "I feel like I saw you guys out in town or something once."

137

"Yeah." Kristina was seven, still wearing Hello Kitty pajamas but with a dark slash of eyebrows like Sophia Loren. Nobody had told her anything either way about my parents, but still, sometime that summer she'd started wetting the bed. "She's a pretty good egg, herself."

Shay grinned, gestured with her sharp chin at the game board. "Your turn," she said.

I sat there for a minute, gnawing on my thumbnail. I played *lazy* across her *gazelle*. "Actually my family's a disaster," I blurted.

Shay reached for the notepad we were keeping score with, didn't miss a beat or try to deny it or tell me it couldn't possibly be that bad. "How come?" was all she said.

So. I told her.

I told Shay things I hadn't told anyone, not even Emily, things I hadn't even really known I was thinking about: weird stuff, our yard going brown and dry because my father had cancelled the lawn service, and everything coming

apart in front of my face like the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. “And like, I know that it’s stupid to even think about, the lawn I mean, but I guess I just...” I trailed off as I dug through the soft brown paper bag full of tiles, cool and smooth inside my hand. “I just really hate how you can be going along your entire life thinking something is one way, and the whole time it’s actually something else.”

Shay was quiet for a minute, looking at me over the rim of her coffee mug. Her eyes were a greenish-gray, this dark ring around the irises. “Yeah,” she said eventually. “Yeah, I get that.”

I was about to ask her why she’d stopped her car in the first place when a key turned in the front-door lock. A tall, middle-aged woman appeared in the family room, round owly glasses and her hair secured with two enamel combs. She was wearing a hugely ugly pair of Birkenstocks.

“Hey, Mama,” Shay said, tilting her head backward so that the woman could drop a kiss on the bridge of her nose. It made her seem younger. “This is Gabby.”

138 I was worried she might follow it up with *I found her having a tantrum on the side of the road like a crazy person or she mispronounces “Yeats,”* but she didn’t, and my name seemed to be enough of an introduction for her mom: “Hi, Gabby,” Mrs. Hamilton said, dropping her schoolbag onto a comfortably ratty-looking armchair. Then, looking back at Shay: “Is that the new coffee? Is it any good?”

Shay nodded, handing the mug up so her mom could have a sip. “It’s pretty good,” she reported, sounding happy, and she grinned at me one more time.

Everyone was asleep by the time I got home, the dishwasher humming quietly in the kitchen, the fridge clicking steadily on and off. I could hear my father snoring through the wall of the guest room.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, eased my sister’s door open; Kristina was tucked in her bed, collapsed on her stomach with an army of stuffed animals standing guard. She’d be up soon if she hadn’t been already, I knew, PJs soaked and crying for our mom at the top of her lungs. Sometimes if I was the one to hear her—and I was, a lot of the time, since the sleeping pills my mother took made it hard to wake her up—I’d go in and change her sheets.

“It’s okay,” I always told her, pushing her sweaty hair back off her forehead. Her body was always squirmy and furnace-warm. “We’re okay.”

The story of the party got picked up by some news blogs, then the New York City TV stations, segments about traumatic brain injuries and underage drinking and the free reign spoiled rich kids had to wreak havoc these days. “Those teenagers don’t know the first thing about citizenship or taking responsibility for their actions,” said one old man on Channel 12, which had been running footage of last year’s hockey team in pretty much a continuous loop, broken up only by ominous-looking shots of Morgan French’s house on Birch Street and interviews like this one, which appeared to have been conducted in the parking lot of a Stop & Shop. “They have the iPhones, they have the BMWs. They’ve had everything in their lives handed to them, and this is the chickens coming home to roost.”

“That’s definitely what caused it,” I muttered, digging in the cabinet for my favorite orange cereal bowl. I was weirdly particular about stuff that summer, cereal bowls and wearing my favorite pair of flip-flops every day, lining up my clothes by color inside the closet. I liked to keep control where I could. “All those BMWs you’ve given me.”

My father frowned. “I could stand to have my coffee without listening to your attitude, Gabby,” he said.

I could stand to have my Cheerios without looking at your face, I almost replied. He and my mother had barely spoken since Memorial Day, silence crashing down inside our house like a piano shoved off a roof. The sound of his voice was startling. “I gotta go to work,” I said instead.

It was a lie, and not even a good one: I had a job scooping ice cream that summer with Emily and Amanda, and the shop didn’t open until eleven. I’d worked there the summer before, too, but just to avoid hanging around the house and getting stuck watching Kristina. It had only been a couple of days a week, my parents still fronting almost all of my spending money. This year I was pretty much paying for myself.

If my father noticed—the lie itself, or the laziness of it—he didn’t let on. “Have a good day,” he murmured, glancing down at the empty table—they’d cancelled the *Times* along with premium cable, but I guessed old habits died hard. My mother was still up in bed. “Bring home some pistachio, will you?”

“They’re saying it was Joey Doherty,” Amanda told us that afternoon, rinsing out the giant plastic blender we used to make milkshakes. Her frizzy red ponytail poked out the back of her *Scoops!* baseball cap. The cops had come to Amanda’s house, too; she’d told her mom she was eating brownies at

Emily's, so now they were both good and grounded. My parents still didn't know shit. "Who pushed him in the pool."

"Seriously?" I asked. Everybody used to call Joey Doherty "Joey Dirty" in middle school, but the joke was on them because he came back for ninth grade looking, like, super attractive. "Was Joey Doherty even at that party?"

"Yeah," Amanda reported, then paused to take orders for clown sundaes from a couple of little kids just out of day camp. "He was there. And there was drama between him and Greg because apparently Joey was also hooking up with Fiona."

"Fiona Blake?" I asked, pressing a scoop of cookie dough onto another of chocolate. "Really?"

"I know," Amanda said. She stuck upside-down sugar cones on top of the sundaes, added some Reese's candy eyes. "She was totally, like, slumming."

"That's mean," I said, although it was also kind of true. Joey Doherty's dad was in jail for grand theft auto the whole time we were in elementary school; he got paroled, won thirty-six thousand dollars in the New York State Lottery, and went back to jail two years later for something with stolen flat-screens on Staten Island. Probably Joey and I would've had a lot to talk about, I thought darkly. "Did they arrest him?"

"Not yet," Amanda replied in a voice like probably it was only a matter of time. "I heard they just made him come in for more questioning."

"Can we stop talking about this?" Emily asked suddenly. She'd been moody all morning, all week really: the grounding, probably, on top of which Student Government Steve was apparently dating a freshman girl from White Plains. We were still good for the beach, though, she'd told me this morning when I'd come in. She hadn't sounded half as relieved as I felt. "God."

"What crawled up your butt?" Amanda snarked, but if Emily answered, I didn't hear her because Shay had just walked in with a couple of other seniors, a girl from the field hockey team, and the kid who'd played the lead in *Pippin* that spring. "Hey, Gabby," she said. From her tone I couldn't tell if she'd been expecting to see me here or not, and I tried to remember if she'd ever come in for ice cream before. Her short hair made her neck look pale and vulnerable in the bright light of the shop.

I felt my face get weirdly warm, even though *Scoops!* is, like, violently air-conditioned. "Hey," I said, fumbling a little bit. Right away I felt embarrassed about everything that had happened the other night, the randomness of it—that she'd seen me crying in public like a psycho to start with, all the stuff

I'd told her about my dad. I wondered if she'd told her friends about the crazy sophomore she'd taken pity on. I wished in a huge way that I could take it all back. "What, um. What can I get you?"

Shay and her friends ordered their ice cream—easy, three mint chip cones. "Don't worry about it," I told her, when she tried to pay. We weren't supposed to do that anymore, give out free stuff, not since it came out that the store was losing like a hundred and fifty bucks a week from people slipping cups of moose tracks to their friends, but I felt as if I owed her something.

"Thanks, dude," she said, grinning. Then: "You like working here?"

"It's okay," I told her. I shrugged. "I mean, I've got one really buff arm now, so."

Shay smiled. "You got plans for later on tonight?" she asked. "You need a ride home?"

Which—huh. "I don't get done for a while yet," I told her. I could feel Emily and Amanda staring at us, even though both of them were allegedly helping the family that had just come in. I angled my body away from them as best I could behind the counter, feeling weirdly like I had something to protect.

"That's cool," Shay said easily. "I've got some stuff this afternoon anyway. I can come back."

141

"Oh." I nodded, pleased and not totally sure why. "Yeah, okay. Like nine thirty?"

"Sure thing." Shay tossed me a high five with the hand that wasn't holding her ice cream, then gathered her friends from where they were standing by the community bulletin board and waved at Emily and Amanda. "See you later, guys."

The door had hardly even closed when both of them turned on me like something out of *The Crucible*, mouths dropped into perfect Os. "Since when do you hang out with Shay Hamilton?" Emily demanded.

"You know she's like a big lesbian, right?" Amanda asked.

I blinked. I did know that, actually, now that I thought about it, although I couldn't remember anyone ever telling it to me out loud. Shay had dated a girl on the volleyball team most of her senior year, and even if she hadn't, probably her varsity athlete/musical theater entourage should have given it away. It hadn't occurred to me, though, standing in front of the library. It hadn't occurred to me when we were sitting on her couch.

"We don't hang out," I said to Amanda, who was still looking at me kind of oddly. "I ran into her at the library the other night, is all."

“And now she’s picking you up from work?” Emily sounded unconvinced. “*That...is strange.*”

“You’re strange,” I shot back, rinsing the ice cream scoop under the faucet in the big industrial sink, back up like a cornered animal. “How can I help you?” I asked the couple who’d just sidled up to the counter. My voice sounded very, very loud.

Shay’s Volvo was waiting by the curb when I got done at nine thirty; Emily and Amanda waved uncertainly as they headed for their bikes. “Hey, chick,” she said, when I opened the passenger-side door. There was something about the way she talked to me, like we’d been friends our whole lives, like there was nothing about me she didn’t already know and understand. “How was work?”

“It was good,” I said, feeling oddly shy. It was like I’d found her out in some weird way, which was stupid since I hadn’t actually learned any new information at all. I glanced at Emily and Amanda in the rearview, at their backs as they pedaled away.

142

Shay smiled, turned the radio up. “Good.”

She drove to a spot she knew behind the Philipsburg Manor train station, railroad tracks on one side and a rocky river beach on the other. Every so often, the Metro North came rumbling by. We sat on the hood of the station wagon for a while, passing a bag of Twizzlers from her glove compartment back and forth.

“What happened with you and Marnie Greene?” I asked her, a long commuter train receding in the distance. I could still feel the vibration of it in my teeth.

Shay shrugged, snapping off the end of a Twizzler with her molars. She had delicate silver rings on three of her fingers, thin as embroidery floss. If she thought it was strange that I was bringing up her ex-girlfriend out of nowhere, she didn’t let on. “We broke up,” she said.

“How come?”

For a second, Shay didn’t answer. It was the first time I’d seen her hesitate, like she was anything but a hundred percent sure of herself. “I liked someone else,” she said carefully, looking out at the water. “And she found out.”

Oh. “Oh.” I nodded. I wasn’t totally sure what she was telling me here. So far, I had kissed two boys. Neither of us said anything; I could hear the faint

lap of the water, the low sound of a foghorn somewhere far away. The hood of the car felt warm under my legs.

“They’re saying Joey Doherty is the one who pushed Greg into the pool,” I told her finally, following her gaze out across the river. I could see the lights of the Tappan Zee Bridge blinking in the distance, the graceful swoop of the cables. The Tap was built as a fifty-year bridge, my father had told me once, only it was closer to seventy years old now and liable to collapse right into the water at any moment. I don’t know if he was trying to scare me—we drove over it a lot to get to the big mall in Nyack—or just to prepare me for the inevitability of things falling apart sooner or later. It looked pretty, in any case, at least from this far off.

“Yeah,” Shay said thoughtfully, and it took me a second to figure out what she was responding to. “That sounds like something they would say.”

The one nonwork exception to Emily’s grounding was the run she took through our neighborhood every night, a three-mile loop around the high school and back. She needed to shave thirty seconds off her time before September. She usually wound up taking a shortcut, though, stopping by my house to hang out for a minute, stretching her hamstrings on my front steps. On Tuesday, I was playing catch with Kristina when she turned up. “There’s a bathing suit I want to show you,” I told her, running inside the house and grabbing the J.Crew catalog that had come over the weekend. I flipped through the glossy pages, held it out for her to look. “For Avalon.”

143

Emily glanced down at the sailor stripes and spaghetti straps, nodded a generic approval. “Cool,” she said, not taking the catalog out of my hands. A couple of summers before we’d worn matching two-pieces every single day, hers green and mine yellow. The snow-cone guy had started calling us The Twins.

“I mean, I thought so,” I said. I was going to have to work extra shifts to afford it, since my parents had already said no way. “Did you get that e-mail?” I asked, changing the subject. Our principal had sent out a school-wide blast that morning, asking anyone who knew anything about what happened at the party to come forward and announcing a fundraiser at Pizza and Brew for Greg’s family.

“Yeah, I got it.” Emily folded herself in half, palms flat against the concrete. When she looked back up at me, her face was flushed. “Greg wasn’t that nice,

you know,” she said suddenly. “Now that all this happened, everybody keeps saying what a good guy he was, but...” She trailed off, shrugging.

“But what?” That confused me, and annoyed me a little, too—like she was trying to act like she knew stuff, like she was more popular than we actually were. I glanced at Kristina, who had wandered across the yard after the neighbor’s cat. “I mean...I thought he was pretty nice.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Did you ever even *talk* to him?”

“Did *you*?” I challenged reflexively. I felt my eyebrows shoot up.

Emily flagged at that, shaking her head a bit. She pulled one leg up behind her, like a dancer. “No,” she said finally. “I guess I didn’t.”

I looked at her a moment longer. A squirrel skittered up the side of the house. Emily was the one who’d come and found me the night of the party, nudging my shoulder with one denim-covered knee as I sat cross-legged on the floor of Morgan French’s den, half-listening to two guys from my AP Euro class talk about the Avengers. “Get up,” she’d said curtly. “We gotta go.”

144

“Where were you?” I asked, blinking up at her. She’d gone to the bathroom a while ago, I thought, but my sense of time was probably a little bit skewed; I’d only had one beer, but my head was buzzing pleasantly, that feeling like your brain has expanded just a little and is pushing at the inside of your skull.

“Peeing,” she said; then, more urgently: “I’m serious. Get up. Something bad happened.”

“While you were peeing?” I asked with a giggle.

Emily rolled her eyes. “A *fight* or something, Gabby,” she said impatiently. “Somebody called the cops.”

That registered. “Shoot,” I said, the new information cutting through the fog in my fuzzy brain. It wasn’t totally unusual for parties to get broken up by the police in our town, neighbors calling to complain about noise, but that didn’t mean I wanted to be at one where it happened. “Okay.” I held my arm out expectantly, let her pull me to my feet. “Let’s go.”

We’d rounded up Amanda and taken off as the information started to spread through the bottom floor of the house, scooting out the back door and toward home as fast as we could in our flip-flops and short skirts. The police cars must have pulled up without sirens. The night was silent and a deep, lucid green. I hadn’t known anybody had gotten hurt until the next morning, zipped safe in my sleeping bag on the pale expanse of carpet in Emily’s bedroom, one arm thrown over my eyes.

"I'm late," Emily said now, shifting her weight in her neon running shoes. It occurred to me that it looked like she'd lost weight. "I'll see you at work, okay?"

"Yup," I nodded. I could hear the neighbors' sprinkler hissing away next door, constant. I thought of when Emily and I were little and used to spend our summers running through the one in my backyard. Suddenly I had this creepy feeling, like we were saying good-bye for longer than just until tomorrow. "See you," is all I said.

Greg's family pulled the plug on his life support on a Tuesday, a sunny summer morning at the tail end of July. They released a statement to the press asking for privacy. Still, they were the lead on the local news.

"God, why do they insist on torturing that poor woman?" my mother asked, staring with palpable disgust at the television while she poured herself a glass of wine in the kitchen. It was the first interrogatory sentence I'd heard out of her in a while.

"He's got a father, too," I said, unable to resist. I'd never seen Greg's parents before any of this happened, but they seemed like nice enough people, both of them perpetually dressed in L.L.Bean. On TV, his father always held his mother's hand.

"Of course he does," she said distractedly, and just like that she was gone again, receding into the blue depths of wherever it was she went that summer, too far for any of us to catch her. She was wearing a pair of loose, faded khaki shorts I hadn't seen since I was a little kid.

"How did you meet Dad?" I blurted anyway, realizing all at once that I didn't know. Suddenly it seemed like enormously important information to have, and like the window for obtaining it might already be closed. "Hmm?" I asked again, unsure whether she hadn't heard me or was just pretending not to. "How'd you meet him?"

"Oh, Gabby, I don't know." My mother waved her hand dismissively. It had been a while since she went to the salon to get her hair tinted, and there was a dark gray racing stripe along the center of her scalp. The two of them still hadn't talked. "We were out in the city. I was with your Aunt Lydia. He sent a drink over to me at the bar."

I waited.

"He had a wife," she said, her voice going quiet and vague. "When I met him. So I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

I stood there. I stared. I thought, bizarrely, of the big magnets Kristina played with in kindergarten—like something in my brain or my body physically repelled this information, like it bounced right off me and went scabbling across the room into a corner.

“I like somebody,” I told her, more to change the subject than anything else.

“Don’t,” she said immediately, then came back to herself and shook her head. “Oh, Gabby, I’m sorry. That’s terrible. That’s a terrible thing for me to say.” She crossed the kitchen and moved to put her arms around me; I tried to sidestep, but I wasn’t quick enough and she got me anyway, my body stiff and leaden inside her grip. “Whoever this boy is, he’s very lucky,” she told me, and I turned my head toward the TV so she wouldn’t see me cry.

I didn’t have Shay’s cell number, so I hopped on my bike and pedaled over to her house. It was humid and sticky out, a storm coming, and I could feel my T-shirt clinging to my back. Shay’s dad answered the door. “Hi, Gabby,” he said.

146 “Hi,” I told him, taking a deep breath to steady myself. “Is Shay here?”

Shay’s room was up on the third floor, this small neat space with a pitched ceiling, a desk and a nest of pillows on the floor next to a low window. On the bed was a big down comforter like a cloud. Shay grinned when she saw me in the hallway. She was reading a huge Stephen King paperback, a bag of gummy worms resting on her stomach. “Hi,” she said, like she was genuinely happy I’d turned up out of nowhere, like her life held space for good surprises, and I was one. “What’s up?”

“What are you after here?” I demanded clumsily. I felt, with no small amount of panic, that I might be about to burst into tears all over again. I wondered if that’s how I would look back at this summer, the summer I biked everywhere and cried all the time with no warning. “Like. With me.”

Shay sat upright, curling one leg underneath her in a gesture that felt distinctly feline, like a cat flicking her tail. “I don’t know,” she said, her smile fading a little. “I like you, Gabby. I like talking to you.”

“Is that all?”

Shay looked at me for a long minute, like she was trying to learn my face by heart. Finally she shook her head. “No,” she said. “That’s not all.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt the breath whoosh out of me, a physical thing, the roller-coaster swoop of my stomach and a sort of buckling about my knees. I

wondered when I was going to stop being surprised by things I already sort of knew deep in the back of my own secret brain. “I—okay.”

“Does that freak you out?” Shay asked. She was watching me carefully, like she thought I was going to bolt. Her eyes were clear and serious, that familiar riverstone gray.

I thought about that for a minute. “Yes,” I said.

“Do you want me to take you home?”

I thought some more. “No.”

“Okay,” Shay said, letting a little sigh out. She smiled at me again, messed one hand through her soft-looking hair. “Well. That’s good.”

The cops did another round of interviews over the weekend, this time asking everyone who’d been friends with Greg and Fiona what they knew about Greg and Joey Doherty having a fight. They didn’t come to my house, or Emily’s, but they went to see Amanda, who was gossipy enough that her name had come up as somebody who might have something to say. “They’re totally going to arrest him,” she reported with confidence. “Probably this week for sure.”

“I have to talk to you,” Emily told me on Tuesday, as we scrubbed out the cooler at work—our least favorite job and guaranteed to make us sweaty and annoyed, ice cream down the front of our T-shirts. “Come over after work.”

“I can’t,” I told her, lifting a tub of vanilla out of the way. The angle was awkward, and my arm muscles burned. “Not tonight.”

“Why?” Emily frowned. “Are you seeing Shay Hamilton?”

I shrugged, caught out and instantly defensive: I *was* seeing Shay, but I didn’t want to tell Emily that. It was none of her business anyway, I told myself. There wasn’t even anything to tell. “What do you have to talk to me about?”

Emily ignored me, zero to totally pissed in two seconds flat. “So what are you, a lesbian now?” she demanded; instinctively, I glanced up to make sure nobody was paying attention. “That’s perfect. That’s really perfect.”

I felt myself flush hot and angry, from my face all the way down to the bottoms of my feet. Nothing had happened between Shay and me, not exactly. I didn’t know what exactly I was. “Listen,” I hissed. “Just because you’re mad about Student Government Steve, don’t take it out on m—”

“It’s not about Student Government Steve!” Emily’s voice was loud enough that a couple of customers had stopped eating their ice cream to listen, cones

melting in their curious hands. Emily followed my gaze, lowered her voice. "It's not."

"Ooookay," I said snottily. There was something unfamiliar and almost desperate on her face that made me change my tone, though, this barely perceptible hysteria. We'd done basically everything together since we were five and a half. "Then what is it about?"

But Emily shook her head like she was well and truly done with me; she flung the lid of the cooler down suddenly, nearly taking my fingers off as she did. "Not everything is about you, Gabby," she snapped. "You think the world revolves around you, but you're wrong." She pulled off her baseball cap, thick hair springing free. I could tell that she'd tried to straighten it that morning, for all the good it had done her: it was wild and curly with the humidity, out of control and everywhere as she slammed through the door of the ice cream shop and into the world outside.

148

I got home that night and my parents were screaming in the kitchen, the first time I'd heard them speak to each other since the start of the summer. I stopped in the dining room to hear. I felt absurdly hopeful for a second, like if they were fighting, maybe that meant there was something to fight about, a family left to save; something leaped in my stomach, even though I knew it was stupid and sad, like being the last kid in your class to still believe in Santa.

I stood there for a minute anyway, listening to them hurl accusations back and forth: "You've fucked things up quite enough already, don't you think?" I heard my mother say. I'd never heard her swear before. It sounded unnatural and fascinating in equal parts. "Shouldn't you possibly quit while you're ahead?"

I don't know how long I was there before I noticed Kristina standing on the staircase, her nightgown wet all down her legs. Her face was streaked with silent, hysterical tears. "Shit," I said softly, so my parents wouldn't hear me, and picked her up and carried her upstairs.

Days passed. July seeped into August; Joey Doherty got picked up by the cops. The doorbell rang one night while my dad was watching *CSI* in the TV room, air conditioner droning away. "Your friend's here, Gabby," he called into the kitchen, and I ran into the foyer barefoot before I realized he was talking about Shay and not Emily.

“Hey,” she said, holding out a giant bag of Swedish Fish like some kind of offering. “I was in the neighborhood.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, steering her around the back of the house and smiling despite the blush that was creeping up from the collar of my T-shirt. I still couldn’t put a name to whatever it was Shay made me feel. “In the neighborhood, huh?”

“Uh-huh.” Then: “Do they know?” she asked once we got to the purpley-dark backyard, gesturing with her chin in the direction of my father and the flatscreen. “About—?”

“They don’t know anything,” I said immediately, which was true. Cicadas trilled high in the trees. Shay took a step forward, close enough that I could smell the lavender lotion she used. The light on the side of the house clicked on, flooding both of us in a sharp white glare meant to deter raccoons and other interlopers. I jumped about a thousand feet in the opposite direction, my heart slamming against my rib cage, the coppery rush of adrenaline in my mouth; then I laughed. “It’s got a motion sensor,” I explained, shaking my head in relief. “A sensor, that’s all.”

“Okay,” Shay said slowly, like I was crazy and she didn’t totally hate it. I could feel the warm, prickly grass under my feet. She grinned and leaned in to kiss me. I tipped my face into the light.

149

Emily wouldn’t return my phone calls, wouldn’t come down when I went by her house after work. “What *happened* with you guys?” Amanda demanded in a voice that made me suspect she had theories of her own about the matter. I shrugged into the cooler, shook my head.

I tried again the week before we were supposed to leave for Avalon, knocking my usual knock on the Birnbaums’ bright red front door. “Sorry, Gabby,” Mrs. Birnbaum said, an exasperated look on her face like maybe she was just as fed up and baffled as I was. “Emily’s not taking visitors right now.”

“Yeah,” I said, sighing, toeing at a mosquito bite on the back of my opposite knee. I tried to remember the last time Emily and I had fought like this and couldn’t. “I know. Just figured I’d give it a shot.”

“Oh, Gabby, before you go.” She held up a finger for me to wait, rifling through the bowl on the sideboard where the Birnbaums kept keys, iPod headphones, a twenty for whoever answered the door to a pizza delivery. “Is this yours?” she asked. She held up what looked at first like a friendship

bracelet, the kind Emily and I used to make at camp. "I found it in the basement when I was vacuuming."

I looked at the bracelet, forehead wrinkling up, except it wasn't a bracelet at all: what Mrs. Birnbaum was showing me, here in the foyer of this house where I'd grown up, was Greg O'Halloran's beat-up hemp necklace, the clay bead strung onto it stamped with a letter G.

I blinked at her for a minute. I went very, very still. I thought of bridges and boys falling into the water, the wide murk of the Hudson River and the bleached stink of chlorine. *You think the world revolves around you, but you're wrong.* For the first time all summer, it occurred to me to wonder how the hell Emily knew that Greg wasn't a nice guy.

"No," I said quietly, a sound like waves and roaring in the dark cave of my skull. "No, it's not mine."

Mrs. Birnbaum frowned. "Are you sure? It could belong to one of Tovah's friends, I guess. That little ferrety girl from her class was over here on the weekend, Grace, but—" She held up the necklace so that it swung a bit, like the pendulum in a clock. "Are you positive?"

150 "Um," I said stupidly. I needed to get out of there. My feet were itching for the pedals of my bike. "Yeah, I—"

"She said it's not *hers*, Ma."

My chin jerked in the direction of the staircase; Emily stood at the top of it in madras shorts and a polo, her hair perfectly, immaculately straight. We stared at each other for a minute. I could hear Channel 12 in the other room. I waited for her to keep going—to break down, to confess something, to promise that us winding up here in these bodies at this moment had been some terrible, laughable mistake—but she didn't, and I knew then, the same way I knew my father was moving out and that I wasn't going to get to be a kid for very much longer, that Joey Doherty hadn't pushed Greg into the pool.

"Hi," I said.

Emily looked at me from up there on the landing. "Hi," she said.

"I just came to let you know," I told her, bracing myself for tears and realizing they weren't coming, "I can't go to the beach." Mrs. Birnbaum was looking at us like we were insane.

Emily nodded slowly, like she was thinking. "No," she said after a minute. She was backlit by the fixture in the hallway, and the shadow made it hard to see her face. "I guess you can't."

“Okay,” I said. “So.” I shrugged a little, as helpless as that night outside the library, the whole world somehow out of my hands. “Bye.”

Emily shrugged back. “Bye,” she said.

I waved to her mom and headed down the walkway, sun glaring. I climbed on my bike and rode away.