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Jessica A. Rinker

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Silver Girls: A Modern Retelling of *Little Women*

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

January 31, 2021

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Situating *Silver Girls* in relationship to *Little Women*, Current Young Adult Literature, and the Secondary Education Classroom

When one thinks of a “reader” they might picture a person with large wire-rimmed glasses, their nose buried deep into the binding of a thick book, perhaps with a cat curled up next to them and maybe a mug of tea. If one had to guess what such a literary person was reading, one would assume something very old and wise like Tolstoy or Wordsworth or Austin. What about the twelve-year-old hanging upside down on his bean bag chair devouring James Dashner’s *Maze Runner* or the fifteen-year-old laying across her bed, lost in the plot of Elizabeth Acevedo’s *Poet X*? Are these not readers too? Young adults often do not see themselves as readers, nor do they believe that the books that they are drawn to, usually contemporary fiction with diverse characters, are as valuable as the great classics they are taught in schools. This may be one of the main reasons there is a decline in reading for fun amongst middle and high school students, something I will touch on more later in my introduction. As a future English teacher, the decline in reading is disturbing, but it is also perhaps a wake-up call for educators, particularly at the secondary level, to incorporate literature that represents today’s students.

Our education system tends to present students with books that do not clearly connect to their experiences, which understandably leads students to assume all books are unengaging. This problem is especially prominent when teachers introduce canonical literature into the classroom. Adult readers may be able to look past the elements of old culture and pick out the relatable bits, but for middle and high school readers this *oldness* is essentially a language barrier. They cannot appreciate the meaning behind the story because they cannot overcome their misunderstandings about the time frame the story was written in. Again, it is not the student’s fault to be perplexed by the unfamiliar, and it is indeed the teacher’s responsibility to bridge the gap between the two

worlds. In addition to providing students with historical context, teachers can also pair classics with retellings. Retellings remove the language barrier by keeping the same themes and basic characters of the original but place them within a modern context that students already understand. This is what I aimed to do with *Silver Girls*, my retelling of Louisa May Alcott's nineteenth century novel, *Little Women* (1868). I kept the spirit of the novel, but presented that spirit in bodies, minds, and environments that are present in our current time. The themes of feminism, family, interdependence, ambition, dreams, hardships, and hope are all still present, but now they are accessible to young readers. Once students have been introduced to the meaning behind the classic, they then will be able to read the original text itself and have a deeper connection to it and appreciation for it.

Silver Girls is informed by the themes and narrative structures of current young adult literature (YAL) (*The Hate You Give*, *A Long Way Down*, *Little & Lion*), as well as a study of why and how other writers have envisioned canonical literary texts (*Beast*, *Everything Under*, *Ronit & Jamil*). My retelling also considers the ways Alcott's text remains an important coming-of-age reading experience today. YA fiction has the unique job of both entertaining its readers as well as educating them--about their world as well as about the world of reading. I argue that, both because of the continued relevance of *Little Women*, as well as the opportunity the genre of YA offers a writer to update certain elements of the 19th Century story, a thoughtful retelling of the novel could offer young readers, first, the chance to discover and appreciate the original text, as well as the opportunity to reflect on their own lives via contemporary themes *Little Women* is lacking. Alcott's novel is primarily a coming of age for the March sisters. By placing the March sisters in today's world, I represent a wider range of young adult experiences regarding sexuality, cyberbullying, and mental health. Thus, I hope to extend Alcott's mission of giving voice to the

concerns of young adults by depicting the diverse experiences of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy as they each challenge gender roles and other social pressures adolescents face in contemporary society.

DEFINING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

If I were to draw a Venn diagram of literary texts with one circle representing “literature” and one circle “young adult” the overlapping sections of those two circles, Young Adult literature (YA) would be an intriguing, complicated, messy collection of texts indeed. While absolutes are never possible with literature, when I refer to YA, I am not, for instance, referring to James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. *Little Women* was written very specifically for a “young” reading audience. Today, not every reader fits into the age 12-18 adolescent category. Since the turn of the century there has been a surge in adult interest in YA literature; in 2012 10,000 YA novels were published, a 50% increase from 2002 (Peterson). In 2012, NPR asked over 75, 000 readers to vote for their favorite YA novels and the top vote getters were, in order: the *Harry Potter* series, the *Hunger Games* series, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *Catcher in the Rye*. But consider Jamaica Kinkaid’s prose poem *Girl*. While Kinkaid’s exploration of the vicious and misogynistic rules governing female behavior was not written for a young adult audience, in certain settings, a classroom for example, *Girl* becomes a powerful reading experience for the young adult reader. For many young female readers, the likes of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre* serve as important and formative YA reading experiences. And, yet, circling back, *Little Women*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and even *Harry Potter* has become a subject of significant literary scholarship as *literature*.

If I look at how literary scholars and the publishing industry talk about and identify YA, the genre typically includes fiction written for young adult readers and with plots that focus on a

young adult protagonist as they experience the challenge of growing up--in literary terms, the *bildungsroman*. Other literary qualities of the genre typically include a reliance on melodrama, a thematic focus on decision making in the face of an authority (sometimes oppressive and sometimes benevolent), and the adolescent challenge of processing heightened emotions with comparatively little life experience (Brown). Titles we might identify as YA (*Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*) or titles that were “read” as YA (*Catcher in the Rye*, *Call of the Wild*) were, prior to the 1970s, lumped into the category of “children’s literature.” However, since then, titles were more often identified specifically as YA, with their own unique features and reading audience (Bachelder, Kelly, Kenney, and Small). Part of the reason for this is because, although YA novels are usually geared toward middle and high school students, in recent years the genre has quickly become a hugely popular genre among adults too (Brown). The evolving history of the YA genre in terms of its value as objects of literary analysis, as well as a publishing phenomena, combined with the allure of the plot and character elements make YA particularly an interesting area for research and writing to me.

THE DECLINE IN YA READING

Adolescents are reading less books for fun than ever before, and it negatively affects them personally and academically. According to a 2007 study on reading habits in America, students read less the older they become. Less than one third of thirteen-year-olds read everyday (Gioia 7), and less than half ages 18-24 read for fun at all (Gioia 7). Reading for fun is connected to excelling academically, socially, and civically (Gioia 12-14), so the fact that teens and young adults are giving up on reading as a hobby indicates that they are losing out on opportunities to excel in schools and in their personal lives.

Several schools try to motivate students to read for fun by encouraging them to choose books to read outside of text the instructor is teaching. Oftentimes, this type of “fun reading” is still graded or tracked, through programs like Accelerated Reader. Although these programs may be helpful to some extent since they allow students some agency in their reading, there is often a stigma that this “extra” reading is not as valuable as the main classroom text. This can become a problem when students feel like the only books that they enjoy or relate to are these not-so-important extras. Students see that the teacher seems to spend more time with old, canonical literature than the literature that presents diverse characters and contemporary issues. So, students begin to feel like their type of reading is undervalued and that they themselves are undervalued. I believe that this is at the core of why teens give up on reading. Unconsciously and unintentionally, educators are communicating that the books students love don’t matter.

Individual teachers are not to be blamed completely though, as they are often abiding by the recommendations from the state. After examining the texts recommended to teachers in the ELA Standards from the Massachusetts Department of Education, one can see that much of the literature recommended for classroom practice starts off as relatable to the age group but becomes less so at the secondary level. Texts for middle schoolers like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain (1876), *The Dark is Rising* by Susan Cooper (1973), and the most recently published, *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker (2016), all present characters ranging from ages 10-13. Even more impactful, the list also includes books from people of color, like Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) and Laurence Yep’s *Dragonwings* (1975). This is a beautiful array of stories to present to students as the list clearly considers texts that would be relatable for students. The problem begins in high school when canon dominates the list. Only a few contemporary reads, like Michale Zuzak’s *Book Thief* are present, while older texts like

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1592), John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1848) overtake the classroom. There is nothing wrong with teaching canonical literature. The issue arises when this becomes all students see.

Although classics are no doubt valuable, students who are sick of *only* reading canonical literature in their English classes have good reason to be. Pamela Mason, a Language and Literacy Senior Lecturer at Harvard, challenges educators to consider *why* students might be struggling to connect with older texts. Mason attributes student's growing disinterest in literature to the fact that most of what is considered canon lacks diversity (Anderson). She stresses the importance of students seeing themselves in literature, which means teaching books with characters of color, characters who are in LGBTQ community, and books with conflicts that today's readers are facing. These books do not have to be entirely separate from the classics, though. Elementary school librarian Liz Soeiro recommends introducing students to retellings of canon, like Madeline Miller's *Story of Achilles*. Being able to discern perspective within a narration is a key element of secondary education, as well as higher education, and research suggests that retellings of stories can promote literacy. An article from *Review of Research in Education*, "Narrative Inquiry as Pedagogy in Education: The Extraordinary Potential of Living, Telling, Retelling, and Reliving Stories of Experience," reveals how retelling stories can promote connectedness as students relate to a shared human experience (212), encourage narrative storytelling in the classroom (228), and challenge dominant stereotypes by promoting "counterstories," stories which express the experiences of underrepresented populations (229). Retellings can be especially valuable because they encourage students to see how the themes in canon still apply to their lives.

As an English and secondary education major, I am highly invested in understanding how to incorporate canon into my classroom while still presenting my students with diverse literature. Like all English teachers, I want my students to love reading as much as I do, especially because I know they will benefit from reading for pleasure. That being the case, I cannot throw classics at them without any context--even classics that have continued to remain popular over the decades.

CONTEXTUALIZING LITTLE WOMEN & THE VALUE OF RETELLINGS

One of the most well-beloved books written for a young audience is Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. *Little Women* also appears on the recommended reading list within the MA ELA standards, and there seems to be no shortage of readers who read it just for fun. Throughout the last 150 years publishers estimate over one thousand copies are printed each month, which, if one does the math, is nearly 2 million copies total. It's never once been out of print, which is a strong indicator of the undying love fans have for the novel. In her the prologue of her book, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why It Still Matters*, author and professor Anne Boyd Rioux pinpoints why *Little Women* remains so popular:

“[Readers] can still find themselves reflected in the characters of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy as each sister finds her own way to grow up. Returning to *Little Women* reminds us of who we are and invites us to examine who we hope to be, making Alcott's classic as vital as ever” (xiv).

Little Women has that relatability quality that is so important in young adult novels. It promotes individual identity and self-growth, which are timeless values. Some critics, educators included, disregard the book, touting it as a “girl's book,” which is to say too romantic and feminine to hold any real power in the classroom, and certainly not appealing to boys (Rioux). Although it is true that women's voices take center stage in the novel, Alcott creates a world in which men and

women empower each other. It is, therefore, a feminist novel, which is impactful for boys and girls.

Although literary experts like Rioux and adoring fans like myself champion Alcott's *Little Women*, it would be a disservice for young readers today to ignore the challenges of reading a book that was published nearly a century and a half ago. The parties, clothing, language, and societal norms adolescents face today are different than that of the original March sisters, which is why there is value in retelling.

Little Women has not only been adapted for film; it has also been retold in literature. The list of retellings includes: *The Spring Girls: A Modern-Day Retelling of Little Women* by Anna Todd, *Littler Women: A Modern Retelling* by Laura Schaefer, *The Little Women Letters* by Gabrielle Donnelly, *The Little Women: A Novel* by Katharine Weber, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* by Rey Terciero, and, most recently, *Meg and Jo* by Virginia Kantra. Retellings have the opportunity to embrace the feminist coming of age themes of *Little Women* that has made it an important reading experience for generations of young readers while allowing for the inclusion of themes that are becoming more commonplace in contemporary YAL described earlier.

CONTEXTUALIZING MY RETELLING

My thesis presents the first two parts of *Silver Girls*, which introduces the March sisters as individual characters and establishes the relationships between them. I set Part I in the hospital, as Mrs. March, Meg, Jo, and Amy wait for Beth to regain consciousness after a suicide attempt. In Alcott's original text Beth, the most angelic sister, battles scarlet fever twice in her life, and ultimately dies from it as a teenager. Today, scarlet fever is not as common as in Alcott's time; instead more and more adolescents are battling less visible mental illnesses, so that

becomes an integral part of my retelling. As Beth recovers, her family must also navigate how to cope with the trauma they experienced. The first part of *Silver Girls* presents readers with four sisters' perspectives of the night leading up to Beth's suicide, revealing their fears, regrets, and their hopes. The second part introduces how they each begin to heal from the pain they felt in part I.

In both sections, I present the aspirations of each sister, tying the characters back to Alcott's original March sisters, but I also show how their dreams fit into a modern context. Meg still dreams of having a family in her future, and, as the oldest sister, she feels the pressure of looking after her younger sisters. Still, she also wants to enjoy the end of her senior year and have some fun, something she feels guilty about when her family faces a crisis. Jo, determined to be a writer, is also fiercely set on keeping her family together, and worries over losing Meg to college and Beth to her illness. Beth, as in Alcott's story, wants to be seen as good, but, feeling that she will never be good enough for her family, she struggles with her self-worth. Amy, as the youngest, is most expressive about her frustrations and fears. In *Little Women*, Amy is often viewed as immature, but in my retelling readers will see that Amy's outbursts stem from her love for her sister and her deep desire to be seen as an important part of the family, instead of just the baby sister.

By creating four different intertwining narratives, my retelling will explore how each girl defines her femininity and how the social pressures placed on each girl affects them differently based on their age, environment, and personal priorities. If I were to continue the novel, which I aspire to, I would expand the plot and characters, drawing more from Alcott's portrayal of side characters like Lauri, Mr. Lurance, and Mr. and Mrs. March. However, as the story is about how young adults grow, specifically young women, it was important that I begin with the sisters

themselves, which is where my retelling remains for now with Part I and Part II. The way the sisters would reunite and reach a more complete healing in the end of the novel would continue to present the themes of family and sisterhood which is so strong in the original *Little Women*. My addition of more contemporary issues like school culture, technology, cyberbullying, sexuality, and mental health emphasizes the complexities of adolescent development in today's society.

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Jessica Rinker

Lee Torda

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“I want to do something splendid... Something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after

I’m dead... I think I shall write books.”

— **Louisa May Alcott**

Part I: Feeling Small

Chapter 1: Jo

I told Meg I was ashamed of her. I told Amy I hated her. I told Beth I'd be back soon. I know I am a screw-up, but I never realized I could hurt almost everyone I loved in less than twenty-four hours. If guilt's a wound, hospitals are the salt. I'm standing here in a hospital room with Beth lying unconscious in the bed as my sisters and my mom stare at her desperately. I feel it all sharp and stinging in the center of my chest.

I can't sit and watch Beth lying here lifeless like the rest of my family can, so I pace the room instead. We're lucky we got a private room. We wouldn't have if it wasn't for Lauri. His grandfather is a big donor to the children's hospital, and he must have made some phone calls when he heard Beth was being hospitalized. I'll have to text Lauri later and thank him. I know he asked his grandfather to help.

I walk past the foot of the bed, back and forth between the wooden door and tiny window looking out onto a big brick wall. I pass the TV mounted across from Beth that no one has turned on and the fake leather chair no one's sat in because it's too far from Beth.

I glance over at Mom and Amy who are sitting in the hard-plastic chairs next to Beth. When we first came to the room, there was only one chair which we all silently agreed went to Mom. A few minutes later a nurse brought in another chair, which Meg offered to Amy who was already getting antsy. Not like sitting placates her at all. Amy keeps swinging her sandaled feet and twisting the charm bracelet she wears around her wrist; the one Dad gave her before he moved to New York.

I called Dad as soon as we got to the hospital. He answered after a couple of rings, and I could hear the New York anthem of honks and police sirens in the background.

“Hey, kiddo, I’m on my way to a meeting. Can I call you back in a couple hours?”

I frowned into the receiver. “Dad, Beth’s in the hospital.”

“What? What happened? Is it her colitis again?”

“No Dad it’s, um, can you come home?”

He didn’t say anything for a minute, and if it hadn’t been for the street noise, I might have thought he hung up. “Is your mother there?”

I was standing outside the room, and I peeked in the door at Mom, holding Beth’s hand and speaking to a doctor, her face heavy and sad. “Can you just come?” I asked Dad again.

He sighed. “Jo, don’t get emotional. I’ll come. I’ll call your mother as soon as I finish up with my publisher.” Then he hung up.

I just stood there holding the phone in my hand for a minute. He is right, I was getting emotional. But it seemed like a good time to be worried and angry and lost. Not that he would know that unless he was here. He’s off having meetings with publishers and editors, hiding in his books. If only I could hide behind my writing desk, only emerge on book jackets. I can’t hide, though, because my sisters and my mom are here, and they need someone. But how can I say that to Dad? How can I tell him I didn’t keep my promise that I would watch over Beth, and now she’s here, and he should be here, too?

An hour later, he did call Mom, and she leaned against the window to talk with him. We all watched and pretended we weren’t watching. When Mom hung up, she announced Dad would be coming tonight. Meg didn’t say anything. Amy said she was glad. I just said it was about time. Mom said I should hush.

Until Dad comes, it’s still just us in the room with Beth. Meg stands behind Amy, braiding and unbraiding Amy’s long blonde hair, as if the world would end if she stands

completely still. None of us speak. After a couple of laps, I pause at the foot of Beth's bed and force myself to look at her. I scan her face for any sign of movement, but her eyes are closed, her cheeks are pale, her lips limply pressed together. She has a tube running through her nostrils, hanging down at her side. Her brown hair is snarled and twisted around the pillow and spilling over her shoulders. Her arms are laying at either side of her, more tubes attached, the IV and heart-monitoring wires.

The white hospital issue blanket covers most of her and where it ends the blue hospital gown begins. I wonder where her clothes have gone. I still remember what she had been wearing when they brought her in: her baby blue fuzzy socks, her jeans and an old purple Volunteer T-shirt she got at one of the charity events she'd done with Mom at the church. I glance around the room, but I don't see them. I start scanning more frantically, underneath the chairs, by the door, under the bed. But there's no sign of them anywhere. Where the hell did the nurses put her clothes? She'll need them when she wakes up. Beth's lying here in the hospital room in a bed that isn't hers in clothes that aren't hers, and she's still, completely unresponsive, and it's like she's not even here at all.

I turn towards Mom to ask her where they are, but her eyes are closed, her hands folded in her lap, praying. Praying never stopped bad things from happening in our lives before, but I don't say anything. We're all hoping for a miracle, and I guess a prayer is how you get one.

As I turn away from Mom, my gaze meets Meg's. Her eyes are half-closed and puffy, shaded by dark circles. She stares blankly at the floor, frowning. When she glances up, she meets my gaze, and I look away. She looks nothing like she did yesterday before she went to prom, fresh-faced, beaming, twirling around in her sparkling red dress. That Meg I could put up with. She was wrapped up in all the trite glitz and gloss of society-prescribed femininity, but at least

she was happy. Then, when Lauri brought her home from Sally's she had a whole other facade, too twirly, too tipsy, her lipstick worn away, left on some Solo cup, and her mascara speckled all over her cheeks. I couldn't stand the sight of her, and I told her so, right there in our front lawn, as Lauri turned off the ignition and Meg swerve up the driveway.

She suppressed a giggle when she saw me. "Hia, Jo"

"Where's John?" I asked, my arms crossed. "He was supposed to be with you." I didn't love the idea of Meg dating, but at least John seemed like someone who would actually stay with her. Maybe I was wrong.

Meg waved her hand in the air dramatically. "John Shmon! You were right, Jo. Who needs men? I had a *great* time without him."

I didn't need much more evidence to see what kind of a time she had had. I looked up at Lauri, who came up behind Meg, supporting her. He had been the one who called me, telling me he saw her at Sally's house--*not* at the school's after prom like she'd told Mom. Meg hadn't bothered to let me know. "Go easy on her, Jo. She's had a long night."

"*She's* had a long night? I'm stuck here at home with Amy who is being a selfish little brat, and Beth who isn't eating and isn't talking and I don't know how to help. And as if worrying about those two isn't enough, now I have to worry about you too, Meg?" I eyed her and dared her to look me in the eye too.

She did, and somehow that made me angrier. She was completely unashamed of herself.

"Shhhh," she moaned. "Can you stop screaming for, like, 2 seconds? You're so *loud*. Why are you always mad?"

I only screamed louder. “When my sister has to be brought home at 1am because she’s too fucking drunk to walk, yeah I’m going to be mad. Why the hell weren’t you at school? Do you know how worried Mom would have been? What the fuck were you thinking?”

Meg’s lips screwed up angrily. “I wasn’t thinking, okay? I always have to think, always have to do what everybody wants me to do. Maybe I wanted to be like you and not think about anything ever. Hey, look I’m Jo and when I’m upset, I let the whole world know!”

Lauri tried stepping in quietly saying, “Meg, let’s get you inside, okay?”

Meg only turned toward Lauri. “And you, you don’t care what anybody says except Jo, so then you had to snitch on me and bring me home. I didn’t want to come home!”

I shouted back, “Well, I didn’t want to be home either or play babysitter all night, but guess what I did, so you could go to your stupid prom with your stupid boyfriend who just left you anyway! He was probably ashamed of you! I’m ashamed of you! And... and Mom will be ashamed of you too! You’re acting just like Dad used to.” In that moment I would have said anything to hurt her, just to get her to feel how hurt *I* felt. I’m really good at knowing where to land a punch.

Meg exploded into tears, collapsing into herself, her hands covering her eyes and her chest heaving in sobs. Lauri stepped up, resting a hand on Meg’s back. “Let’s get you inside, Meg,” he whispered. This time she complied, walking with him to the door. I was left just standing in the dark.

I’m not even sure Meg remembers that fight. I think of Dad again, and how he used to drink before he left. He would become a different person, angry and cruel. Then the next morning our Dad would be back, and he wouldn’t remember who he had been. I don’t understand how Meg could fall into that when she always hated him so much for it.

Lauri left after helping Meg settle down on our couch, and I went straight to my room. I was too mad to sleep, though, and I wrote angry poetry until there was more poetry than anger. It was well past midnight by the time I went downstairs to check on Meg. I found her in the downstairs bathroom, alternatively crying and vomiting. I'm no good at comforting people, but I held her hair back, and told her to gargle, and I helped her upstairs to her own bed.

If I had known that just hours later Beth would have been in our second bathroom, trying to take her own life, I would have told Meg how sorry I was right then and there. I would have asked her never to leave me behind again, and I would have rushed to Beth and begged her not to leave me either.

But I didn't do any of that, and now the damage is done. All I can do is pace.

I feel completely dumb and useless in this room. I thought once I got to the hospital, I'd feel better, just being beside Beth. I wasn't allowed to ride in the ambulance when they drove away with her. They only let Mom in, and she told me to stay behind at the house and help Meg watch Amy. Mom didn't know that Meg wasn't in any state to watch Amy.

I texted Lauri and begged him to come over for the second time that early morning. He saw the ambulance from across the street, and he came over right away. He didn't try to pry any details out of me. He just made me his signature mocha latte because that's what I needed, marathoned *Glow Up* with Amy because that's what she needed, and let Meg go back to sleep. Amy and I would have either killed each other or lost our minds or both if he hadn't come over.

By late afternoon Meg was up, even though she still looked like complete hell, and the three of us spent the rest of the afternoon waiting for Mom's call and packing a bag for Beth for when she woke up. I packed her phone and earbuds with all her music downloaded, and even her stuffed animal that she still sleeps with. I also included the notebook we share, the one where I

scribble my poems and Beth scribbles her music and we put them together. We both turn to the notebook when we're stressed, so this seemed like a good time to have it. Meg and Amy threw in a few things, too. Meg packed Beth's comfiest clothes, hairbrush, and toothbrush, and Amy packed nail polish and a card game she and Beth played. I considered bringing Beth's piano keyboard, but I wasn't sure it would fit in the room. Finally, Mom called me to say we could come to the hospital, and I unashamedly sped the whole way.

A knock interrupts my thoughts and all of us look toward the door as a nurse in Pooh Bear scrubs walks in. In a pediatric hospital, all the nurses wear cartoon clothing, as if that somehow makes everything happier.

"How are we doing here?" she asks, rolling in a car behind her with a tablet and a plastic bottle filled with what looks like water. "I'm just here to irrigate Beth's nasogastric tube, make sure there's no blockage."

I ask, "How long does she have to have the tube in like that?"

The nurse closes the door behind her and moves toward Beth with some sort of liquid. "The doctor wants to leave it in as Beth recovers. We'll be in every couple of hours to check it for Beth." The nurse begins to unscrew the end of the tube.

"Is that going to hurt her?" Amy asks, pointing to the bag filled with fluid the nurse holds.

The nurse smiles and shakes her head. "No, sweetie. It's saline, salt and water, kind of like drinking Gatorade. What's your favorite Gatorade flavor?"

Amy wrinkled her nose. "I don't like Gatorade." I know for a fact she does, but Amy likes to be stubborn.

Mom interjects. “I thought I saw her eyelid move a few minutes ago. Could that mean she’s waking up?”

The nurse uses a plunger to push the liquid through the tube. “It might. Movement is always a good sign.” She says it the same way you would tell a child Santa might bring them their wished-for toy. She finishes with the syringe and makes a note on her tablet. She glances at the machines around Beth and adds, “Her vitals look good. That’s what we want to see!”

“We want to see her wake up,” I reply.

The nurse turns to me, startled. Then she smiles and says, “And we fully expect she will, dear. Her body’s been through a lot, and it’s pretty common for it to take some time to wake up.”

I glare at the nurse, because she’s talking to me like Beth is just a statistic. She isn’t some random common patient. She’s my sister.

The nurse wheeled her cart back to the door and called on the way out, “Just hit the call button if you see any changes.”

As the door shut behind her, Meg leans on the back of Amy’s chair. “How are you doing, Ames?”

Amy shrugs and swings her feet back and forth. “I’m kinda getting hungry.” I try hard not to roll my eyes. Amy’s always ridiculous, but this feels like a new level of stupid. I can’t believe she can even think about food while Beth is hovering between life and death. Sometimes it feels like I’m the only one in this family who will actually call Amy out for her crap. And I don’t care if she is only twelve.

Meg would say I’m too hard on her. She’s always reminding me that Amy is still basically a kid. If you ask me that’s part of the problem—making excuses for her because she’s

the baby. Mom and Dad have always done it too. When we were little, Amy would sometimes start crying for no reason and when they came running in, she'd claim I had pushed her, or taken her lollipop, or whatever. And Mom and Dad would always believe her. I swear it was even worse after Dad left, like now that Amy might have daddy issues she gets to get away with even more.

Mom glances at the time on her phone and rests a hand on Amy's knee. "When was the last time you girls ate something?"

I mumble, "Doesn't matter." But I know it has been a while. I don't have any appetite, but I know I shouldn't be angry with Amy.

"I can take you down to the cafeteria," Meg offers. It's like her to try to take care of everyone like this. When Dad moved to New York, I felt like I had to be the man in the house, and when Mom had to start working more hours, Meg became another mother. On top of her daycare job and her own schoolwork, Meg was always the one keeping the house neat and tidy. I am usually the one in charge of the cooking, but I hated cleaning up afterwards. I helped Beth and Amy with their English homework, but Meg would help with the rest. She was the one who always made sure they went to bed at a reasonable hour, with their backpacks already packed, and their lunches made for the next afternoon. I never had the patience for any of that. I always felt like it was unfair that we had to take over a lot of the parenting, but Meg seemed to enjoy it. Sometimes, it feels like Meg even mothers our mother.

"Mom, do you want anything?" Meg asks her now.

Mom shakes her head. "No, thanks, hun." She keeps her eyes on Beth and holds her hand, careful not to touch the IV that's embedded into the veins on the top of Beth's hand. After

a second, Mom glances over at Meg as if she just realized something. “Do you have any cash on you? I might have some--”

Meg waves Mom’s sentence away and picks up her own black clutch that she had set on the floor. “I have my card. Don’t worry about it, Mom, really. Just stay with Beth. Do you want anything, Jo?”

She looks at me tentatively. The way she asks feels like she’s trying to make peace, maybe. But also, maybe not. Meg could be furious at you and offer you a plate of cookies if you look hungry. It makes me feel like a demon, because if I was furious with anyone, I’d probably consider poisoning their cookies.

“Just water.”

“Sure, you got it. I’ll get water for you too, Mom.”

Mom’s attention is back on Beth, but she nods again.

Meg glances at me, and I wonder if she is going to say anything. I feel jittery, thinking that maybe she is going to hash it out with me right now. But that isn’t like Meg. That’s me. But I don’t want to fight right now either. It feels wrong to fight with Meg anyway. Our whole childhood, we are always a team. Sure, I sometimes picked on her for the boy band posters she hung in our room, and she threw pillows at me when I’d keep the light on late at night to write, but we always knew, no matter what, we stood together. After last night I’m not sure if that’s true anymore. It feels like maybe I don’t even know my sister anymore. It feels like I am losing her. And that hurts so bad that right now, I don’t even care about what she did last night. I just want us to be okay again. Whether we’re okay or not though, we have to save face, have a united front, and all that.

Meg turns to me before she opens the door, and we communicate through that one look.

We need to take care of them, Beth and Mom and Amy. Meg's look says.

And we will, mine say back.

Meg's lips raise in the corners, not in a smile exactly, but in acknowledgement. She turns to Amy who is still sitting, staring at her swinging feet and jangling her bracelet. Meg musters her upbeat voice, the one she uses when she's around little kids and she wants to get them excited over something that isn't really that exciting.

"Let's go get you some food, Ames!"

Amy usually objects when Meg uses her kid-friendly voice on her, but she doesn't this time. She even looks relieved. She hops off the chair, smoothing her jean skirt. She grabs her own purse, a hand-me-down hot pink crossbody from Meg, which has absolutely nothing useful in it, but which she carries to feel more grown-up. She removes the pink scrunchie from her braid and allows her long blonde hair to drape over her shoulders. Meg starts to walk toward the door, but Amy pulls out a tube of Lip Smacker and runs it over her lips.

That's the last straw for me. "Seriously? You're going to a *hospital cafeteria*. Literally no one cares how you look."

Amy stuffs the lip gloss back in her purse and snaps back, "*I care how I look.*"

I'm about to say how incredibly ridiculous that sounds considering her older sister is lying in a hospital bed after trying to kill herself when Meg says quickly, "C'mon, Amy."

Amy follows Meg out the door which clicks shut behind them. I walk over to the window in the room and grip the windowsill. I can also see my reflection on the windowpane, and the scowl I'm wearing feels like even my reflection is disapproving of me. I know I shouldn't have snapped at Amy like that. I wish I hadn't. I still think she's being immature, but I am, too. I'm

supposed to be the example. I always used to hate when Mom and Dad would say that to me, but it's true.

But Amy's just so... so *Amy*. I mean, *lip gloss*. I was really trying to be patient.

Recognize how hard this is on her. I always try. But then she always pulls out the lip gloss, or the snarky comment, or the stubborn stare. It's always something with her. Sometimes it feels like the world's too small for both of us to be in it.

I turn from the window and stare at my mother's back and Beth's body. I feel a tug of guilt. I have to control my temper and learn to be patient, even with Amy. Because if Amy was no longer in this world, I'd give anything to have her back.

I take Amy's seat next to Mom. Looking at our mother, I realize for the first time that she looks old. Grey threads weave through her dark brown hair. She isn't wearing any make-up, so underneath her wire-rimmed glasses I can see wrinkles at the corners of her eye and dark circles hang heavy beneath them. More wrinkles frame her lips, climbing up her pale cheeks. Smile lines, they're called. Only she isn't smiling now. Her thin lips are resting in a worried line. The veins of her hands are thick and blue against her skin, resting over Beth's hand which are smooth and bare, except the protruding IV. Mom alternates from holding Beth's hand gently to tracing her thumb over each of Beth's fingers. Beth's nails are short, partly from her nervous habit of biting them and partly because she clips them short to play her ukulele. I feel guilty for all the times Beth was practicing her uke or her piano and I was annoyed by the noise. I'd give anything to hear her play again.

I lean my head on Mom's shoulder and take in her smell. Mom always smells like baby powder, hairspray, and vanilla. I always attribute the vanilla to her baking. She used to bake all the time when Dad was with us. She stayed at home until Amy was in kindergarten and she was

always cooking or cleaning or baking. She doesn't bake much anymore, but the vanilla follows her.

Mom turns her head to kiss the top of mine. "How's my Jo holding up?"

I lift my head and wrap my arm around her shoulders. "I've been better."

Mom nods and we both watch Beth breathe. Up and down. Up and down. There's comfort in the rhythm of it, but there's also a threatening terror if that rhythm stops. This rhythm of Beth's breathing has been the only thread of hope. When the EMTs reached our house, they rushed into Beth. Her breathing was the first thing they checked. She's breathing, they said. That was the only consolation they gave us. They shoved us away, told us not to look. But I fought back. I told them that was *my sister*. I shoved past one of the EMTs and for a second I saw my sister lying unconscious on the bathroom floor. Then Mom pushed me back, told me I had to keep Amy in her room. So, I ended up in Amy's room with Meg crying on Beth's bed, still drunk, and Amy, screaming at me, telling me to let her go as I held onto her and forced her to stay in the room. Mom left with the EMTs and eventually Amy and Meg fell asleep. I didn't sleep at all.

"Do you think God punishes us by taking away the people we love?" I ask Mom.

"Jo!" Mom's voice rises, surprised. "Why would you ask that?"

"I've been an awful sister. And I think God knows Beth's my favorite. So, I know it's stupid, but it feels like...like maybe..." My voice cracks but I keep going. "Like he's taking her away from me on purpose."

"Oh Jo," My mom turns to me as I collapse into sloppy tears. I let my head fall on her shoulder again and she holds me in her arms, rocking me back and forth.

“Jo, honey, Beth is... She’s very sick, Jo. This isn’t your fault. This isn’t anyone’s fault.” She cups my chin with her hand, forcing me to look at her. I try to stop crying and nearly choke on my own snuffle.

Mom locks eyes with me and says, “Jo, I don’t think God is trying to punish you. He’s not mad at you. And I am praying very hard that he doesn’t take our Beth right now.” I see the tears pool in her eyes. I nod feverishly and hug my mom. She hugs me back.

We stay like that for a long time, until Meg walks through the door. I pull away from Mom and rub at my salt-crusted cheeks and my still-teary eyes. When Meg sees we’ve both been crying, her eyes widen and immediately flash to Beth.

I say quickly, “She’s okay. Well, I mean, she’s... the same.”

Meg looks relieved. It’s then that I realize Amy’s not with her. Mom asks where Amy is.

Meg rubs her hands together nervously. “She wouldn’t leave the cafeteria. I tried calling you, but I think your phone might be on silent.”

I glance over at Mom who presses her lips together. She reaches into her purse and pulls out her phone. She mumbles to herself, “I should’ve kept checking it.” Then to us she says, “I’m turning the ringer back on now. Call me if anything changes. I’ll go get Amy.”

Mom turns to Beth, squeezes her hand, and whispers, “Please baby, come back to us. I love you. We love you. Come back.”

She leans over, kissing Beth’s forehead, then finally stands. She walks toward the door, glancing back at Beth before shutting it behind her, leaving Meg and me alone with our sister. Meg hesitates, but then walks over to me, pointing to the seat Mom just sat in. “Can I sit?” she asks.

“Don’t be stupid,” I reply. Meg sits down, rubbing her hands over her bare knees. Meg had changed into a pair of black denim shorts and a black-and-white striped T-shirt before we came over here. She washed off all her leftover prom make-up too, and it’s a little weird seeing her without any make-up on at all. Her brown hair, streaked with blonde highlights, which she usually straightens and wears down, is thrown into a messy bun, and I can see the baby hairs that frame her ears curling around her scalp, betraying the fact that her natural hair is thick and wavy. She didn’t even bother putting her contacts in, and I haven’t seen her wear her glasses out in public since middle school. She has her pearl earrings in, the ones Mom gave her on her sixteenth birthday, a family heirloom. Probably the only expensive thing Mom owns, except maybe her wedding ring, but even that probably isn’t much since Dad’s always been poor. Meg never takes those earrings out, and, more recently, she never takes off the promise ring John gave her, a little silver ring with a bow on it and what I’m pretty sure is small fake diamonds in the center of the bow. She twists the ring on her finger as she watches Beth.

“Are you going to tell Mom about the promise ring?” I ask Meg. The question just pops into my head, but the second I ask it, I regret it. It probably sounds like I’m accusing her of keeping secrets. Which, I mean, she is, but I’m done accusing her of things right now. And I don’t want her to think I am still mad at her. But I’m also not doing a great job with showing how sorry I am.

Meg stops twirling the ring and tucks her hands underneath her thighs. “Yeah. Eventually.” She glances over at me. “It’s not really the best time to have happy news.”

I nod. Meg turns away. I try to think of something else to say. Finally, I ask, “So, um, it’s happy news?”

Meg looks at me like I'm the dumbest person alive, which is how I feel right now. Of course, it's happy news for Meg. Meg loves the whole Princess Charming happily ever after promise crap. I'm the one who would rather run off to New York, become a famous author, and be single forever.

I try to back track. "I mean, I know it's happy news. I guess, I just, I want to make sure. You're happy?"

Meg rubs her temple, like she has a headache. "Not at this particular moment. But yes, with John, I'm happy."

"Good." Then after a second I add, "I want you to be."

Her voice is softer when she says, "Thanks, Jo." After a pause, she turns to Beth. "Right now, I just want all of us to be together again."

"Me too."

Chapter 2: Amy

I follow Meg out of the room and try not to think about how rude Jo is. I was just putting on lip gloss. She didn't need to freak. She always picks on me. I can be just as tough as she can though.

I want to vent to Meg, but when I look over at her she's walking with her head down, twisting her promise ring around and around. She looks like she doesn't want to talk about anything, which is weird. Meg and I talk about everything, friends, make-up, movies, and boys. I mostly just gossip about who has a crush on who in my class, because I don't really have a boyfriend right now. I know I could get a boyfriend if I wanted to, but boys are really immature in the sixth grade. Plus, Mom says I'm too young, which is not true at all, but it's not worth

fighting her over it for any of the boys I know. Meg, though, has a real boyfriend. I wish I was a senior like her, then I could have a mature boy like John. I'd probably go for someone a little more handsome than him, but overall, Meg has pretty good taste. And it's so cute that he gave her a promise ring! I already asked if I could pick out my own bridesmaid dress for their wedding.

If I did have a boyfriend, I would much rather be with him than in this hospital. I would much rather be anywhere. I hate how the hospital smells. It's too clean. And white. And boring. I hate how quiet everyone is.

The thing I hate most is that no one is telling me anything. And when I ask questions, they look at me like I'm a little kid. They smile and tell me not to worry. I hate how the nurses are all fake-nice or try to tell me everything's fine and normal. Like the lady who came in wearing that cheesy Pooh Bear outfit, asking me about stupid Gatorade.

No one's even told me what Beth did. But I know. We learned about suicide in health class. What I don't understand is *why* Beth did it. I didn't even know she was sad. Beth's always quiet, but she smiles a lot too. It's like nothing ever bothers her. Well, except for being sick.

Like a year ago Beth was in the hospital, but it was for something different. And I knew she wasn't going to die back then. I just remember she'd always be hogging the upstairs bathroom, which was super annoying, but then one day Mom told me not to get mad at Beth for me. She said Beth was sick, and she couldn't help being in the bathroom. Mom had to take Beth to the same hospital we're at now, the one in Boston., but it wasn't an emergency like this time. They were just running tests. When Beth came home from the hospital last year, Mom sat me down and told me she had some sort of stomach disease, which sounded like it sucked. I felt bad because all Beth could eat for a while was boring stuff like plain rice and applesauce. That would

have killed me. But then Beth got better. She still had to go to check-ups every couple of months, but that was great for me because I got the whole room to myself when she was gone.

Beth is *always* home. I don't think she has any friends at school, and I wish she'd get some because then she could go over their house sometimes. Beth has her keyboard in our room, and whenever she plays, I'm forced to listen to her practice the same song over and over and over again. It's even worse when she finds a new musical to be obsessed with. She is a total nerd. She totally ruined my YouTube account because she used our shared iPad to play *Hamilton* and *Dear Evan Hanson* for months. I *still* get nerdy Broadway videos popping up on my recommended page, totally drowning out all the make-up artists I follow. Plus, it's impossible to film my videos when Beth's practicing, so I always have to wait until she's done.

Beth's not the worst person to share a room with. I'm just saying she could learn how to be a little more fun. If I had it my way, I'd have a room all to myself. My best friend, Nikki has a brother, so she gets to have her own room. She can decorate it whatever color she wants, and play whatever music she wants, and stay in it all day if she wants to. Life's just not fair when you have sisters.

One night I was texting Nikki, hiding my phone under the covers, because Mom told me not to keep Beth up. But then I heard Beth crying in her own bed, and I told Nikki I had to go. I placed my phone on the floor near my bed and flipped over to my side to look at Beth. I couldn't really see her, but I could still hear her crying, even though she was being quiet.

"Beth?" I whispered. She didn't answer at first. "Beth, do you need me to get Mom?"

"No," she whispered back. Her voice broke, so it wasn't super convincing when she said, "I'm okay."

I didn't know what to say at first. I wished Meg or Mom had been there instead of me. But I knew I had to do something. "What's wrong?"

Beth sniffled. "Am... am I... am I a burden?" Her voice broke again when she said "burden," and she started crying a little louder.

"What? No," I said. "Why would you even ask that? It's a dumb question."

Beth didn't say anything again, so I added, "Sorry, it's not dumb. I just meant that you shouldn't think that."

Beth was still being super quiet, so I leaned down, grabbed my phone, and shined it over. I could see now that Beth was sitting up in bed, her back pressed up against the headboard. She had her knees underneath her blanket and bunched up to her chest. She was also hugging her stuffed animal. Even I don't sleep with a stuffed animal, and I'm younger than Beth. But I know what it's like to be teased, so I don't tease her for stuff like that.

I used my flashlight to cross the room to Beth's bed without stepping on the piles of clothes I'd left earlier while I was trying to pick out an outfit. I sat on the edge of her bed and nudged her to move over. She did, and I slid in beside her and gave her a hug. I remember when I was really little, and I had bad dreams Beth would hold me til I fell asleep. I figured maybe it could help Beth too. Sharing a room with your sister isn't always bad.

"I'm just tired of being sick," Beth told me. Beth doesn't complain a lot, so it was kind of weird to hear her say that. Not that I blamed her. I'd be complaining too. I hate being sick, like really sick. Being a little sick can be okay, because Mom brings my favorite foods and lets me watch TV all day. But you don't go to the hospital for that kind of sick.

"The doctors gave you medicine," I said. "That means you'll get better."

“But the doctors said colitis can flare up anytime. What if I just never get better? What’s Mom going to do? She can’t keep taking days off of work to bring me to Boston.”

“Then Meg or Jo will drive you.”

“I don’t want them to have to do that.”

“I don’t think they’d mind. Jo loves cities. Plus, you’ll be sixteen in like, two years, so you can buy a car and drive yourself kinda soon. You’re so lucky. I can’t wait til I can start driving.”

Beth was quiet again, but she had stopped crying, so I figured I had done a pretty good job. I shimmied underneath her covers because leaning up against her headboard was hurting my back. Beth did the same, and we were lying there so long I almost fell asleep.

“Amy?” Beth whispered.

“Yeah?” At this point I was a little annoyed we couldn’t just go to sleep, but just in case she was still sad, I kept that to myself.

“Do you think Mom’s life would be easier if I wasn’t around?”

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling. I had plastic glow-in the dark stars over my bed, but above Beth’s wall was just dark. I turned over so I was facing Beth.

“I never thought about it before. I think probably Mom’s life would be easier without any of us. But I think she’s happier with us.”

And suddenly I got this really strange feeling. It was like suddenly I was really worried for Beth. “And I’m happy I have you.” It was a cheesy thing to say but I meant it.

“Even when I keep you up by being a cry baby?” Beth asked it kind of like a joke, but also kind of not like a joke.

“Duh. Promise me you’ll tell me again when something’s bothering you, okay?” I didn’t want Beth to think I couldn’t handle her telling me what’s upsetting her, because I can. Life can suck, and sometimes you need to complain about it. I think maybe if Beth vented a little more, it might help her. She’s always going around being such a goody-two shoes, maybe if she just admitted that some things are hard, she could deal with it better. At least I think that’s the very mature advice to give.

“Okay.”

I made her pinky promise that night. But she didn’t tell me something was bothering her this time. She broke her promise, which is crap. I thought we were close. If we were, she would’ve told me. Instead, I woke up to the sound of strange footsteps in the hallway. Beth wasn’t in bed, and when I opened my door, I saw two men in EMT uniforms at our bathroom door. Mom, Jo, and Meg were huddled just outside the door, crying.

I rubbed my eyes. “Mom? What’s going on?”

Mom had looked up suddenly, as if she forgot I existed. “Amy, go back into your room. *Amy, now!*” She was so angry. And it wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know. Beth never told me.

Beth only was thinking about herself and her own feelings, and she didn’t think what it would be like to be left behind. And now I’m supposed to be here in the hospital waiting for her when she apparently didn’t even want me in the first place.

Meg stops suddenly at the end of our corridor, and I nearly knock into her. There’s a hallway in front of us and on both sides. Meg looks down all the halls. I follow her gaze. The hallways look the same, with white shiny tiles, lined with wooden doors that lead to other sick patients.

“There has to be a sign somewhere,” Meg mutters.

I look around and see a little arrow down the left hallway with a food icon next to it. I point. “Is it that?”

Meg grins. “Good eye, Ames.”

We have to ride an elevator to get to the cafeteria, but it’s not a normal elevator. It’s humongous. “Why is it so big?” I ask Meg.

“For wheelchairs.”

“Oh.” For some reason that makes me sad.

I expected the cafeteria to look like the one at my school, with big metal vats separated by glass and a dingy grey surface to slide your Styrofoam tray across as the old lunch lady plops down a couple of chicken nuggets and ice-cream-scoops some greyish mashed potatoes. But this cafeteria looks more like a food court. It’s insane. There are different stations, most of which from restaurants I know, like Jamba and Subway and Fro Yo World. There are some tables that look like normal cafeteria tables, big grey circle tops with round seats attached, but there are also booths, like a restaurant.

“This is the best cafeteria ever!” I look up at Meg, who grins.

“Do you know what you might want?” she asks.

I’m looking at the fro-yo. There aren’t any fro yo places where we live, but it’s the best stuff on earth. Is it wrong to want some right now? I feel guilty eating something so yummy when Beth can’t eat anything. But it looks so good. Meg must see what I’m eyeing, because she starts walking over there.

Meg orders a small vanilla with fresh strawberries and blueberries. Meg’s always trying to eat healthy. She thinks she’s fat, but she’s actually super skinny. Except for her boobs which are kinda big, but Nikki says it’s a good thing when your chest is big, because guys like you

better. I think Nikki's probably right because Sadie Milton also has huge boobs, and she has a boyfriend. I don't really have much in that area yet, but Mom says I'm still growing. Plus Jo says if a guy only wants you for your boobs he's sketchy. I don't like agreeing with Jo, but I trust her with that. When a girl says a guy's a creep, he's a creep. I might only be twelve, but I know that.

Usually Meg dresses really well, but today she's in a T-shirt and some jean shorts. It's still a pretty cute outfit, but it's nothing like the dress she wore to prom the other night. She looked like a celebrity. I can't wait to grow up and be able to wear a tight red dress like that. I bet I'd look really good in it too. Mom doesn't even let me wear crop tops. She is so strict sometimes.

Even though we were going to a hospital, I still chose a cute outfit. I'm wearing my favorite white Hollister shirt with a daisy embroidered onto the pocket and a cute little jean skirt. Plus, my purse. Even though hand-me-downs are kinda embarrassing, at least Meg has good taste. If all of my hand me downs were from Jo, I'd be doomed. Not only because Jo has literally no idea what fashion even is, but because she stains or rips or scuffs everything. At least with most of Meg's things, like this cute purse, I can pretend it's new. It's never a bad time to look your best. And not for other people either. You have to do it for yourself. There's nothing wrong with being confident, if you ask me. Or Demi Lovato.

I choose a small cup of froyo like Meg because I don't want to seem fat, but I go with chocolate with lots of caramel drizzle and chocolate chips on top. In normal circumstances, Meg would probably tell me to put some fruit on it too, but when bad things happen you can eat as much sugar as you want.

We sit at one of the tables and I dive into my fro-yo with my plastic spoon. It tastes like fudgy sugar heaven. Hospitals aren't so bad as long as you can get fro-yo like this. I suck on

each chocolate chip, savoring every bite. When I glance over at Meg, she's only stabbing her vanilla scoops and twirling around her strawberries. I wonder what she's thinking.

I say out loud what I'm thinking. "Do you think they'll let Beth eat fro-yo when she wakes up?"

Meg leaves her spoon sticking up in a scoop. "Maybe. It might help her throat."

"What's wrong with her throat?"

"Well, she has a breathing tube right now. It could make her throat scratchy."

"Oh," I hadn't even thought of that. It kind of freaked me out to look at it, but I guess it's probably worse for Beth to feel it. I take another spoonful of my fro-yo. "When she wakes up, will she still need the tube?"

"No, she should be able to breathe on her own." Meg finally takes a bite of her fro-yo. She doesn't look like she's enjoying it very much.

I prop my elbow up on the table and lean my head against it. "I wish she'd just wake up. Then this would all be over already."

I stare at my paper bowl, the chocolate chips now sinking into brown soup. I don't look up when Meg replies. "I want her to wake up too, Ames. But she'll need help still. She's sick, Amy, and that doesn't just end when she wakes up."

Suddenly my fro-yo doesn't look so good anymore, and I shove it away. "So, what does that mean? Do we have to stay here til she gets better?" It's hard enough being here one day. I was hoping we'd get out of here by tonight. Like, where am I going to sleep? Are we just going to have to drive back to Boston every day? Would I not even be allowed to go to Nikki's house? How could I keep up my YouTube channel? I can't film in the hospital. School is going to be

ending in a couple of weeks, too, and I am not going to spend it stuck here with bleach fumes and nurses with bad style.

“No. I think they’ll move Beth to a different part of the hospital. And we’ll visit sometimes. And as soon as she can, she’ll come home.”

“Well, how long til she comes home?” I ask, looking up at Meg. She meets my stare, and frowns.

“I don’t know, Amy.”

Again, with the not knowing. I’m so sick of this not knowing anything. Nobody is telling me anything. Nobody doing anything. All anyone’s doing is waiting. And I thought we were just waiting for Beth to wake up, but now we have to wait for, practically ever. Ever since last year, it’s like Beth’s been sick all the time, and we’re just all floating around her, our life on pause, *waiting* for her to get better. Waiting for this to be over. But now it’s like it never will be over. Meg’s chair squeaks as she pushes it back to stand. “Ready to go back? We should see how Beth’s doing.”

I don’t want to go back to that room. I’m sick of just watching Beth be sick. “No.” I tell Meg. I reach for my fro yo cup again and start scooping up the melted chocolate pool. “I’m still eating.” Meg doesn’t move for a second, but then she sits back down. “Okay.”

I eat my remaining fro-yo as slowly as I can. I even scrape the sides of the paper bowl. I can feel Meg watching me the whole time, but I don’t look at her.

I’m trying to think of what to do when my cup is completely empty. “Are you going to finish yours?” I ask Meg.

She hesitates. “No. You can have it. Do you want to take it back with us to the room?” “It’s not even that much,” I argue.

“Okay,” Meg says again. I try to eat hers even more slowly. The strawberries help because I break them into tinier pieces with my spoon and chew them one at a time.

“She’ll be alright, Amy,” Meg says. But I know she doesn’t know that for sure. And when I was trying to tell Meg Beth would be alright if she woke up, Meg was all like, no she’ll be sick forever. Now she’s just trying to backpedal, but I’m not a little kid. I get it.

“If she was going to be alright, you wouldn’t be so anxious to go back and check on her. You go. I’m going to stay here and finish my fro-yo.”

Chapter 3: Meg

I’m standing outside Beth’s hospital room preparing myself. If I move too quickly, I feel like I might fall over. People always say things like, “the room’s spinning,” but it feels more like it’s wobbling. Like when Jo and I went boogie boarding at the beach years ago, and I got caught in a big wave that sent me bobbing upside down and seeing the world around wavy as my eyes stung from the salt. Thankfully, I was able to swim back to shore that day, but when I reached the sand, I had spun around so many times in the water, I didn’t know where I was. Today I feel the same way. I keep being pulled under and spun around, and when I finally come up for air everything hurts, and I don’t know what to do. I thought taking Amy to the cafeteria was finally a step in the right direction. She was obviously uncomfortable sitting beside Beth, and if I took her Mom would be able to stay in the room. Now I even messed that up, because Amy won’t leave the cafeteria, and, worse, I made her mad. When Amy’s mad she’s stubborn. So now Mom has to leave the room after all and face a stubborn Amy. It’s all my fault. Why can’t I know how to handle things better?

I swallow hard, trying to send my nausea back down. A tiny part of me wishes I could throw up again, just to alleviate the unrest in my stomach. But all that vomiting this morning didn't leave me at peace, so more probably wouldn't either. The second I opened my eyes this morning, I felt the sickening urge to race toward the bathroom. I was so grateful nobody was in there. It's never a good time to be sick when you share a bathroom with a mom and three sisters. I don't know how long I was in there, but I remember at some point I gave up all hope of going back to my room, and I just laid there on the tile.

I thought maybe if I showered, I would feel better. Just showering felt like the hardest thing to do. I threw on the first shirt and pair of shorts I saw, which is bad for me, since I usually spend forever picking out an outfit the night before. I didn't even bother putting in my contacts. I hate how I look in glasses. I have ever since I first got them in fifth grade. I never show anybody those school photos. That year was a curse. My first break out. My first pair of glasses. Plus, I was humongous. Thank God for glow ups.

Only today I feel way grosser than I ever did at ten. The one good thing about John and I being apart right now is that he doesn't have to see me like this. He's never seen me without glasses or without make-up. And if I have it my way, he won't until we're married. Well, if we marry. Like, way in the future. I don't know. When we first started dating, I felt in my heart like he was the guy I'd be with forever. Right now, it's not looking so hot.

I should text him.

We haven't spoken since last night. Or maybe technically early in the morning. I can't really remember. Prom ended around ten, and we all took the shuttle back to school. I wasn't super excited about going to a party that had been planned by the PTO, but it meant I could stay

out with John for the whole night. My usual curfew was eleven, but the school's after prom ran until five in the morning.

When the shuttle reached the school parking lot, John and I got out and headed to his car. Sally had invited me over, and by extension, John too, but Mom hadn't allowed it. I was bummed, but John said he hadn't wanted to go to Sally's anyway.

As John was unlocking his car door, I heard Sally call over to us. "Meg! Meg! John!" I turned to see her prancing over to us, still wearing her stilettos, and perfectly balanced as if she was wearing running shoes. I was so jealous of how well she handled heels. I had to practice walking around my bedroom for a week before I could get the hang of my prom heels, and they were only three inches. John leaned against his car, frowning.

"Be nice," I whispered to him.

"I'm never mean," he whispered back. Which to be fair, was true. He wasn't ever mean to anyone, including Sally. But I could tell she wasn't his favorite person by the way he tensed up whenever she was around.

She caught up to us and grabbed my hands. "You're both coming to my place, aren't you?" She blinked her long fake eyelashes at me, then at John, then back at me.

I glanced at John who was still frowning and looking at me. When I didn't say anything he started, "Thanks for the invite, Sally, but--"

Sally waved the end of his sentence away. "Meg told me her mom didn't want her to, but we've gotten past her mom before, haven't we Meg?"

She winked at John, and John looked back at me. Sally did that a lot, reminding him that she was there first. She had a right to, I suppose, since we had been best friends way before John came into my life. I tried telling John she didn't mean anything by it, but he still felt offended.

I glanced up at John and rubbed my arm. I gave him a small smile, asking, but he raised his eyebrows, begging. I turned back to Sally, “Yeah, but I think John really wanted to do the school thing. I mean, you know, it could be fun, right?”

Sally giggled. “Oh sure. I hear there’s a raffle for a Blue Devils T-shirt. And the magician will be the life of the party! C’mon Meg! You told me yourself you’d rather come to my thing. Don’t let John drag you down.”

I cringed. I looked at John quickly and shook my head. John frowned deeper and looked down at his shoes.

I tried to make it better. “He’s not dragging me down, Sally. Look, we just don’t feel like going. We’re tired, and it’s late, so we just want something chill. You and I can hang out some other time.”

John was so quiet I almost didn’t hear him. “If you really want to, we can go.”

Sally grinned wide. “That’s the spirit, John! I knew I liked you! See you two soon.” Sally strutted away. The second her back was turned, John got into the driver’s seat and shut the door. I was left outside. It was still warm out, but I rubbed my arms as if it was cold. I walked around the car and got into the passenger seat. John sat quietly staring at the steering wheel. I clasped my hands and place them on my lap. The quietness got under my skin. We were so happy just a second ago. I feel like the only way to fix the night is to tell John we don’t have to go, even though I still wanted to.

The thought of going to a real high school party, my first, thrilled me. I wanted to try my first drink. Maybe John and I could find a quiet corner all to ourselves. Not a whole bedroom to ourselves. I’m not ready for that yet. But I just want a little taste of everything. It just feels like what a normal carefree, seventeen-year-old would do. Totally outside of what I normally have to

do, the oldest sister who has to get good grades, and hold down a job, and help take care of everyone, and be an example and everything. I always think about how my decisions will affect Mom and my sisters. I just wanted one night when I didn't have to think.

Still though, a relationship is based on compromise, right? If going to Sally's makes John uncomfortable, I shouldn't. "We don't have to go, John."

John sighed. He took his hands off the steering wheel and rubbed his palms on his thighs. "But you want to."

I shrug. "Yeah, and you want to do the school thing."

John catches my gaze and smiles weakly. "I want to be with you, Meg. I just don't like going against your mom, you know? Like, she's trusting me to be with you all night, and I don't want anything to happen."

"I totally love you for that, but what could happen?"

John sighs. "I'm not sure. I don't have tons of experience with parties, but the one I did go to in high school wasn't exactly fun. The people I went with all got drunk or high or both and the only reason I stayed was because they needed a driver. I thought I left that stuff when I graduated. And I didn't really think it was your thing."

I rested my hand on his. "It's not like I'm going to go crazy or anything, but I don't really know what's my thing. I've never gotten the chance to try it. Let me just have this. Just this once, please. And I promise I won't leave your side."

John nodded and looked back at the steering wheel.

"And my mom won't know. And even if she somehow finds out, she wouldn't be upset with you. She loves you, John."

John shook his head and buckled up. “She loves me because she thinks I’m the guy who will respect her.”

I buckled up too and grinned. “She loves you because you’d do anything to make her daughter happy.”

John glanced over at me. When he saw my wide smile, he rolled his eyes and grinned. “Yeah that’s what I’m worried about.”

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, and we drove off.

I should have known it was a bad idea to go to Sally’s. I should have known that I would have to pay for it later. I should have listened to John and stuck with the plan. And deep down I know I should tell him that. I should apologize. I don’t really know what to say, or how to say it. I can’t exactly call him right now with all of us watching Beth, and a text feels too scummy. As much as I want to make things right, I don’t feel up to reaching out right now anyway. Partly because I feel like crap. Partly because Sally, who has way more experience with dating, says not to text first. But also, because I don’t feel like I should be the only one apologizing.

I don’t remember what time it was, but John wanted to leave. I told him I didn’t want to go, so he grabbed my hand. I yanked it away.

“Let go of me!” I cried. I was dancing again. I’d never heard the music before, but it was catchy. It was loud enough that I could drown out everything else. Every negative vibe. Only good vibes. Sally said that a lot. It was a good saying. I closed my eyes and continued swaying.

“Meg, c’mon, please.”

Without opening my eyes, I said, “You can go.” It was freeing to say that. I felt like I could say anything. I could do anything. I wasn’t afraid of what anybody else thought, not even John. I could dance the entire night if I wanted to. And I wanted to. So I would. Because I could.

“I don’t want to leave you here.”

I opened my eyes and glared at him. “I like it here! I’m fine! I’m having fun!” I was having three Solo cups worth of fun. I wasn’t sure exactly what was in the cups, some punch Sally offered me that tasted like Hawaiian punch, orange sherbet, and something sour that burned going down. I didn’t love it at first, but I got used to the sour flavor, and started almost craving it. Plus, it helped me stop being so self-conscious. It was kind of freeing, kind of like being a little kid dancing around, not caring who sees. But also not like being a little kid, because I am grown up and grown-ups drink.

John shouted over the music. “Well, I’m not having fun. Can we go? Look, we can do something else together, please let’s just go.”

“No! I’m staying.”

“I thought this was supposed to be our night. Isn’t that what you kept saying?”
Who cared what I’d *been* saying? This was all about living *now*.

“Yeah, well, you’re the one leaving!” I yelled back.

“Then come with me!” John tried to hold my hand, but I pulled away. I opened my eyes and glared at him. He was interrupting my dance, and he was trying to stop all the fun of this magical night.

“No! You can’t make me!”

“I’m not trying to make you. I want you to come with me because you want to.”

“I. Don’t. Want. To.” I kind of spit the last word at him, which I felt bad about. I felt even worse when I saw him frowning, his arms hanging limply at his side for a second. He looked defeated. But then his fists clenched, and his face became angry. It reminded me of Dad when he got angry, and that’s when I didn’t feel sorry for him anymore.

“Fine, then, stay here with Sally. Maybe you’ll be happier with her.”

“Maybe I will! She’d be a better boyfriend than you!”

At the time I thought that was a genius comeback. Only now I’m standing in the hospital hallway, nauseous, wobbly, terrified, and sad, and I have no one to turn to. Mom has too much on her shoulders worrying over Beth, Jo’s mad at me, Beth’s not really here, and Amy’s too young. So once again I am the one who has to be strong all by herself. And I thought maybe when John and I were together, he could help me be strong. Because as much as I love Sally, she’s never really been there for me when I really need her, like when things get bad. Like when my pet hamster died in kindergarten or when Dad left in sixth grade, or when Beth got sick last year. So I can’t text her, and I can’t text John, and I’m standing in a hospital in the center of a big city, and I am completely alone. And Amy won’t leave the cafeteria.

Tears start streaming down my face, but I can’t cry in front of my sisters, so I just wipe them away and stare up at the ceiling and count to ten. Because being the oldest sister means you know how to act like you’re fine so that everyone else will be fine. I exhale and practice smiling. I don’t feel happy, but it helps me hide my tear face. I face the door again, and I turn the knob. When I walk inside Beth’s room, I see Mom and Jo clutching each other with tears streaming down their face, I freeze. *Beth*. I turn, but she looks the same as when I left. My eyes frantically glance up toward the monitor. It’s still beeping.

“She’s okay,” I hear Jo say. “Well, I mean... she’s the same.”

I feel like I’m going to collapse from sheer relief. I can’t even imagine coming upstairs and realizing Beth died while I was gone. I can’t imagine losing her, but the idea of losing her without saying goodbye is even worse. Especially since I wasn’t home last night. While I was off dancing and drinking, Beth was alone in the bathroom, her life draining out of her slowly. I don’t

know what any of us would have done if Jo hadn't found her and called 911. I'm glad Amy was in her room asleep when it happened, too. It would have been worse if she found Beth. She's still so young. But, really, if any of us had to deal with something so horrible, it should have been me. I'm supposed to be looking out for all of them. But I wasn't there.

"Meg, where's Amy?" Mom asks. I cringe, because it feels like she caught me, once again, not looking out for my sisters. Mom's eyebrows knit together, and I can't tell if she's just worried, or mad too. I desperately explain that I tried to call. I explain Amy's just upset. I wish I could explain, confess even, to everything, even things Mom doesn't know yet. Now is not the time though. She has enough weighing on her shoulders without realizing her oldest is a complete failure.

Mom collects her things and starts to leave. It's then that I realize I forgot to buy her a water after all. I don't say anything, because that's not important right now, but I add that to the list of ways I have hurt my Mom. A list of how I'm not the girl I thought I was, or, at least, I'm not being the girl I want to be.

As Mom slips out the door, I realize I'm frightened that she's leaving me with Jo. Because I don't know what Jo will say to me. She could tell me, again, that she is ashamed of me. She could tell me that Beth and Mom and Amy would all be disappointed in me if they knew. She could tell me that I am not the sister she thought I was. And she'd be absolutely right about all of it.

Maybe she won't say anything. That would be worse. When Jo's temper flares, she can scream all sorts of things, but when she's truly infuriated, she is terrifyingly silent. Either way, I deserve it.

I walk slowly towards the chair near Jo. I feel like I really need to sit. It feels like a tiny little strongman is hammering my skull, right between my eyes, and all the bright lights and beeping of the hospital room seem to be encouraging him.

“Can I sit?” I ask Jo.

She scowls. “Don’t be stupid.”

I sit. She definitely still sounds mad at me. She hasn’t said much to me at all since she picked me up from Sally’s, and every time she does say something, I try to read into her tone. Most of the time when Jo’s mad, she just needs some time. But with Beth here in the hospital, holding back on an apology seems wrong. Maybe it’s selfish, but I hate the idea of apologizing without any hope of being forgiven.

I keep my gaze on Beth and say a silent prayer for her. I’ve been going to church since I was little and praying became more of a habit than anything else. Today though, I sincerely hope that God can hear every word.

God, please, I am so sorry.

God, please, keep Beth here with us.

God, please.

Jo’s voice catches me by surprise. “Are you going to tell Mom about the promise ring?” At her mention of the ring, I glance down at my left hand. I must have been spinning the ring around my finger, a new nervous habit. It helps me feel safe because it reminds me of John. Only now, it makes me feel sad, because he’s another person who I’m not sure will forgive me.

I sit on my hands, so I don’t have to look at the ring anymore. “Eventually,” I tell Jo, which is true.

I had imagined myself running to Mom the day after prom, showing her the ring, and telling her how happy I was. I want Mom to know John's a good guy, one who will stay. I know she's skeptical. At first, she was nervous about me even dating John because he was already a college student. I met him through Jo's friend Lauri, who had been getting tutored by John. John was a college sophomore, and I noticed right away how much more mature he was than any of the boys I knew from high school. It wasn't until Lauri's grandfather practically provided Mom a full character witness for John, that she conceded to a first date. Three months later, I think she likes John, but she's always warning me not to pour too much of my heart into him, or our relationship. "People change," she always warns. I know she means Dad.

I was old enough to remember life before Dad left, when him and Mom would always find ways to make small things feel special. On Monday nights Dad would stop writing early and the six of us would all go to the library together. He always said Mondays were a terrible day for writing, but a great day to be around writing. Dad loved to read, and him and Jo would have a contest to see who could read the most books in a week. I remember I liked sitting in the children's room with Amy and helping her read. She was easily frustrated when she couldn't figure out the word. Beth, who was usually very quiet in public, always struck up a conversation with the librarians, who were gentle and calm at heart, like her. Then we'd always eat breakfast for dinner. Dad would make Mickey Mouse pancakes, and we would all try to make faces with whipped cream, yogurt, fruit, or my favorite, chocolate chips.

Monday nights were especially fun, because we didn't see much of Dad most days. He was always home, but he was always shut up in his office, writing. We weren't allowed to go in. If he was in his room, walking in might "disrupt his flow" and if he wasn't in the room, we might have messed something up. I used to peer inside when he would go in, and if you asked me, there

wasn't much we could have done to make it messier than it was. I stayed out anyway. It was Jo who was always trying to sneak in. One day she even sat in his chair and started writing her own story right at his desk. Dad found her and screamed so loud Amy started to cry. Then Mom started yelling at Dad, which saved Jo, but ended with Dad slamming his office door, and not coming out for the entire night. A couple days later, he apologized to Jo and promised to read her story. Jo was thrilled, but I was still mad at him for yelling at her.

To be honest, I am still mad at him. Mad at him for breaking Mom's heart and leaving her to handle everything all on her own. She had to take on two more jobs, and now that Jo and I are old enough, we have to work too. Even though Mom tries to hide it, she's tired. She never says anything, but I think she's lonely too.

Dad is by himself too, but that's how he likes it, how he always wanted it maybe. He's happy now, in New York writing with nobody to get in his way. I wonder if he's worried about Beth, or just frustrated that this whole family thing interrupted his writing. I feel guilty once I think that. I know he loves us. But it's hard to see that when I don't see him.

Jo speaks again, asking if I'm happy with John. A part of me almost tempts me to lie, because I feel like a lie will make her happier. But the truth is that I love John, and I am not too young to love him. So I tell Jo, yes, I am happy with him.

"I want you to be," Jo adds.

I am brought out of my own thoughts by this declaration from Jo. I'm not sure what I thought she would say, but this wasn't it. I glance over at her. She looks more tired than angry now, and I feel a bit of relief. Her telling me she wants me to be happy isn't exactly news. We all want each other to be happy. But it feels like she's trying to accept my happiness. And that is big.

“Thanks, Jo.”

I look at Beth, her pale face and dark hair. We’ve always teased Beth, gently, for being a lot like Snow White, partly for how she looked but more because of how she lives. It would not have surprised any of us if a blue bird one day perched on Beth’s shoulder and started singing its song just for her. For a second, I wish this could be a fairytale, and we could just kiss her, and she’d wake up. We’re not prince charmings, but we’re her sisters. That should be stronger.

“Right now,” I tell her, “Right now, I just want all of us to be together again.”

“Me too.”

We’re silent for a moment. I reach out and run my thumb on Beth’s hand, like Mom had done before she got up.

“I’m here,” I tell her. I feel unexpected tears filling my eyes. I blink them away. I can’t break down in front of my sister. The overwhelming guilt about everything—about last night and the days leading up to last night when all I could think about was stupid prom—it all crashes down around me, drowning me. I feel the guilt in my lungs, and I don’t know how to breathe. I wasn’t with Beth when it mattered. I wasn’t with Jo or Amy. I left the burden of last night all on Jo’s shoulder’s, and I put myself in a position where I was a burden myself. I did everything wrong.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me.” I say while I’m still facing Beth, but I mean the apology for Jo too.

I can hear Jo sigh. “You have your own life.”

I look back at her. She’s staring straight ahead of her, at Beth’s feet. Her lips are pressed together, both determined and sad. I squeeze Beth’s hands gently and let go to face Jo.

“I’m still here for you.”

Jo shrugs. “Yeah. But we’re growing up right? We can’t always be joined at the hip.”

I cringe. Those are the words I told her when we fought last night. I wasn’t so drunk that I don’t remember our fight. I guess that’s good, even though I’d rather not remember us fighting.

“That doesn’t mean we should grow apart.” It’s what Jo had said to me as a comeback, and even though I shrugged it off at the time, I knew she was right.

I think I see Jo’s lips turn up in a smirk. “That’s my line.”

“It’s a good line.”

“I know.”

Her bluntness makes me smile. Jo turns to me. “I’m sorry too, Meg.”

“For what?” I ask.

“I thought you hated me.”

I shake my head. “I never hated you.”

“You looked like you hated me. I mean, I was pretty clear that I wasn’t happy with you.”

I look down at my hands in my lap. “Yeah, well, now I’m not really happy with myself either.”

“Well, we both agree you made a dumb choice,” she says, half smiling, lightening the blow of what isn’t really a joke. “But let’s forget it now, deal?”

I offer her a smile, too. “Deal.”

We sit there silently for a few minutes. A part of me wonders if Jo really has forgiven me. It feels like if we weren’t in the middle of a family crisis, she’d still be mad at me. Maybe that doesn’t matter.

I feel the nagging worry rise in me, and I figure it's safe to finally ask. "Did you tell Mom?"

Jo shakes her head. "I thought about it." She grins devilishly, "But I also thought about tearing apart your prom dress. Like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Only not out of jealousy. Lots of possible revenge plans, actually, quite creative. I decided your hangover was probably vengeful enough. So... you're welcome."

I can't help but laugh, a big burst of ungraceful laughter. It's such a relief to hear Jo say something so... *Jo*. Also it's a relief to know Mom doesn't know yet. I feel like the right thing to do will be to tell her, some day. But it feels like trying to take the spotlight, making everything about me, and I really don't want to do that again.

Jo looks over at me and her smile fades. She takes in a deep breath and says, "I was just so mad and it was just, it was because it felt like... like I was losing you too."

My stomach sinks. Sometimes I forget that Jo feels the pain of losing people too. She possibly took Dad's leaving the hardest. And now Beth. And then there was me, being a completely different version of myself. Before I thought Jo just didn't want any of us to grow up because she was just being so immature. But now I realize she's afraid of all of us leaving her behind, because she knows what that feels like.

I reach over and grab Jo's arm. "Well, you're stuck with me now because I tried on that whole party outfit, and it didn't fit. So, I have my sister hat back on and it's never coming off again."

Jo grinned. "Good. Because I don't accept returns."

Jo gets up and walks over to Beth's bag that we set on the floor near the window. I remember Jo and Amy packing things they thought Beth might enjoy when she wakes up. I tried

to think of things she might need. Jo takes out Beth's phone and brings it over to us. She sits back down and unlocks the phone. Beth was never very secretive about her password. She was never trying to hide anything. Jo opens up her Spotify app and starts scrolling through her playlists. I look back at Beth. She's still so still. I half expected her to wake up any second now. I'm not really sure how this works, but it feels like she should be awake by now. They pumped all the meds out of her stomach, and she's been given a breathing tube and an IV. It's strange that what's keeping her alive looks so deadly.

"Do you think it's true that she can really hear us? It feels like something doctors say just to make us feel better," Jo says.

"Either way, it helps someone. And I think she can hear us." I reach out for Beth's hand again. "Want to hear some music, Beth?"

"What should I play?" Jo asks.

"What was her favorite?" I feel guilty suddenly that I don't know myself. Beth's sitting right in front of me, and now I can't ask her. I hold her hand tighter.

"She always said she couldn't choose a favorite."

I smile. "Sounds about right."

I feel like I can't sit still, so I get up too and go to Beth's bag. I grab her bamboo hairbrush. She stopped buying plastic products a few months ago after her science teacher showed her photographs of trash island. I remember that day I found her crying in her room after school because she said she was killing the planet. Jo and I spent the rest of the night with her researching how we can all live more sustainably. When she wakes up, I'm going to cook her up the best veggie burger she's ever eaten.

I walk back to the bed. I push the plastic chair closer to Beth and gently lift her head to gather some of her tangled hair in my hands. I start to brush the ends out gently. I can't get all of the tangles out with her lying down, but I can help.

"What about 'Bridge Over Troubled Water?'" Jo asks.

"Yeah, Beth always liked that one."

"I never got why. It's so depressing."

The brush snags on a bad knot and I cringe. "Sorry, Beth," I whisper. I stand and set the brush on the chair, working through the tangle gently with my fingers instead. "Um, I don't know. It sounds kinda sad, but the lyrics are sweet."

"What the heck are the lyrics even about? Like, who's the silver girl? It sounds spooky." Jo slumps, balancing her elbow on her knee and resting her chin on her hand, lost in thought. I always feel like Jo's truest self is her mind, like she can just forget how her hair looks or tune out the background noise and only see the words her brain is weaving. I guess that's what makes her the smart one of the family. I smile to myself.

"Yeah, I don't get that part either. But it's about being there for someone. That seems like a good song for right now."

"The perfect song," Jo agrees. She hits play and turns up the volume.

Chapter 4: Beth

When darkness comes

And pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down

Sail on silver girl

Sail on by.

I tried. I tried to sail. To sail away. I failed. I think.

All your dreams are on their way.

See how they shine.

I never shined. Always gray. Or red. So much red.

“Oh, if you need a friend.”

“I’m sailing right behind.”

Jo?

“Like a bridge over troubled water.”

Meg?

“I will ease your mind.”

Meg and Jo?

“I will ease your mind.”

I hear you. I don’t see you though. All I see is darkness. My eyes. My eyes are closed.

They feel too heavy. The world feels too heavy.

“I think I saw her move.” Meg.

“Really?” Jo.

“Play it again.” Meg.

The song restarts. Music knows me. It knows how to say what I can’t.

“Beth, can you hear us?”

Yes, Jo.

“Come back to us Beth, please. We miss you.”

I know it hurts, but it’s better this way. I gave it a lot of thought. Last night, I realized I couldn’t just think though, I had to take action. I had to get outside of my head. There was too much in my head, not enough space for me. I couldn’t even escape with my music anymore. I was a stone in the troubled water, not able to swim away, only weighing my family down. I had to break away.

I wanted to say goodbye. I tried to. I left Jo the notebook we shared on her desk. I slipped my birthday savings into Meg’s drawer, knowing she could use it for her college. I gave Amy the crocheted bumble bee I made that she was always trying to steal.

Mom’s gift was the hardest. I didn’t know what I could possibly give her that could make up for all the things she gave up for me. I finally decided on my old, illustrated Children’s Bible Stories, the copy she used to read to me when I was young. I placed it on her bed with a note that asked her to tell Dad I’m sorry I wasn’t strong like Jo. I don’t know if any of them found their gifts yet. I hope so.

I wanted to erase all the proof of my weakness, so I took all the pills I’d ever been prescribed. They would leave with me. Pill after pill down my throat, lumps of chemicals that were constantly fighting my body, forcing it to cover up its damaged DNA, tricking my immune system into submission. My body had been trying to kill itself for a long time, and I was done fighting it. I finally made peace with my body.

Except I feel it now, angry and sore, screaming at me. I try to swallow, but I can't. Everything hurts. My hand itches. I want to be still, but my hand feels so funny.

“Jo, her hand moved.”

“Oh my god. I'm calling Mom.”

“Should we call the nurse?”

“Hit the button. On the remote thing.”

No, no, don't call anyone. Please, I'll be gone soon. Why aren't I already gone? What's happening? Why does my hand hurt?

“Beth, no, honey, leave that alone. It's your IV. You need that.”

I don't need anything, Meg. I always used to need something. My body is so needy. It's better that I leave. I don't have to be broken anymore. I don't have to need anything anymore. I can free all of us if I just leave.

I hear a door open in the distance. Another voice now. A man, I think. I don't know who he is. He's asking questions. Meg's answering. I can still hear Jo too. She's talking but no one's answering. There's beeping somewhere too. Too much noise. Go away. Go away. Go away. Please, I need to go away.

Something warm and solid on my hand. It's another hand. “Beth,” Jo's voice is sad. Once I leave, no one will have to be sad ever again. “Beth, please. Open your eyes. We need you with us. I need you.”

Why can't you all see the truth? I am already gone, and I am just going to drag you with me. Let me go, please.

“Beth, my girl!”

Mom.

“Beth! Can you hear me? Mom, is she waking up? What’s going on? Meg? Tell me what’s going on!”

Amy

The fear in her voice pierces through me. I didn’t mean to scare her. I can’t leave with her watching. Maybe waking up right now is the last thing I have to do for my sisters and Mom. Maybe I can even show them why I have to leave.

I force my eyes open. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done. They all crowd around me. Light shines around them, and I keep blinking until my eyes adjust. I see the white-tile ceilings of the hospital I know so well. This place just keeps pretending it can play Jesus and resurrect me. I wonder if Jesus asked the official’s daughter if she wanted to be returned to this world.

Mom kissed my forehead. “My beautiful, Beth, we were so scared.”

For once, *Mom*, let me be the brave one. The strong one. Let me do the one thing I can do. Let me die.

Part II: Sail On

Chapter 5: Jo

I wake up. It’s still pitch black in the room. Must be nighttime. I didn’t realize I had slept for so long. I sit up in bed and stretch. That’s when I notice it’s quiet. Not just quiet. Deadly silent. There’s almost always some sound in the house, even at night, whether it’s Mom coming in from a shift, or the cats getting into something, or the hum of the AC window units. At the very least, there’s Meg’s snoring (even though she denies it).

But right now it's completely silent. I'm not usually creeped out, but I am now. I whisper loudly, "Meg?"

She doesn't respond, so I call her name louder. Nothing. Maybe she's video chatting John in the living room again. Sometimes they talk late into the night, and she goes someplace else because she knows I'll kill her if she keeps me up. She hasn't talked to John for that long on the phone for a while now, but it's the only reason that makes sense.

I reach for the lamp next to my bed in the darkness, my arm memory knowing exactly where to go to turn the switch. With the light on, I see that Meg's bed is empty, her sheets flung at the end of the bed. I grab my phone from my nightstand--low battery because I forgot to charge it. I turn my flashlight on and walk out of my room toward the stairs. I expect to hear Meg's voice floating up from the living room, but there's still no sound.

I get to the bottom of the stairs and switch on the living room light. There's no one. I stare at our old, worn blue sofa, Mom's rocker, and the old armchair as if someone will appear. No one does.

Where the hell is Meg?

I leave the living room and head toward the kitchen instead.

I'm almost at the kitchen when I hear the tap in the downstairs bathroom. Then I hear a loud crash, like a window shattering.

"Meg!?" I call out.

I rush toward the bathroom. I automatically reach for the doorknob, which is unlocked, and I fling the door open.

Instead of Meg I see Beth. She's still in her pajamas, her hair tangled and flying in the air. I feel the wind, and I brace against the door frame. I see that the window has shattered.

Outside it isn't just night, it's space. Outer fucking space. Sucking everything toward it. The shower curtain tears off the hoops and flies out the window. Even the toilet seat is ripped off its hinges and lost in space.

"Beth!" I call out over the deafening rush of everything leaving.

She's clinging to the bathroom sink, crying. "I'm sorry," she calls out to me. "This is my fault."

"Beth?" I scream.

I know what she's done. I don't know how I know, but I do. She tried to cast the Dark Spell. The Dark Spell. I feel a lump in my throat and fear shoot through me.

"Beth, it's okay. It's okay. Just grab my hand." I cling to the door frame with one hand and reach out with another. Beth, one hand, still clinging to the sink, reaches out.

"I can't reach!" She cries.

A booming voice calls to us from outside. "I must have my payment." It says.

Beth locks eyes with me.

"Beth, no, please!"

She shakes her head. "I have to go. It's the only way."

"Beth, no!"

I watch as my sister lets go of the sink and her body flings out of the window. It's so fast I can't catch her. I can't save her.

The second it happens the wind disappears, and the outer space sky with all its stars turns completely black. Everything is quiet again.

I'm kneeling on the bathroom floor crying. I don't know what to do, but I know I have to find Mom, so I turn towards the door. But then I see that my house is gone. Beyond the doorway

is just more blackness. I remember I still have my phone, but it's dead. A black screen. Everyone's gone.

I shake with grief. I shake with rage.

I shake awake and see Meg's face over mine.

"It's okay," she says in her best soothing voice. "You were just dreaming, Jo."

The fear and anger inside my chest is still there. "Beth," I sputter, tears wet on my cheeks. I can't tell if I am crying now, or if I was crying in my sleep.

"She's okay. She's asleep in her room."

I shake my head. "I have to go see her." I yank the covers off of her and push past Meg, who warns me I'll wake her.

"She's just started sleeping normally, Jo. Don't wake her!"

I'm at Beth and Amy's door in a second. It's already open, so I slip my head in and peer at the two beds. Both have my sisters in them. I take an extra second to watch for Beth's chest to rise and fall before I walk back to my room.

Meg's still sitting on my bed when I get back. I sit next to her, silently, staring at the floor.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She whispers.

I shake my head.

"What about your journal? You always write down your dreams."

I'm about to tell her that I don't want to write down this one, but maybe it's exactly the type of dream I need to write down. There's a story somewhere in there. Who was that voice outside the window, and how did Beth and I both know what the dark spell was?

I nod, and Meg grabs my journal and pen off of my nightstand, where I always keep it.

“Do you want me to stay up with you?” She asks.

I hesitate. “Yeah.”

Meg nods. She goes over to her nightstand and pulls out an old tin that she uses to store her private chocolate stash. She brings it over to my bed and we sit shoulder to shoulder eating chocolate, like we used to when we were little, and we thought Mom didn’t know we were up past our bedtime.

I stay up and write down the dream. I write about the wind and outer space and the shower curtain flying out. And Beth. Beth letting loose of my hand and flying out too. And I write about the empty blackness that surrounds me. And this Dark Spell that Beth and I seem to know about but only in this dream. In real life, I don’t think either of us really knows for sure, but I think we need to find out. Then I keep writing, because I don’t want to fall back to sleep and dream it again. At least if I’m writing it I can control it. I write for so long that when I turn to Meg, she’s fallen asleep on my pillow. I sit my journal on the floor next to my bed and slide into the covers next to Meg. It’s a tight squeeze now that we’re older, but at least I’m not alone.

Chapter 6: Meg

I stand in front of my closet, dragging hangers from one side to the other, examining each shirt, and trying to decide what to wear. I’m also trying to ignore Jo who is staring at me from her bed. I turn around to look at her. She’s lying on her stomach, with a pillow propping her up, and her laptop in front of her. Her eyes locked on me instead of the screen though.

“What?” I ask her.

She props her head onto her fist and tells me, “You’re acting like John’s never seen you before.”

I turn back to my closet and keep rifling through clothes. “He hasn’t seen me, not in weeks.” Not since the fight. Not since I yelled at him, half-drunk, told him to leave. And he did. He left. I think I sort of expected him to stick around. I thought he would, maybe leave the room, but then I would calm down and go looking for him, and he’d be there. But he wasn’t. He walked out Sally’s door, and drove away. Lauri had to bring me home, which was embarrassing. Lauri’s like a younger brother to me, and it felt wrong to have him be the one to lead me to his car and drive me home. I mean, it should have been John.

To be fair, I might have left me too. I was unimaginably rude. I never apologized. Neither has he. We didn’t really get a chance, with me rushing to the hospital with Beth the next morning. It felt wrong to talk about prom night when my sister was in the hospital, and John seemed to sense that too. So we just never talked about it. And when we did talk, it was over the phone and awkward and short.

It’s practically been a month, and it’s the first time we’ve seen each other in person. So yeah, I’m nervous. I know we’ll talk about it today. We have to.

The thought of talking about that makes me feel like I’m going to pass out. I don’t even really know what to say. And I’m afraid of what he’ll say. I can’t even really tell if this is a date to make-up or to break-up. It feels decisive either way. And I don’t know if I am strong enough to face it.

I sit down on my bed, across from Jo. “Maybe I shouldn’t go. I mean, just because Beth’s home, doesn’t mean she’s all better. Are you sure you’re okay with me going out?”

Jo shifts off her stomach and sits up. “Jesus, Meg, just *go*. Mom’s not working today, so she’ll be here. We’ll be fine.”

I nod, and start French braiding my hair. A couple months ago all I could think of was going to prom with John, having a last summer with him and with Sally, then going off to college. This time away from John has been hard in some ways. I have missed him. But it’s also been kind of refreshing to be around my sisters again and even have some time to myself. I wonder if that makes me a bad girlfriend.

I finish braiding my hair, holding the end in one hand and searching in my drawer for a hair elastic with another. “Did you take my hair elastics?”

“You told me I could take one the other day.”

“Jo, I had, like, 10 other hair elastics in here. How many did you take?”

“Just one, I swear.”

I sigh. “Well, can I have the one you took the other day then?”

Jo looks guilty. “It broke.”

“Ugh, seriously, Jo?”

“What? I have thick hair. Sue me.”

I hear my phone ping and I glance down to see John has texted me that he’s here. Guess I have to wear my hair down, which isn’t ideal since I didn’t have time to straighten it. I fluff it out and try to embrace the freakish frizz that is my natural hair. The 80s called, Meg. They want their hair back. I try not to think about it too much, and grab my phone and purse hanging on a hook near the door. I resist the urge to look in the mirror again before heading downstairs.

“See you,” I call out to Jo.

“You look fine!” Jo calls back, which makes me both roll my eyes and smile.

Mom and Beth are sitting next to each other on our living room couch watching reruns of *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, one of Beth's favorite shows. It's nice to see Beth out of her room, but I don't say that because I don't want to make her self-conscious of being in her room all of the time. When Beth came home from the rehab center, the doctor told us we should be around Beth and spend time with her, but also be understanding of when she is feeling overwhelmed and needs some space. It's all a difficult balance to strike.

Mom turns as I come down the stairs. "Heading out, honey?"

"Yeah, John's here."

"You know he's welcome to come in!" What Mom doesn't say is that she hasn't seen him come in in a while. That's not something I want to get into right now, so I just tell her thanks, and hug her and Beth bye. We always hug each other before we leave the house, but it feels even more important now.

I head out the door, and I see John standing next to his car. He looks up when I walk out and smiles. I feel my whole body warm, and I instinctively smile back. Facetime is nice, but it isn't as... as tangible. And with him leaning against his car, I get to take in all of him, not just his face on a rectangle screen. I can take in his broad shoulders and wide chest, his sturdy arms, and his long legs. I want to run up to him, but I don't. I walk over our lawn to meet him in the driveway.

He moves towards me too. "Sorry, I wasn't sure if I should come inside. With Beth and everything."

I smile at him for remembering and wrap my arms around him. He hugs me back, and I bury my face into his chest, inhaling his scent, a mixture of musk and fabric softener. We pull away and I just look at his face for a second, trying to read it. We never really talked about what

happened during prom. Lauri told John that Beth had been in the hospital, and I got a text from him asking if I was alright. It was like we silently agreed that we wouldn't hash anything out until Beth was better. Now Beth's home, so I guess that means it's time to talk about it.

John opens the passenger door for me before getting into the driver's seat. He starts the car.

"Are you still okay with Chipotle?"

I nod. "Of course. I'm always up for Chipotle."

"Cool." He pulls out of the driveway and we're on our way.

I twist my promise ring around my finger, trying to will away the awkwardness.

"You're still wearing it?"

John's question surprises me. "What?"

"Our ring. I mean, your ring. The one I gave you."

"Yeah. Should I not be?"

John looks at me quickly, alarmed, then back at the road. "What? No! I mean, I want you to wear it. Do you want to wear it?"

Wow, had I really been such a terrible girlfriend that I made him think I didn't want to wear our promise ring? "Of course, I still want to wear it. I never took it off."

I look down at my hands, the sterling silver promise ring on my left hand. When I was little, I used to admire my Mom's wedding ring and sometimes, if I promised to be careful, she would let me put it on my finger. It was always too big of course. She would tell me that love is something you have to grow into. She told me marriage is about being willing to grow together. Then one day her and Dad stopped growing together. They just grew apart. I never wanted that to happen to me and John. Somehow, I seemed to push John away on prom night, but I don't

want to push him so far. I think maybe I do have my own things I need to work out myself, but that doesn't mean I want to leave John.

John glances over at me again, smiles. "Good. I love you."

"I love you too," I reply. I mean it. I mean it so much I want us to stop the car right then and for him to tell me again that he loves me and then I would say it again and we would just sit there holding on to each other for as long as we could. But I know that's not enough. It might be late, but I have to apologize. I open my mouth to say how sorry I am, but John beats me to it.

"I know it's a while ago, and we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I just wanted to tell you I'm really sorry for leaving you at Sally's on prom. It was a real douchebag move. I should have stayed with you."

I reach out and rest my hand on his lap. "I shouldn't have put you in that position in the first place, John. You wanted to stick with the plan—the Mom-approved plan. And I was way too obsessed with having a good time. I don't know what got into me. I knew you didn't like parties, and I made you come with me, and I got too drunk to even enjoy our time together. I messed everything up."

"I should have handled it better, though. I got angry and threw a fit. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

I shake my head. "I think I was the one who threw the fit. And I also may have yelled some things, possibly."

"Possibly," John teases, glancing at me again. "Seriously, though, I'm sorry, Meg."

"I am too."

And I know we both really mean it. I immediately feel the tension in the car dissipate, and I feel so much relief. But then it's gone—that feeling of relief. However things were before

prom, they weren't ever going to be that way again. I knew in that moment and I know John knew it too. A new sadness creeps in. I realize there's still one thing we have to talk about though. I wait until John pulls into the parking lot, partly because I'm procrastinating, and partly because I think it needs his full attention.

Before we get out of the car, I say "I am really glad we get to hang out today," I say. "But now that Beth's home, I need to be too. We are all trying to work out our schedules, so at least one of us can always be home with her. I don't want you to think I don't want to see you—because I do—um, but, you know, I need to focus on my family right now."

John looks at me seriously, the way he always does when he's super focused on listening or thinking about something. It's one of my favorite things about him.

He nods. "I'm glad you said that. There's something I wanted to tell you."

I feel butterflies in my stomach, but not the good kind. I am all of a sudden deadly afraid that he's breaking up with me.

"I got into the Teach For America summer student program."

"Oh, that's great! I'm so proud of you!" At first, I'm so relieved that he's not breaking up with me I don't realize what that means. Then it hits me. "Oh, but that's like in another state, right?"

John nods, solemnly. "Yeah. I'm going to New Mexico at the end of next week. I found out I was accepted the same week as prom. I wanted to wait to tell you til after prom, but then—you know..."

I feel like I'm frozen in my seat. My sadness of a moment ago grows deeper. It crystalizes and becomes real and hard. I know at that moment that it's not going away. I don't

know why I'm sad. I'm happy for him. And this is what I needed, some distance. I just didn't think it would be this much distance.

"We can still Facetime and text and everything. And we can definitely hang out in person again before I leave. But this way you get the time with your family."

I nod and try to force all the happiness I feel for him past my own selfish shock. I smile. "Yeah, it works out perfectly. This is great. I'm really happy for you."

John smiles back and leans over to kiss me. As he pulls away, he pauses a few inches from my face. "I'll be back though. And I'm keeping my promise." He grabs my hand, the one with the promise ring on and kisses it.

I know he means it. Because John never says a thing he doesn't mean. But what I know now, after that night, and after Beth, is something John doesn't know yet: sometimes the promises we make just can't be kept. But I push that thought out of my head. John is here, with me, right now, telling me he loves me. I know that I love him too.

"And I'll keep mine," I tell him.

Chapter 7: Amy

I sit on the tree stump in our yard, my easel in front of me, holding up a half-finished painting of Shadow, our outdoor cat, sitting under our apple tree. I look from my reference photo on my phone, to my painting, to the apple tree now. No cat here today. No apples either. The tree was a gift from all of us to Mom. She loves to garden, and she said she had always wanted to grow her own fruit. I remember Dad took us to the greenhouse to pick out the sapling. He told me that I would grow up with the tree.

Now the tree's grown, and I am more grown up too. But Dad's not here. And Beth almost wasn't here. And there have never been apples.

The first year the tree was old enough to grow fruit, I was kind of excited. But I hate gardening, so I didn't really come out much to check it. Beth was totally opposite. She was out here every day. I don't even really know what she was doing. Whatever you do for a tree. Pruning, and stuff, I guess. She was upset when the tree only produced too-sour, too-tiny apples. At least, she *seemed* upset. She didn't *say* she was upset. She never does.

I grab a brush, dab some green paint on it, and flick it against the canvas, adding some texture to the trees. The paint splatters in places I don't want it to, and I know I'll have to paint white over it when it dries. I try a new technique of repeatedly jabbing my brush into the tree.

"Looks like someone needs a break," Mom says, coming out of the back door, a basket in her arms.

"I'm fine," I say, but I plop the brush in my water jar anyway.

Mom sets down the basket and comes over to me. She pulls my hair out of my face, behind my shoulders, and kisses the top of my forehead. Then she glances at my easel and smiles.

"Aw, that looks great, honey. How'd you make that look *just* like Shadow?"

I shrug. "I just used the referenced photo."

Mom shakes her head. "Don't sell yourself short. Not everyone could *just use a reference photo* and have it look that good. I certainly couldn't."

She walks toward the little shed where Mom keeps all her gardening tools. "Want to help your old Mom plant some seeds?"

I don't really, but I also don't feel like staring at my painting or going inside where Beth is unhappy and Jo and Meg are running in every direction to make her *not* unhappy.

"I guess," I tell her, and follow her to the shed. She hands me a small shovel and some floral gardening gloves. I walk over to the basket.

"What are we planting?" I ask, even though I can see the sunflower seed packets in the basket. I poke them with my shoe.

"Just the sunflowers today."

I roll my eyes. "Right. Beth's favorite flower. Why isn't she helping you, then?" It comes out harsher than I mean it to.

Mom gives me a look, but she doesn't yell at me. "She doesn't feel up to it today. And that's alright. She helped me start the pepper plants inside a few days ago."

"Oh."

Mom moves to the small rectangle of soil in the yard that Mom must have prepared for the flowers. She already had little markers where to put each seed.

"When do you have time for this?" I ask. "I mean, I feel like you're always working." *Or taking care of Beth*, I think to myself.

Mom kneels down near the plot and starts digging little holes. "Here and there. I do a little gardening whenever I need to let out some frustration." Mom glances up, smirks. "So, maybe I come out here a little too often."

I smile a little, and kneel next to her, starting the next row. We are quiet for a little while.

"Sometimes that's why I paint," I admit. "I feel frustrated."

Mom nods. "That's healthy. We all have our burdens to unload, and as long as we have a good place to lay down that burden, we'll be okay."

“Yeah.” I say, jamming my finger into a hole to make it deeper. I watch as the dirt slips back into the hole, little bits at a time.

“Momma?”

“Hmm?”

I look up from the dirt, and glance back over to the tree. “Am I a bad person because I don’t feel sorry for Beth like everyone else does?” Does it mean I don’t love her as much? Because I do love Beth. She’s my sister. The thing is, I am her sister too, and it’s like she forgets that. She doesn’t talk to me. She doesn’t think how I would feel if she was gone.

Mom looks up at me, sets her shovel down, and wipes her face with the back of her wrist. She smiles warmly and shakes her head. “Oh, honey, no. You’re not a bad person. We all... well, we all feel things differently. Do you know what I mean?”

I yank my gardening gloves off and toss them on the ground. “No, but, like... I *don’t* feel bad for her. I mean, obviously I’m glad she’s home. But it’s like Meg, and Jo, and everyone is acting like she didn’t just make this huge decision. I mean she tried to *die*, Mom.”

Mom knows that. Obviously. I don’t know why I feel the need to remind her, and I hate myself for it because I see her eyes tear up. She inhales and blinks, and sighs, and it’s gone, buried again.

“Why am I the only one who is mad?” I ask, finally. “Like why would she do that to us?” Saying it out loud makes me cry. I hate crying in front of people. I try to swallow it like Mom swallows her tears, but that just makes my throat hurt. I try wiping away my tears, but they keep coming down. Stupid tears.

“Oh Amy,” Mom says softly, reaching out and patting my knee. “She didn’t do it *to us*.”

Something between a sob and a scream leaks out of my throat. I slam my fist into the dirt, which spews dust everywhere. “But she did! Maybe she didn’t mean to. But that’s kind of the point. She didn’t even think about us. She just was going to leave. She wasn’t even going to say goodbye. She didn’t even tell us anything was wrong. She promised me.” My voice breaks down, and all I can do is sob.

I let Mom wrap me up in her arms and I lay on her chest like I used to when I was little. Mom rubs large circles on my back, slowly and softly, the way she used to every night before bed. One night I told her I was too old, so she stopped. I forgot how much I missed it. After a few minutes, my sobs shrink into sniffles, but I keep my face pressed against my mom.

“I felt angry too.” she says, quietly breaking the silence. Mom never once seemed angry, not the night it happened, and not when Beth came home. Not ever.

“But you know,” she continues. “I wasn’t really angry at Beth. I was just so sad and scared that I felt angry at the situation. I just didn’t want one of my babies to feel like they had so much pain, they couldn’t take it anymore.” Mom is talking to me, but it feels like maybe she is talking to herself.

I nod because I understand feeling scared. I’m afraid if I speak, I’ll start crying again. We sit there silently for what feels like a long time until Mom speaks again.

“I know it’s hard, honey. It is... hard.” She smiles weakly and brushes the hair out of my eyes. She looks like she is talking to herself again. “But you know, I think Beth was sad and scared and angry too. She wasn’t trying to leave you, honey. She was just trying to leave all of those feelings. But now she’s here. She’s making a choice. She’s choosing to be here every day, even though it’s hard. And I think she would really love for you to choose to be here with her.”

I look up to our house, to the window of the bedroom Beth and I share. I guess I've just been choosing too, choosing to be mad. It doesn't really feel like a choice. I guess I just thought that if Mom and Meg and Jo felt angry, they would be showing it too. But maybe they do feel angry and sad and scared, but they are just choosing to put all those feelings aside for Beth, at least for now. Until she's better and we are all better. That's the grown-up thing to do, I guess. I mean, I know, it's the grown-up thing to do. I take a deep breath.

I look back at Mom, her grey eyes a little puffy and sparkly. It's funny how crying makes her eyes look silver. Maybe sometimes we need to cry to shine.

I lean over and give Mom a hug. "Can I have one of the sunflower seeds?" I ask her.

Mom nods. "Of course, honey. What for?"

"I'm going to see if Beth and I can grow one in our room, until she's ready to grow some outside."

Mom smiles. "That's a great idea, honey. Here, I think I have a terra cotta pot in the shed you can use. You can paint it, if you want."

I know exactly how I want to paint it. Silver. Silver looks gray sometimes, but when I put the pot near the window the sun will make it shine.

Chapter 8: Beth

I sit on my bed with my earphones in. Carl Sigman and Robert Maxwell's *Ebb Tide* floods into my brain. I close my eyes and practice in the air, my fingers tapping an imaginary keyboard, the rhythm and rests, the tide going out and coming in. *It's like the tide. When it turns, it goes in slowly, but it can't be stopped.*

The line comes into my thoughts, like a wave washing over me. I open my eyes suddenly. I haven't felt a wave like that in a while. I almost don't know what to do. It makes me feel uneasy, like it might topple me over. I feel the urge to write the line down, or else it will drown me, I know. I remember the notebook I share with Jo, remember it's still in the duffle bag my sisters packed for me when I was in the hospital. I slide off the bed and walk over to my closet, where I had dropped the bag when I got home. I sit criss-crossed on our carpeted floor and stare at the bag for a second. I haven't opened it since I got home, and for some reason opening it seems big. I don't know if it's a good big or a bad big. It's hard for me to tell sometimes.

Although my sisters packed a lot of stuff in the bag, I wasn't allowed to have much of it in my room once I was transferred from the hospital to the clinic. I didn't understand why I couldn't have my stuff, but I didn't really mind. Most of it just reminded me of my sisters and their sad faces, and how I made them sad. Still, though, I missed them. It was lonely at the clinic. There were lots of kids there my age, but it was still lonely. They would try to get us all to talk to each other. They put on movie nights and we could borrow board games and stuff. At first, it felt big just to sit out in the common room, but eventually I tried to talk to some of the other people. I've never really been good at making friends. Amy and Meg are much better at that. It's not that I don't like people, though. I like being around people, sometimes. I like watching them and listening in. But when people notice me and try to talk to me it isn't fun anymore because I never know if I'm saying or doing the right thing. So when I was at the clinic, I mostly just watched other people. There was this one girl who always had her hair in her face and wore long sleeves. I named her Violet in my head because she reminded me of the girl from the *Incredibles*. I think maybe she did have superpowers, in her own way. I think all of them did. There was a boy who wouldn't speak to anyone, but he made really beautiful artwork. I wish I could have shown his

art to Amy, because that's her superpower too. Another boy would sometimes shout really loudly, and even though it scared me at first, the power of his voice was really amazing. I bet he would have made a really great singer. I don't sing much, but I do like to play instruments and they had some there at the clinic. They had a keyboard in the common room and one day I started playing it. A couple of kids came over, which made me feel embarrassed, but they didn't really try to talk to me too much. They just asked what songs I knew, and I would try to play the songs they wanted. It helped make everything less scary, I think. That's how I actually started to like going to the common room, even though there were other people. It was better than my room which was quiet and bare and empty and lonely. Violet told me one day that the reason we weren't allowed to have our things in our room was because they thought we would use them to hurt ourselves.

Nobody was ever afraid I'd hurt anyone. Out of all the things that I did wrong in life, everyone always told me that I was good. I had always tried to be gentle and kind, the one who wouldn't hurt a fly. I never have hurt a fly either. I always try to catch them and let them go. But now, it's different. Now people are afraid of me. They think I am capable of terrible things. And I guess I am. I didn't mean to do a terrible thing, though. I was trying to do a good thing. I tried explaining that to Dr. Riley. She told me that I wasn't a bad person for trying to help my family, but that the real way to help them is to stay. My heart was good, but my brain was in a bad place at the time and everything got twisted. My brain can get better though, and that means my doctors and my family won't have to be afraid of me.

I open my duffle bag and dig through the leftover clothes I haven't taken out yet. I find the notebook at the bottom. I pull it out and reach for a pen on my desk. I scribbled down the line: *It's like the tide. When it turns, it goes in slowly, but it can't be stopped.*

What's like the tide though? Is it death? Is it life? Is it me? I circle the word "it" and draw a question mark. Maybe Jo can help me. She's better with words. She always seems to know exactly what to say, and she isn't ever afraid of saying it. I'm always afraid that I'll say something I don't really mean, or say something that might hurt someone else. I tried really hard to be quiet, but that seemed to hurt people too. Now I really don't know what to do.

Above the music in my ears, I hear a knock on my door frame. My door is always open now. It's one of the rules from the clinic. The only time it can be closed is if Amy's in here by herself. She doesn't need to be watched like I do. It's only my first week home, so I haven't been able to prove to my family yet that they don't have to be afraid of me. I will, though. I will get better, and then they won't worry. I thought that leaving them would relieve them of the burden that I can be, but now I know I have to stay. I take a deep breath. *Not a burden*, I think. Dr. Riley told me to try to catch thoughts like that. Catch them, acknowledge them, but don't believe them. *Reframe them*. I am not a burden. I just... I don't know what I am.

I look up from my notebook to see Jo smiling too hard at me from the doorway. "You're back to the notebook!" Her voice is unnaturally high, like she is trying to be cheerful, which feels uncomfortable because Jo isn't cheerful. She's confident and loving and fierce, but not cheerful.

I shrug, embarrassed. I never used to be embarrassed around Jo. She always felt like the person I could say anything to. Except, when things started getting really dark, I knew I couldn't burden her with it all. So I didn't tell her. And now it feels like there's an ocean separating us. I wish I could just build a bridge over the water. I don't know how yet.

Jo sits across from me on the carpet, her legs sprawled out in front of her, leaning against Amy's bed. I'm not sure where Amy is. I haven't seen very much of her since I came home.

She's mad at me. I hurt her, and I don't know if she'll forgive me. I don't blame her. I just miss her.

Jo interrupts my thoughts. "I was thinking I might go down to the beach today. Do you want to come with me?"

A sharp spark shoots down my spine and I feel my chest tighten at the thought of going out. That feels like another big thing. Bad or good big? Does it matter?

I rub my arm and look out the window, trying not to look terrified. From where I sit on the floor, I can only see the sky and the sun. It's very bright.

"Um, I don't really want to be around people." What I don't say is that it feels like everyone looks at me, and knows what I did, and they see how terrible I am.

"Lauri offered to take us to his beach house. There wouldn't be anyone there except us," Jo assures me.

I turn away from the window and look at Jo. Her smile has dulled to a look that is almost neutral, but her deep, sad, grey eyes look pleading. I can't look at her anymore, so I turn my gaze to the notebook. I fold and refold the corner of the notebook paper.

"Does Lauri want to really spend the afternoon with me tagging along? I know you have to watch me all the time, and I don't want to ruin your beach day."

"You won't ruin our day. You'll make it better. Please, Beth, I want you to come."

I brave another look at her, and this time she makes a silly face and dramatically clutches her hands at her chest, begging. I smile small. At least that's a little more like Jo.

Dr. Riley said I need to spend some time outside, and I don't want to disappoint her at my next appointment. She's a really nice woman, and I know she is just trying to help. I feel as though whenever I talk with her, I have to prove that I am doing better, following her

instructions. It's a little like school, which I'm not very good at (except music class). I try really hard to please my teachers though. I know it's important, and everyone wants to succeed, and I want to do good too. And I think Dr. Riley would be happy if I told her I went to the beach with my sister. It will give me something to talk about too, I suppose.

I study the words and notes on the notebook page. Maybe there's some music the real tide can share with me.

I close the notebook and slip my pen into the binding. "Okay."

Jo's smile bursts open. "Okay? Yes! Thank you, Beth," She leans over and hugs me. "I just have to change into my swimsuit. We can leave whenever you're ready."

She leaves my room, and I sit on the floor for a few minutes. Okay, I'm doing this. I was able to get out of bed this morning, so I guess the next step is getting out of the house. I take a deep breathe. Small victories, Dr. Riley said. This feels big though. Maybe it is. Maybe it's a big victory. Okay. Good big.

I start *Ebb Tide* over again as I stand up. I should bring something with me. I'm not sure if I want to swim though. I definitely don't want to commit to swimming. So maybe I'll just pack my swimsuit. But I also don't want Jo to have to come inside with me if I decide I want to change into my swimsuit later. I feel the familiar shakiness in my chest. That's one of the signs I'm supposed to look for.

I take in a breath. Then I let it go. Ocean breathe. That's one of the breathing techniques Dr. Riley talk me. Long breathe in, then push it all out in a slow rush with your lips closed. If you close your eyes and listen your breathing sounds like the ocean. It's kind of like a superpower. I take in a couple more ocean breathes, then I keep my eyes closed and listen to the song.

I lower the volume on the music, but I don't take out my earbud. "Hi," I say.

"Hey, Jo told me you're going to the beach," Meg's voice interrupts the song. I open my eyes. "That's awesome!" She adds cheerfully. Her cheerful seems real, but she looks even more tired than Jo.

"I'm not sure if I want to go, but Jo really wants me to," I confess.

Meg sits beside me on the bed. "That's okay. Jo would understand if you don't want to go. Do you want me to tell her for you?"

I shake my head. "No. I like the *idea* of going. It's just I haven't been out much. And I haven't really seen Lauri yet. And I would need to pack a bag if I'm going."

Meg nods. "So, is it because it feels overwhelming that you don't want to go?"

I watch Meg as something clicks in her brain. I can tell she is getting ready to help, whether I want her to or not. That's what she does.

I nod yes, because it's easier than explaining all the things I'm feeling, explaining what big feels like.

"Well, I can help!" She beams. Her voice is too high when she gets to the word "help."
"Let me get a bag ready for you. It'll take me no time at all. And don't think twice about Lauri. He invited you. He loves you; you know that."

Meg is already running around my room packing as if I'm going to be gone a week and not an afternoon. I just watch her. I've decided that I need to let her help. It's the least I can do given everything.

A minute later, Meg has my duffle bag packed to the brim with beach stuff, and she's brushed and braided my hair. She steps out of the room, so I can change into a comfortable tank top and some shorts. When I'm done, Meg comes back in and smiles.

“You look great! One last thing!” She goes to my closet and grabs a black baseball cap I own that has a cat embroidered into the center and the words *cats meow* surrounding it. “There you go. *Meow* you’re ready!”

I feel shaky from all her running around and all her cheerfulness, but I muster up a smile. “Thanks Meg.”

Jo pops her head in. “Did I just hear a cheesy cat pun? You know the rules. No making bad jokes unless I’m around to make fun of them. Are you ready, Beth?”

“Yeah,” I tell Jo. “Okay.” I hesitate at the door of my room and glance back to my bed. The notebook sitting there catches my eye, and on a whim, I step back into my room and grab it. I place it on top of the beach bag, just in case.