

CHANGE *of* PLANS

CHANGE *of* PLANS

SARAH DESSEN

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFR

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI



SIMON & SCHUSTER | BFYR

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

For more than 100 years, Simon & Schuster has championed authors and the stories they create. By respecting the copyright of an author's intellectual property, you enable Simon & Schuster and the author to continue publishing exceptional books for years to come. We thank you for supporting the author's copyright by purchasing an authorized edition of this book.

No amount of this book may be reproduced or stored in any format, nor may it be uploaded to any website, database, language-learning model, or other repository, retrieval, or artificial intelligence system without express permission. All rights reserved. Inquiries may be directed to Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 or permissions@simonandschuster.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Text © 2026 by Sarah Dessen

Front jacket illustration © 2026 by Nash Weerasekera

Back jacket and flap illustration by iStock.com/Liana20121

Jacket and edge design by Lucy Ruth Cummins

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

and related marks are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, LLC.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact

Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949

or business@simonandschuster.com.

Simon & Schuster strongly believes in freedom of expression and stands against censorship in all its forms. For more information, visit BooksBelong.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event.

For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Interior design by Hilary Zarycky

The text for this book was set in Adobe Caslon Pro.

Manufactured in China

First Edition

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

CIP data for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 9798347108770

ISBN 9798347108794 (ebook)

For Sasha

CHAPTER ONE

It was always awkward when we all got together. But this? This was excruciating.

“Okay, everyone, try to pretend you like each other!” said Colin’s dad, who was holding his phone, one finger squarely over the camera lens. Unaware, he continued to shout directions. “Finley, squeeze in with your mom a bit more. And Marisol? Come in the other side.”

Next to me, I felt my mother, always on edge, grow even sharper. It was always a lot for her to be with the rest of my family—my dad; stepmom; the twins, Will and Piper; and baby Leo—because, well, we were a lot. And she was used to being alone, except when she was at work or with me. The rest of the time, I had no idea what she did. For someone who birthed me, it was weird she was so much of a mystery.

Marisol, my stepmom, did as requested, pressing in on my right. She had Leo fussing in one arm—it was way past his naptime—as she tried to keep my brother Will from frog-punching Piper by reaching around my dad. Who looked exhausted. As always.

“Joel,” Colin’s mom said as her husband told my mom to get in even more. “Just take the picture.”

“Please.” Heather, Colin’s sister, shielded her eyes with one hand. “So hot out here.”

“It’s graduation! It has to be perfect. And I’ve almost got it.”

“Do you, though?” Colin said, coming up behind him. He took the phone, freeing the lens, and then stepped back and bent down, instantly getting everyone in frame. My hero. Even if he had been making the rounds giving hugs and high-fiving basically our entire class while I was dealing with all this. Once StuCo president, always StuCo president. “Okay, everyone: Say, ‘Finley’s awesome!’”

“Finley’s awesome!” everyone said, although I only heard Will, who yelled everything. Click. Click. I watched Colin’s goofy stance as he shot the pictures, so grateful for him once again for making this easier. His family was a tight unit—parents married twenty-plus years, older sister already at Defriese, running for student office herself. Colin, the most ambitious person I’d ever met, was considered the family slacker.

Meanwhile, at our messy house, money was usually short, diapers and rogue LEGO pieces ruled, and someone was always leaving the fridge door open. My stepmom was sweet but always exhausted, a matched set with my dad, who I’d discovered napping in his car in front of our house the day before, having dozed off between cutting the engine and taking groceries out of the trunk.

And then there was my mom, Catherine Finley Hope, who was now standing beside me, her posture straight, sunglasses on as she regarded Colin and the camera. In her black dress and suit jacket, hair pulled back, she looked as out of place on

the lawn of Jackson High as she did anywhere that was not a boardroom or office. A dark blotch, eerily quiet as Colin started another round of “Finley’s awesome!” and my brother and sister increased their volume. Even with all the noise, I was very aware that my mom did not chime in.

Like I said. Awkward.

“Let’s get one all together!” Colin’s dad said, just as we finally began reclaiming our personal space. I looked at Mrs. Frisbee, but she was already on it, gently reminding him we’d be late for our lunch reservation, where we could get plenty of pictures, inside. Then Colin was handing Marisol her phone back, or trying to, as Leo dove for her boob (his favorite) while she scrambled to cover up.

“I’ll call the restaurant to let them know we’re on the way,” my mother said, her low, even voice always finding my ears no matter what other chaos was around.

“Mom, Will hit me again,” Piper reported.

“Shhh,” my dad told her, taking Leo. Marisol grabbed a twin’s hand in each of hers and began pulling them out of ear-shot. She always hated when they acted up, but with my mom as an audience, it was worse.

“All right, everyone!” Mrs. Frisbee clapped her hands. “To Luna Blu. We’re in the back private room, thanks to Catherine. I still can’t figure out how you got that reservation. They swore they were fully booked!”

At this, my mom just flashed her work smile, or really, her only smile: just enough teeth, measured warmth, quick. “Just a connection I had.”

“Well, I can’t wait,” Mr. Frisbee said, rubbing his hands together. “I was thinking about those famous fried pickles the entire ceremony.”

“Nice, Dad,” Colin said. “Glad you enjoyed my speech.”

“I can think food and pay attention,” his dad assured him, as Mrs. Frisbee laughed. “I especially liked the line about your father being your inspiration. And the Churchill quote. Nice touch.”

At this, Colin smiled. He played a big game, always, but I knew how much his dad’s approval meant to him. “Gotta know when to use the right words.”

“Smart kid.” As Mr. Frisbee pulled him in for a hug, his wife and Heather looked on, smiling. Yet again, I was reminded how, as a family, they were like this warm light, calling me closer. I just wanted to sit in it forever.

“Finley. Congratulations.”

I turned to see Ms. Fallon, my English teacher. She’d been my favorite of the faculty at Jackson even before agreeing to advise my senior honors project, an oral history at a local retirement home. “Thanks,” I said, glancing over at Colin, who was still talking to Heather and his parents. Suddenly aware of my mom beside me, I said, “Um, this is my mom, Catherine. Mom, this is Ms. Fallon. I told you about her.”

“Of course.” My mom extended a hand. In her sleek suit, she was a studied opposite of Ms. Fallon, who was in a dress I recognized from Cork, the discount place where I shopped as well. “From what Finley says, you’ve been a real influence and mentor.”

I flushed. Of course she’d sum up something I couldn’t

even explain, with a few words of corporate speak. Ms. Fallon smiled. “It was my pleasure. You’ve got a really cool kid here. I can’t wait to see what she does next year.”

Hearing this, I felt a bolt of panic. Only two people knew that I’d actually gotten into my dream school, Pacchiana College, and turned it down to go to the U with Colin: me and Ms. Fallon. It would have been just me, but she had a friend in admissions. Now I had a flash of when I’d told her my plans, how her face fell before she carefully rearranged it. She’d felt so many things for me over the years, but disappointment had never been one of them. Until then.

“The university will provide lots of opportunity,” my mom said now. “I’m an alum myself.”

Of course she’d need to point this out. Ms. Fallon was smart, educated, and someone I admired. It would only take half of that to bring out the competitor in my mom. “It is,” Ms. Fallon agreed. “Although I’m sure we can all agree that Finley would thrive anywhere.”

My mom took a beat, hearing this. With her sunglasses on, I couldn’t make out her eyes. The crowds from graduation were dispersing to the parking lot, and for the first time, I felt that now, really, it was over. High school. My time at Jackson. So much lead-up, the farewell tour that was senior year, and only now did it hit me.

“Finley!” Colin called out. I looked over to see him standing with his parents and my dad, Marisol just beyond with all three kids, trying to herd them toward the car. “You ready to go?”

Looking at him, I felt that warmth again. It didn’t matter

who knew the other paths I might have taken. This was what I had chosen.

I met Colin Frisbee on the first day of junior year at Jackson. It was like entering a new world: Until then, I'd spent my entire life at the Fountain School, the crunchy private school where my dad and stepmom both taught. But after a lifetime with the same kids, I was determined to make a change. So I left my friends behind to keep exploring their feelings in sharing circles while I tried public school. It seemed like a great idea until I had to walk in alone that muggy August morning.

My first class was US History, and I arrived to find the room already packed, with only a handful of desks left. I scanned them, considering my options. I could be adjacent to a stocky guy in a muscle tee who was drawing video game logos on his notebook. Or at a table with two girls who had their laptops already open and books out, ready to begin. The last spot was next to a guy with short brown hair wearing a green T-shirt and beat-up flip-flops who was drumming a pencil against his temple. Door number three, it was.

Just as I slid into the desk, Ms. Hernandez, standing at the front of the room, clapped her hands. "Hello, everyone! This is US History. If you're not supposed to be here, this would be a good time to gracefully exit."

Silence. No one left. She continued.

"Great! This semester, we'll be learning about this great country of ours. Although I bet you think you know it pretty well already; am I right?"

No one seemed to be sure whether this was a rhetorical question. One of the laptop girls started to raise her hand, just in case it wasn't.

"Well, let's find out. Grab a partner."

This got a response, and not an altogether positive one. Clearly, everyone had been expecting an easing of sorts into the new semester. But partners?

"People," Ms. Hernandez said with a sigh. "This isn't prom. Just turn to the person beside you or behind you and introduce yourself."

A groan from the back, and then people started shifting around and talking. I was on the end of a row, so I turned to face the guy in the green T-shirt, hoping he hadn't already turned to his left. He had not. In fact, he was sitting there, his face expectant.

"Colin Frisbee," he said, sticking out his hand. He had a very clean-cut look to him, even features, perfect teeth. "And you are?"

"Finley," I said, feeling my face flush. "Hope."

"Finley and Colin," he repeated. "We sound like a singer-songwriter duo. Can you carry a tune?"

"Um," I said. "No."

"I'm not great either. Guess we better stick to history, huh?" And with that, he grinned at me. Not smiled, but *grinned*, and until I met Colin I honestly hadn't realized there was much of a difference. But it was obvious the way this simple thing lit up both his whole face and, I was embarrassed to admit, my heart. Yowza. Later, I'd hear a million stories about Colin and his grin, how as a baby and kid everyone commented on it, the way it

ensured he never met a stranger, one of many things making him a “born politician!” his dad would say. But at that moment, I thought that grin was mine alone. And I liked that.

“Okay,” Ms. Hernandez said. “Next, grab a piece of paper and a pen. I’m going to mark ten minutes on the clock. When I say go, I want you to list all fifty states.”

Now one of the laptop girls, who had straight black hair and glasses, did raise her hand. “Ms. Hernandez, is this a competition?”

“It is. First team to get all the states within the time limit gets extra-credit points.”

“Do you really think that’s wise? That everyone here can, you know, handle it?”

There was a flurry of laughter, although I wasn’t exactly sure of the joke myself. Then I realized Ms. Hernandez was smiling, looking at my partner.

“Colin? Can you do this without having a breakdown?” she asked.

“No,” the other laptop girl said, and snorted.

“That was last year,” Colin said, but it was clear he was in on the joke, that this was a thing. “And, I might add, a possibly biased call on the part of the official.”

“I was the official,” Ms. Hernandez said, “and it was the wrong answer.”

“*Last year!*” Colin said again, and everyone laughed. “I’m a new man now. Please proceed.”

“Competitive Colin,” the laptop girl with glasses added. “We’ll all be praying for your partner, poor thing.”

“Oh, Finley is going to wipe the floor with you guys,” he replied confidently. “I won’t even have to help.”

What? I thought.

“Go!” yelled Ms. Hernandez, and the room was suddenly buzzing. Colin immediately wrote down our home state. “Forty-nine to go. What’s our strategy?”

“Are you really that competitive?”

“No,” he said, writing down California, Oregon, and Washington. “Maybe. Yes. How are you on the Midwest?”

“Not as good as you think I am,” I said. “Put down Hawaii and Alaska.”

“My feeling is that you have a killer instinct. I have a sense for these things.” He was writing down states quickly as he spoke: all of New England, the Deep South, Texas, and the Gulf.

“Do the norths and souths, Dakotas and Carolinas,” I said. I noticed the girl with glasses behind him was listening to us and grabbed a pencil, gesturing not to talk. He shot me a thumbs-up, then pushed his desk closer so we were right next to each other, making room for me to add to the list. Instead, I found an empty spot on the page and started to draw a map.

You are brilliant, he scribbled, in between adding Virginia, Maryland, and Tennessee.

Flattered, I started filling in the mid-Atlantic states, then moved west. I got hung up for a second on Arkansas and Michigan, but rallied. All around us people were shouting states, but we were stealthy, silent except for the scraping of his pencil and mine.

W's and M's, I scribbled, having run out of sure things I knew in the middle of the map.

Montana, Wyoming, Wisconsin, Minnesota, he added. Then he looked at me, eyebrows raised. I snapped my fingers.

Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, I wrote.

"Four Corners!" he said. "Nice."

"Shhhh!" I swatted at him with my hand.

"Oh. Sorry," he said. I could feel him watching me as I bent my head back over the paper, thinking.

"Five minutes to go," announced Ms. Hernandez. Colin looked back at the girls behind us.

"Keep your head in the game," I said. "You want them to have bragging rights?"

Another smile. "I might love you," he announced broadly. "Just saying."

I couldn't dwell on this—okay, maybe I did for a second—because we only had three left to go. "Come on, come on," I said under my breath, running my pencil over my makeshift map.

Colin was biting his lip, thinking as well. *Indiana*, he wrote. *Illinois*.

One left. We looked at each other. Suddenly nothing mattered more to me than remembering this one last state.

A squeal from the laptop girls, and they huddled again over their paper. Colin looked at me. "They're double checkers," he said. "They've got it, there's no—"

Idaho, I wrote down. I stuck up my hand. "We're done!"

"We have a possible winner," Ms. Hernandez said, walking over to us. "Pending my check."

“We’re done too,” the girl with the black hair shouted.

“Too late, Kumara!” Colin hollered back. But I was only focused on Ms. Hernandez, running a finger down our list of states. When she reached the final one, she looked at me.

“He’s going to be insufferable now,” she told me. “You know that, right?”

But I didn’t care, wasn’t thinking about that one bit as she declared us the champs. Some people were clapping, some booing, but all I could focus on was Colin, grinning widely at me as he held up a palm for a high five. When I pressed my hand to his, he wrapped his fingers around mine, giving them a quick squeeze.

“Way to go, Idaho,” he said. In all the noise and commotion, I heard him as clear as day. Then I squeezed back.

Idaho.

That one word would become my nickname, our inside joke, the beginning of everything. As we sat at Double Burger on our first date, three days later, we decided we would have to go there, maybe in a year’s time, to commemorate our victory. Never mind that we were both under eighteen, had no actual money to speak of, and still probably would have had trouble picking it out on a map. Already, with Colin, anything seemed possible.

“Have you ever been?” he asked me as he started another burger. The boy could eat, although he was so skinny it was hard to tell where it all went.

“To Idaho?” I asked. He nodded, chewing. “Nope. You?”

He shook his head, helping himself to the fries we'd put on the table between us, only after he'd established that I didn't believe in putting any condiments on top of them—*Are you a drencher? I can't date a drencher*—as well as my preference for extra salt. “The only part of the country I know other than here is Chicago, which was home of the Frisbee Fam until I was in eighth grade and my dad got his job here.”

The Frisbee Fam. Who else did I know with a family nickname? I loved it. “What's he do?”

“Political science professor at the U,” he replied. “When you meet him, avoid asking him about the election. He won't stop talking for hours.”

He was like that too, right out of the gate: a maker of plans, already assuming a future for us. It wasn't just Idaho, or asking about my drencher status, or this—prepping me already to meet his dad (who did bring up a recent decision by the president before going on to list both pros and cons in full detail). There was also how he referred to his friends, and how they'd love me—the laptop girls, Hannah Klein and Nalini Kumara, were two of his besties—not to mention that I was a natural for their group game night, which did they did every week after the Frisbee Fam Friday dinner, another tradition.

“What about you?” he asked. “You always lived in Lakeview?”

I nodded, adding some salt to my end of the fries. “My parents met at school here. When they divorced, Dad and I stayed.”

“Where’s your mom live?”

Immediately, I had a flash of her current apartment. All her places—and there had been several as she climbed the corporate ladder—were done in the same aesthetic: modern, cool, and minimalist. “Timlee,” I said. “That’s her home base. But she travels most of the year.”

“What’s she do?”

With someone else, I might have felt like I was being interrogated. But Colin’s curiosity was flattering, even contagious. His need for details made me feel interesting. “She’s a corporate staffing advisor. Basically, the person who comes and tells you who to fire.”

His eyes widened. “Wow. Intense.”

“I guess,” I said, dunking a fry. “I don’t actually know her that well.”

A pause, just one beat. Then he said, “What about your dad?”

I smiled. “He’s an English teacher at the Fountain School. My stepmom teaches kindergarten. They met there, when I was in her class. Now they have the twins, my brother and sister, who are six. Will and Piper. And the baby, Leo.”

He froze for a second. “Wait. You went to the Fountain School?”

I nodded. “All my life until this year.”

“I have always been fascinated with that place,” he said. He leaned in closer. “Is it true there are chickens on the campus?”

“Yep. A coop and everything. We got to collect eggs and feed them.”

“I always wanted a goat,” he told me. “My mom was *not* on board.”

“She’s smart,” I told him. “The one at Fountain was a nightmare.”

He looked thrilled, as if this was another check in my column. “You had goats, too?”

“Just one,” I said, and he laughed. “His name was Seymour.”

“Are you kidding me with this?” I shook my head. “Idaho! You’re fascinating. What other secrets are you hiding?”

I laughed. “None. Livestock’s all I got.”

“Livestock can take you a long way,” he said. “I can’t wait until you come over for Friday dinner. It’s going to be all about Seymour the Goat, right out of the gate.”

“You guys really eat dinner together every Friday?” I asked. “Our house is too chaotic for that. Sometimes I just eat cereal and call it dinner.”

“Leigh Frisbee is a firm believer in family face time,” he said. “Leigh Frisbee does not tolerate cereal in the evening.”

“Leigh Frisbee sounds a little scary,” I said.

He smiled. “Nah. She’s awesome. Her cooking is legendary and the more people she can feed, the happier she is. That’s how we ended up doing game night at our place. The snacks were just too good to go anywhere else. Speaking of which, how are you at Speculator?”

“Speculator?”

He sat back in his seat, eyes wide. “Seriously? It’s only the best game *ever*. Settlement building, cabin construction, material gathering, pelts . . . it’s got it all.”

“Pelts?”

He ate another fry. “Just wait, Idaho. With your killer instinct and my experience, we’ll be unstoppable.”

And there it was again. The future, our future, as clear in his mind as if it was laid out right beside us like a game board itself. All summer I’d been bracing myself for the unknowns of the fall, this jump into a new school and a new life. And now, here was this boy, so confident that what lay ahead would not only be guaranteed but *good*. How could I do anything but fall in love with him?

I didn’t, though, not then. Or at that first game night a couple of days later, when he brought me into the Frisbee living room, a hand on my shoulder, and introduced me to Nalini, Hannah, the rest of the gang, and the intricate rules of Speculator. Don’t get me wrong: I was crushing hard then, and we texted constantly and walked to classes together at school, where I began to sit at lunch with him and his friends on the edge of the center fountain, their customary spot. But it was the following week, a random weekday, that I’d look back on as the day he became mine.

Colin’s family was super involved at Lakeview Methodist, where he and his dad both taught Sunday school. While Mari-sol had been raised Catholic, she wasn’t practicing, and my dad and I had never been religious one way or the other. So when he asked if I wanted to come along to the annual Children’s Dance that Tuesday, I said yes immediately, curious to see what it was all about.

It was a mild night in early fall, and I remember feeling

oddly nervous as we walked in through the main doors to the brightly lit church. I wasn't sure how to act, suddenly, or what the protocol was, and felt grateful when Colin took my hand.

Everyone knew him, of course, with hellos coming from all sides as he led me to a seat toward the front, next to his mom and dad. The minister, a surprisingly young guy who greeted me warmly, went to a podium shortly after and led everyone in a prayer. I watched Colin bow his head, his parents beside him, and did the same, feeling that peace of so many people being quiet together. It was nice.

The dance was an annual thing, part recital, part tea party. All the kids under twelve who participated in the after-school program had been taught some easy steps, and this was when they got to dress up and show off what they'd learned. Colin's group was the second graders. The cuteness as he herded them onstage in their paper crowns decorated with sun shapes was almost unbearable.

Truthfully, I felt the same way about Colin. Times like this, watching him move through the world with such humor, effortlessly, I couldn't believe he'd chosen me. At Fountain, I'd been content to stay on the periphery, observing. That hadn't changed: In fact, I was doing it right then. Being with him, though, gave me a connection. Like, now I was linked to something bigger, better than myself.

When all the classes were finished, the pastor invited anyone who was so inclined to come up onstage for one last dance. By this point, things were quickly devolving, especially with the younger kids, many of whom had wandered off or sat down. A

few people got up around me, but I stayed where I was, watching Colin as he reassured a girl in a shiny pink dress who had burst into tears. As her mom swooped in, he turned, gesturing for me to join him.

Immediately, I shook my head. But he was undeterred, again giving me the universal sign for *come on*. Beside me, I heard his mom chuckle: She and Mr. Frisbee had seen it too. Maybe it was this, an added audience, that made me get to my feet.

By the time I got to the stage, it was full-out chaos: kids, parents, crumpled crowns, seated preschoolers—some wailing. Colin, however, kept his eyes on me as I approached, feeling every bit of my shyness. But then he held up his hands in the same stiff, formal way the kids had been taught, giving me a grin, and I found myself doing the same, our fingers locking around each other's. As he began to lead me into a boxy step—front, right, back, left—a final song began to play over the loudspeakers.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine

You make me happy when skies are gray

The words were still in my head later that night, when Colin kissed me for the first time as we sat on the front steps of my house. They became part of the story too, like Idaho and Seymour the Goat. But it was that dance I'd come back to more than anything. How after so long of my being sidelined, feeling shapeless, I'd been brought into a place I fit perfectly. From then on, all I wanted was to remain there, like a planet in endless orbit, forever.

CHAPTER TWO

A toast,” Mr. Frisbee announced, lifting his glass, “to the graduates.”

It was loud in the restaurant, despite us being in the back room, and it took a moment for everyone to stop talking. All week there had been one final thing after another: last day of classes, last lunch, last night as a high school student. This, though, felt new. A first.

“Eighteen years ago, when Colin was born,” Mr. Frisbee began, holding his glass aloft, “I thought a lot about what it means to have a son.”

“Dad,” Heather, who I’d noticed sneaking sips from her mom’s beer, groaned. “You said a toast. Not a speech.”

Leigh shushed her, moving the bottle to her other side. Beneath the table, Colin squeezed my hand.

“I have always been proud of Colin,” his dad continued, as Piper asked my dad loudly if she could go to the bathroom. Marisol was already outside, walking Leo around to keep him from screaming. “But today, he inspired me.”

“Dad,” Colin said, but I could hear the tightness in his voice. “Don’t cry.”

“He already is,” Heather observed.

“To my son Colin and his incredible girlfriend, Finley,” Mr. Frisbee continued. “Two amazing kids who will most certainly change the world. Congratulations.”

Everyone raised a glass, except for my dad, who was wrangling Piper and Will out the door. In the ensuing calm, I was even more aware of my mother beside me, silent and observant as always.

“Catherine?” Leigh asked her. “Would you like to say something?”

It was an awkward moment, although I appreciated what Colin’s mom was trying to do. Between the kids and my mom’s natural reticence, it was unlikely I’d get my own mention otherwise.

“Yes, thank you.” My mom lifted her drink, red manicured nails against the glass. Then she turned to me, and I felt a jolt of nerves, like I might not be prepared for what she would say. Which was stupid, because my mother was the opposite of impulsive. Anything she wanted to express had already been written, edited, and learned by heart.

“To Finley,” she began, and I took in her dark hair, straight to my wavy, and the green eyes we shared. “I am so proud to be your mother. Here’s to an incredible future for you and Colin both.”

“Hear, hear,” Mr. Frisbee bellowed, as Leigh dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. “To the kids!”

More clanking, more pouring of drinks. Colin’s dad reached over, grabbing him for a hug, while Leigh kissed his cheek. Meanwhile, my mom and I sat there, side by side, not

touching. She'd eaten exactly half of everything on her plate, just like always.

"Idaho," Colin said from my other side. "You okay?"

I nodded, returning his smile so he could go back to his parents. As for mine, they were split, as always. My dad outside with Marisol and the kids, my mom here out of obligation. It was nice, and I appreciated it. I mean, I had come from her, once, and this was what I always made a point to remember when it felt like she was a figure labeled *Mom* and not much more. It had to mean something, that she'd carried me in her belly and then raised me for those first four years. I just didn't know what it was.

My baby album is white, and small, with a picture of me as an infant showing through the cutout on the front cover. It's only when you open it that the full picture is revealed: my mom at twenty-three, in a ponytail and jeans, sitting on a couch, holding me in her lap. She's leaning into my ear, saying something, her own mouth half open as the shutter clicks. One picture, both together and broken apart. Just like us.

My parents got together their sophomore year at the U. She was studying econ, and he was an English major with dreams of writing a novel. While he'd grown up in Lakeview, a faculty brat with both parents professors, her family lived an hour and a half east in a small town. They moved in together after commencement, both picking up jobs until the fall when my dad would start his graduate degree and she would attend law school. But then, that summer, my mom got pregnant with

me. She did her fall classes, intending fully to start again after I was born. But she didn't.

Not the next spring. Not the following semester, either. In fact, four years would pass—during which my dad got a master's and began his PhD—with my mom and me together all the time, day after day, before she'd jump ship to start her life over.

I often wondered, when Marisol had the twins and then Leo, what it was that finally tipped my mom to the side of leaving. All the crying? Diapers and potty training? The endless snacks required? It could have been any of these, a combination, or something entirely different. All I knew for sure was that one day she was there. Then she was gone.

Of course, at four I didn't remember her going, the way she did it, or really any details. I just had this sense of things being one way, then another. Just like the cover of that album. Open and close, and everything changes.

After, my dad regrouped. Enrolled me in preschool, which I loved, the loss of my mom always tinged with a new world of friends and teachers. He took a teaching job at Fountain, intending to finish his dissertation. Instead, he met Marisol and started a new family, steadily filling our quiet world with noise and the momentum of, well, life. We'd been moving at break-neck pace ever since. Like what was before was just a photo, but this was a GIF, the frames on repeat, again and again.

This was probably why, with my mom, the first thing I always noticed was her stillness. Her deliberate movements, learned corporate calm. Her careful, measured words. When

we spent time alone, I would literally find my right foot pressing down on an imaginary gas pedal, as if I could somehow rev her up to my speed. I talked too much, moved too fast, and was always waiting for our time together to be over.

It wasn't our time, though. It was hers. That was how we always referred to it: "Catherine's time" or "your mom's time." It wasn't much: a week at Christmas, two in the summer, plus a handful of weekends she always claimed in January. I was never sure if she really wanted to see me or if this was just another thing to check off her list, along with money and job titles. Or maybe it went deeper. But that was the thing about my mom. She was all surface, gliding. Whereas I was always aware of my feet churning beneath me.

This year, she'd specifically requested the week after graduation for us to take a trip together to New York. She'd lived there for a few years when I was younger, but I'd never gotten to visit, and she wanted to give me the full experience: Broadway show, shopping on Fifth Avenue, MoMA, and all her favorite restaurants. It sounded great, until the spring, when Colin's grandparents invited me on the Disney cruise they'd booked as *his* big gift. I really wanted to go, thinking my mom could be flexible and reschedule. My dad warned me she wouldn't. And he was right.

"I've already made the reservations," she reminded me after gently saying no. "And this is my time."

Her time, again. I was just an object to fill it.

So the next day, I'd say goodbye to Colin and we'd head our separate ways. Him to the water with Ariel and Rapunzel; me

the city, with the parent I barely knew. I appreciated that I was beyond lucky to even have these options. But I wondered what it would be like if I made my own choice when it came to my mom, just this once.

When I had thoughts like this, I'd realize I did recall something about her leaving: sitting there as absolute sadness washed over me like a wave. It wasn't even a memory as much as a feeling. Like I was hollowed out, with no idea of what had once filled me.

"Hey," Colin said, pulling me more tightly against him. "Idaho. Don't cry."

"I'm sorry," I told him. Normally I was not one for Big Feelings, so I wasn't sure what it was that had me suddenly teary only a few hours after all the celebrations. Maybe the champagne we'd smuggled to his family's guesthouse after Nalini's party, where we'd planned to soak up the last of our time together. Or the New York trip I now didn't even want to take, which was creeping ever closer, second by second. I just had a bad feeling, uneasy, like my balance was off. I couldn't explain it. All I could do was cry.

When we'd gotten onto the couch earlier, kissing wildly as we ditched our graduation gowns, it had felt like we still had so much time. Now my phone said one thirty. I had to be home by two, and she was picking me up in a hired car at seven sharp. Another constant of our relationship: the big, clean cars she sent for me. Always driven by a quiet man in a suit who I avoided talking to until we were at our destination.

Now thinking of *this* made me cry. I was a mess.

“I love you,” I told Colin now, my voice breaking. More tears. This was not how I wanted to leave him, us, for a second, much less a full week. “We’ll be okay, right?”

I had my cheek to his chest as I said this, one of his hands stroking my hair. Beneath me, I felt him take a big breath.

I lifted my head. “What?”

He looked at me for a second. Again, I felt that weird clench. But then there it was, that grin. My world. “Idaho. How could I ever give up the girl who told me about Seymour the Goat?”

I laughed, snotty and despite myself. Then I curled in tighter, taking note of every detail of this place beside him until I was back here again.

CHAPTER THREE

My mother was late. Not just late. A half hour late. And not answering her phone. Two things that never happened. Clearly, she was dead.

“What?” Marisol, horrified, said as she spooned mashed bananas into Leo’s open mouth. In the adjacent living room, Will and Piper were in their morning trance, cereal bowls balanced on their laps as some cartoon blared from the TV. My dad was still in bed, as sleep was a commodity, always. “Finley. No. I’m sure she just got held up somehow. Try her again.”

Marisol’s extended family—parents, an older brother, three younger sisters—was loud and tightly interconnected, their exchanges over the phone and at gatherings a whizzing mix of laughter, Spanish, and English. My mom’s quiet, and the ripple effect it tended to cause, had always mystified her.

I turned back to my phone and saw the last text I’d sent to Colin, who was leaving for the airport shortly. **Miss you already**, it read, followed by a heart. No response, but that wasn’t much of a surprise. When traveling, the Frisbee Fam moved with military precision as well as a strict phone use policy, which his mom maintained “preserved the experience.” I’d hear from him eventually.

Just then, a shiny silver Lexus pulled up in front of our house. My mom was behind the wheel. I didn't even know she could drive.

"She's here," I reported, watching as she cut the engine. Usually she was in work attire, which as far as I knew was also her life attire: black-suit wear in the form of a jacket, sleeveless dress, and tailored pants in one combo or another. Now she was in a simple black T-shirt. Another first.

"Oh, good," Marisol said, sounding so relieved, it was clear she'd been worried too. She padded down the hallway, poking her head into their bedroom. "Jason. Finley's car is here."

My mother did not move from her seat. Instead, she just sat there, studying her rearview mirror like it was her job. Finally, she emerged, starting slowly up the walk. I opened the door just as she was climbing the steps.

"Hey," I said, as I heard my dad and Marisol come into the kitchen, Leo squawking a greeting. "Everything okay?"

"Not exactly," she said. Her always-sleek hair was pulled back into a bun, a few waves hanging loose. She had dark circles under her eyes I knew I would have noticed the day before.

"Catherine?" I turned to see my dad behind me, his face still sleepy, in a T-shirt and gym shorts that constituted his pajamas. "What's going on?"

Instead of answering, my mom looked at me. As if something in my face would decide what happened next. Then she said, "I have to go to the woods."

Camping? I couldn't even picture my mom in a tent. It was like trying to imagine her on the moon.

“Your parents’ house?” my dad said. “Now?”

She nodded, looking down at the key fob clutched in her hand. “We’re finally selling.”

I looked at Marisol, who seemed as clueless as I was. All I knew about my mom’s family was that she was from a small city in the southeastern part of the state. I’d been there twice: once in second grade to visit my grandmother in her rest home, and then again a couple of years later for her funeral. Both were a blur, tinged with formality, as all activities involving my mom tended to be. My dad said, “Liz and Kasey actually want to do that?”

“So it seems.” She swallowed, and I had a bolt of panic, thinking she might cry. For some reason, I was not sure I could handle that. Instead, she took a breath. “The bottom line is, I’ve been needing to go, and I haven’t. Now I’m out of time.” She turned, looking at me. “I’m so sorry, Finley.”

“So New York isn’t happening?” I asked, still confused. Then a realization. “I could have gone on the cruise?”

A beat as she looked at me, and I swear—strange as it sounded—she seemed hurt. But then, just as quickly, her face changed. Cold and distant, familiar yet again.

“No,” she said. She took a breath, steeling herself. “We’re going to the lake.”

The worst part was passing the airport exit.

If it had been the final moments of a rom-com, I could have booked myself on Colin’s flight immediately, while his grandparents somehow discovered one extra cruise ticket. Cue

us waving from the ship's deck as it left port, everything perfect and solved. But this was real life, so I watched a plane taking off in my rearview, swallowing over the lump in my throat.

It had been over fifteen minutes since we'd gotten into the car at my house, and my mother had still not uttered a word. Instead, she just kept taking breaths, like she was about to speak, and then exhaling, saying nothing. She was also driving fast, changing lanes often. For a place she clearly didn't want to go, she sure was in a hurry to get there.

Finally, after about thirty minutes, she took an exit, pulling into a Chicks right off the ramp. When I looked at her, she said, "Bathroom. You should go here so we don't have to stop again."

Then she opened her door, getting out, and I followed her inside. I'd never been to any eatery with my mom that did not have a bar and a hostess stand. Now she headed for this fast-food joint restroom like she'd been there a million times, passing a few seniors having breakfast in the booths. I pulled out my phone, quickly texting Colin again, hoping I might catch him before he boarded.

Change of plans. Going to the lake?

"I'm getting coffee," my mom announced as she returned. She'd put on her sunglasses. "You want anything?"

I shook my head, and she turned, studying the lit-up menu over the registers. After using the bathroom as she'd directed (what was I, two?), I splashed some water on my face, drying it with a rough paper towel. Back at the car, my mother was behind the wheel, engine already running. She said nothing as

I got in and was pulling away before I'd even gotten my seat belt on, back into the flow of semis and commuters headed east.

As she moved into the left lane, I texted Nalini and Hannah, filling them in. I felt us switch lanes again before my mom observed, "Is that Colin? I thought he was leaving this morning."

"He is," I said. I was sensing a bit of judgment. "This is someone else."

"Oh." She glanced over at me: I could see myself reflected, small, in her sunglasses. "Well, it's nice to know you have other friends."

Forget a sense: Now her point was obvious. "Of course I do. We have a whole group."

It wasn't until after I said this that I realized the collective might not have been the ideal choice. "Right," she said, in such a way I was pretty sure she'd noticed it as well. "I just haven't gotten to know any of them, I suppose."

You don't live here, I wanted to say. Or: You barely know me. Why would you expect to be hanging out with my friends? Instead, I went with, "They're usually with their own families holidays and summers."

"Of course. That makes sense." She glanced at the rear-view: a beat later a tow truck whizzed past us, lights flashing. "I guess what I'm saying is, it's important not to build your entire life around just one person. Especially since you and Colin are attending the same school in the fall."

"The U is a big place," I countered. "I doubt we'll just hang out with each other."

Before she could answer, my phone chirped. It was Hannah, sending a bunch of shocked faces in reply to my update. She and Nalini were headed to a beach week with a bunch of other seniors later that day, the first of two our friend group planned for the summer. Colin and I would be on the next one, right before we all headed off our separate ways in late August.

Thinking this, I remembered that I had to make a spreadsheet about everyone's share of the week's rent, as well as a meal list. Might as well get the jump. I bent down, taking out my laptop, then set my phone beside me and put on my earbuds: I had two podcasts I'd been meaning to listen to.

I'd just cued up an episode when I felt us move off the highway and up an off-ramp. I adjusted the volume, then started typing as the host began murmuring in my ear. I was so absorbed, it took me a minute to realize we were no longer moving. Just sitting, in fact, at a stop sign on the exit to a random highway, nothing else around. Also, something was buzzing.

It was coming from behind us. I turned, seeing my mom's phone in a leather tote on the backseat. ELIZABETH, said the screen. I waited for her to turn and grab it, but she just stared straight ahead, deep in thought, as if there were more than two options for us to take: right or left.

More buzzing. This was going to make me crazy.

"Are you going to get that?" I asked her.

"What?"

Of course, right then the phone stopped. A school bus puttered past, handprints on the back window. Then the buzzing began again.