

Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Nicole Sparks. Welcome to the first day of the worst summer of my life.

"Colie," my mother said with a sigh as she walked down the train platform toward me. She was in one of her FlyKiki workout suits, purple this time; she looked like a shiny grape. Her assistant, standing by the station door, took a not-so-subtle look at her watch. "Will you please try not to look so tortured?"

I fake-smiled at her, crossing my arms more tightly over my chest.

"Oh, that's even worse," she said. Another sigh. "With your hair that color and that thing in your lip you look terrible even when you're smiling." She came closer, her sneakers making squeaky mouse noises on the concrete. Like everything else, they were brand-new. "Honey, you know this is for the best. You couldn't stay by yourself at the house all summer. You'd be lonely."

"I have friends, Mom," I said.

She cocked her head to the side, as if she doubted this. "Oh, honey," she said again. "It's for the best."

The best for you, I thought. The thing about my mother is that she always has good intentions. But that's as far as she usually gets.

"Kiki," said the assistant, whose name I hadn't even bothered to learn because she'd be gone by the time I got back, fired before they even reached the airport, probably, "we've got to go if we want to make that flight."

"All right, all right." My mother put her hands on her hips—the classic Kiki Sparks aerobic stance—and looked me up and down. "You'll keep up your workouts, right? It would be a shame to gain all that weight back."

"Yes."

"And you'll eat healthy—I told you I'm sending along the complete Kiki line—so you'll have your foods with you at Mira's."

"You told me."

She let her hands drop to her sides, and in that one brief moment I saw my mother again. Not Kiki Sparks, fitness guru and personal trainer of the masses. Not the talk show Kiki, the infomercial Kiki, the Kiki that smiled out from a million weight-loss products worldwide. Just my mom.

But now the train was coming.

"Oh, Colie," she said, and she pulled me close, burying her face in the jet-black hair that had almost made her have a total breakdown when I came to breakfast that morning. "Please don't be mad at me. Okay?"

I hugged her back, even though I'd told myself I wouldn't. I'd pictured myself stony and silent as the train pulled out of the station, my angry face the last image she'd take with her on her European Summer FlyKiki Fitness Tour. But I was the opposite of my mother, in more than just the fact that I always had bad intentions. And that was as far as *I* got.

"I love you," she whispered as we walked toward the train.

Then take me with you, I thought, but she was already pulling back, wiping her eyes, and I knew if I said it the words would fall between us and just lie there, causing more trouble than they were worth.

"I love you too," I said. When I got to my seat I looked out the window and found her standing by the station door, her assistant still fidgeting beside her. She waved, in all that purple, and I waved back, even as the lump formed hard and throbbing in the back of my throat. Then I put on my headphones, turned up my music as loud as I could, and closed my eyes as the train slipped away.

It hadn't always been like this.

In my first real memory, at five, I am wearing white mary janes and sitting in the front seat of our old

Volaré station wagon in front of a 7-Eleven. It is really, really hot, and my mother is walking toward me carrying two Big Gulps, a bag of Fritos, and a box of Twinkies. She's wearing cowboy boots, red ones, and a short skirt, even though this is during what we call the "Fat Years." Being obese—she topped out, at her worst, at about 325 pounds—never stopped my mother from following fads.

She opens the car door and tosses in the loot, the bag of Fritos banking off my leg and onto the floor.

"Scoot over," she says, settling her large form in beside me. "We've still got half a day till Texas."

The rest of my early memories are all of highway, coming toward me from different landscapes: flat, dry desert; thick Carolina pines; windy coastal roads framed by dunes. Only a few things stayed the same. My mother and I were both fat. It was usually not too far to the next place. And we were always together, us against the world.

The last of our stops was Charlotte, North Carolina, three years ago. It's the longest I've ever stayed in any one school. It's also where my mother became Kiki Sparks.

Before, she was just Katharine, college dropout and master of a million small talents: she'd pumped gas, peddled cemetery plots over the phone, sold Mary Kay cosmetics, even arranged appointments at an escort service. Anything to keep us in food and gas money until she started itching to travel again. But after a few days in Charlotte she applied for a job at a dry cleaner's which she -didn't get and, in a fit of frustration, accidentally rear-ended a Cadillac in the parking lot. Since we were flat broke, she talked the owner of the car, who ran a gym called Lady Fitness, into letting her work off the cost of the repairs. She started by cleaning the machines and answering phones, but after a few weeks the woman liked her so much she gave her a full-time job and a free membership. A week earlier we'd been back to ketchup soup and ramen noodles, sleeping in the back of the car; now, we had a steady income and a decent apartment. Back in the Fat Years, things always seemed to work out at the last minute.

My mom had been trying to lose weight all her life. At Lady Fitness, it actually started to happen. She'd always loved to dance, and she got hooked on aerobics, taking classes whenever she could fit them in. After a week or two she started dragging me with her. It was kind of embarrassing. She was *super* enthusiastic, the one voice you could hear above all the rest, all three hundred pounds of her touch-stepping and heel-toeing, clapping her hands and singing along to the music.

The instructors, however, *loved* her. After a few months one of them started helping her prepare for the certification test so she could teach her own classes. When she passed she became the heaviest—and most popular—instructor in the history of Lady Fitness. She played the best music, knew all her students by name, and used the stories of our Fat Years to emphasize her message that anyone can do *anything* they set their mind to.

By the time we'd been in Charlotte two years, my mother had lost a hundred and sixty pounds, with me shedding forty-five and a half right beside her. Katharine disappeared, along with the breakfasts of doughnuts and chocolate milk, our love handles and our double chins, and Kiki was born.

She loved her new, strong body, but for me it was harder. Even though I'd been teased all my life, I'd always taken a small, strange comfort in my folds of fat, the fact that I could grab myself at the waist. The weight was like a force field, shielding me as I was plopped into one new school after another, food being my only comfort through the long afternoons while my mother was working. Now, almost fifty pounds lighter, I had nothing left to hide behind. Sometimes in my bed at night, I'd find myself still pinching the skin at my waist, forgetting that there was nothing there to hold on to anymore.

My body had changed, parts of me just disappearing like I'd wished them away. I had cheekbones, muscles, a flat stomach, clear skin, just like my mother. But something was missing, something that made us different. I could build muscle, but not confidence. There were no exercises for that.

Still, I kept working out—doing aerobics, jogging, lifting weights—driven by the echo of words I'd been hearing for as long as I could remember.

Fat Ass! I'd force myself to do ten more lunges, feeling the burning in my legs.

Lard-O! I'd push through another set of repetitions, curling the dumbbell tight into my arm, even when

the pain was killing me.

Thunder Thighs! I'd go another mile, running fast enough, finally, to leave the voices behind me.

My mother and I had become new people: even the pictures in our photo albums didn't look like us anymore. Sometimes I imagined our former fat selves were still out there driving around the country like ghosts, eating bags of Doritos. It was strange.


Meanwhile, my mom's classes at Lady Fitness kept growing, with women crowding in hip to hip to follow her gospel. Then the local cable access channel asked her to do a live morning show called *Wake Up and Work Out*. I watched her before school as I sat at the kitchen table eating my nonfat yogurt and high-energy Grape-Nuts.

"My name is Kiki Sparks," she said at the beginning of every show, while the music built behind her, louder and louder. "Are we ready to get to work?"

Soon you could almost hear the hundreds—then thousands—of women across the city shouting, "Yes!"

It was only a matter of time before she went statewide, then national. The woman who'd hired her at Lady Fitness mortgaged her house to produce a high-tech "FlyKiki" video, which sold a million copies after my mom appeared on the Home Shopping Network and led the host in a five-minute Super Cal Burn. The rest is fat-free history.

Now we have a house with a pool, keep a cook who makes only low-fat meals, and I have my own bathroom and TV. The only downside is that my mother is so busy, spreading Kiki-mania across the country and around the world. But whenever I miss her too much, I can flip through the channels for her - infomercial—*KikiSpeaks: You Can Do It!*—and find her, just like that.

Sometimes, though, I still think about us bumping along together in our old Volaré, me half asleep with my head in her lap while she sang along with the radio. And I miss that endless highway stretching  out ahead, full of possibilities, always leading to a new town and another school where I could start again.

When the train pulled into the Colby station five hours later, the only person waiting was a guy with shoulder-length brown hair, a tie-dyed T-shirt, cutoff army shorts, and Birkenstocks. He had about a million of those Deadhead hippie bracelets on his wrist, and he was wearing sunglasses with blue frames.

I was the only one who got off in Colby.

I stood on the platform, squinting. It was really sunny and hot, even though the ocean was supposed to be close by.

"Nicole?" the guy said, and when I looked up he took a few steps toward me. His shorts were splattered with white paint and I was sure he'd smell of patchouli or pot if I bothered to sniff hard, which I chose not to.

"Colie," I said.

"Right." He smiled. I couldn't see his eyes. "Mira sent me to pick you up. I'm Norman."

Mira was my aunt. She was stuck with me for the summer.

"Those yours?" he said, pointing at the bags, which the porter had piled further down the platform. I nodded and he started after them, with a slow, lazy walk that was already irritating me.

I was immediately mortified to see the entire Kiki line right there next to my stuff. The Kiki Buttmaster, a carton of Kiki-Eats, the dozen new FlyKiki videos and inspirational tapes, plus a few more boxes of vitamins and fitness wear with my mother's smiling face plastered across them.

"Wow," Norman said. He picked up the Buttmaster, turning it in his hands. "What's *this* for?"

"I'll get that," I said, grabbing it from him. For the entire trip down I'd imagined myself in Colby as mysterious, different; the dark stranger, answering no one's questions. This image was significantly harder to maintain while lugging a Buttmaster in front of the only boy I'd seen in the last year who didn't automatically assume I was a slut.

"Car's over here," he said, and I followed him to a battered old Ford station wagon parked in the empty

lot. He put my bags in the back and held the door as I threw in the Buttmaster, which landed with a clunk on the floor. We had to make a second trip for the rest of the Kikicrap.

"So how was the train ride?" he asked. The car smelled like old leaves and was full of junk, except for the front, which had obviously been cleared out just recently. In the backseat were four mannequins, all of them headless. One was missing an arm, another a hand, but they were lined up neatly, as if they'd piled in for the ride.

"Fine," I said, wondering what kind of weirdo Mira had sent for me. I got in and slammed the door, then caught a glimpse of myself in the side mirror. In all the confusion I had forgotten about my hair. It was so black that for a second I didn't recognize myself.

Norman started up the car with a little coaxing, and we pulled out into the empty intersection.

"So," he said, "did it hurt?"

"Did what hurt?"

He looked over at me and touched the right corner of his upper lip. "That," he said. "Did it hurt, or what?"

I ran my tongue along the inside of my lip, feeling the small metal hoop there. I'd had it done only months earlier, but it felt like it had always been part of me, my touchstone. "No," I said.

"Wow," he said. The light turned green; we chugged slowly forward. "Looks like it would."

"It didn't." I said it flatly, so he wouldn't ask again.

We didn't talk as we drove. Norman's car was downright strange; besides our headless fellow passengers there were about twenty tiny plastic animals glued to the dashboard, lined up carefully, and a huge pair of fuzzy red dice bouncing from the rearview mirror.

"Nice car," I said under my breath. He had to be some kind of art freak.

"Thanks," he replied cheerfully, reaching up to adjust a red giraffe by the air vent. He obviously thought I was serious. "It's a work in progress."

We turned on to a dirt road and passed a few houses with glimpses of water just beyond. We went all the way to the very end, finally turning in to park right in front of a big white house. Around the porch, I could see the beach and the sound. There were little boats out there, bobbing.

Norman honked the horn twice and cut the engine. "She's expecting you," he said. He got out and went around to the back door, unloading my stuff and piling it on the front steps. He put the Buttmaster on the very top, arranging it just so. I couldn't tell if he was being a smartass or what.

"Thanks," I said under my breath, deciding he was.

Mira's porch was the old southern kind: wide and long, running the entire length of the house, and I noticed two things about it right away. First, an old bicycle leaning against a front window. It had Cadillac-style fins over the back wheel and was spray-painted bright red, with a few rust spots showing through. In the metal basket on the front was a pair of sunglasses with big black frames.

The second thing I noticed was a small sign posted over the doorbell, an index card that read, in simple block letters, BELL. For the truly moronic, there was an arrow as well.

I was beginning to wonder what kind of world I had landed in.

"Norman?" A woman's voice came from inside, filtering through the screen door. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," Norman called back, walking up the steps and leaning in close against the screen, shielding his eyes with his hand. "The train was right on time, for once."

"I can't find him again," said the woman, who I assumed must be my aunt Mira. She sounded like she was moving quickly, her voice strong at first and then fading. "He was here this morning but then I just lost track of him. . . ."

"I'll look for him," Norman said, already glancing down the porch and into the yard. "He never goes far. He's probably just having issues with that dog again."

"Issues?" I said.

"Big ones," he said under his breath, still looking.

"Is Colie with you?" she said, her voice rising as she came closer.

"Yep," Norman said. "She's right here."

I kept waiting for the door to open. It didn't.

"I can't stand it when he does this," Mira said, her voice fading again. I looked at Norman, who was pacing the porch, peering over the rail to check under the house.

"We'll find him," Norman said. "Don't worry."

I just stood there. Obviously my aunt was as excited to see me as I was to come here.

I sat down next to my bag and pulled my knees to my chest. There was a rustle in the bushes, and the fattest tabby cat I'd ever seen poked his head out to look at me. He wound himself through the handrail, almost getting stuck, and brushed against me, leaving about an inch of cat hair on my black pants, jacket, and shirt. Then he climbed into my lap, clawed me for a second, and settled in.

"Cat Norman!" Norman said, and the cat turned to look at him, flicking his tail.

"What?" I said.

"Found him!" Norman yelled out.

"Did you?" said the voice from inside.

"You should take him in to her," Norman said to me. "She'll love you instantly."

"I don't like cats," I said, trying to dislodge the monster from my lap. He was purring now, a loud, rumbling noise that sounded like a chainsaw.

"Cat Norman?" Mira called out. "Come here, you terrible thing, you!"

"Take him in," Norman said again. "She's waiting." He started slowly down the steps. I noticed he moved -everywhere slowly.

I stood up, the cat in my arms. He weighed about thirty pounds, as much as an entire set of KikiBell weights.

"I'll see you later," Norman said, already walking around the house, toward the backyard.

"Colie?" Mira said. Through the screen, I could almost make out a shape in the hallway. "Is he with you?"

I walked toward the door, the cat curled against me. "We're coming," I said, and I stepped inside.

The first thing I saw when my eyes adjusted was the TV in the next room. It was tuned to a wrestling match, and at that moment some huge man in a cape and a blindfold was leaping to flatten another man in purple spandex, who was writhing on the mat. As the caped man took off, his arms spread, you could see behind him rows and rows of people, aghast, as he fell fell fell toward his victim. Splat.

"Cat Norman!" my Aunt Mira said, stepping right in front of the TV and opening her arms to both of us. "And Colie. Hello!"

Mira was overweight, just like my mother had been before she became Kiki Sparks. She had a wide face and long red hair piled up on her head, like she'd done it in a hurry—a pencil and a pen were sticking out of it. She had on an old, deep green kimono patterned with dragons, a big white T-shirt, black leggings, and flip-flops. Her toenails were painted bright pink.

"Colie!" she cried again, and before I knew it she had wrapped her arms around both me and the cat. She smelled like a mix of vanilla and turpentine. "I'm so glad to see you. You look different, all grown up. And skinny! Your mom's program must work then, right?"

"Right." A piece of cat hair blew up my nose, and my eyes started watering.

"Bad, bad Cat Norman," she said to the cat, who was mashed between us, still purring. "I wonder what kind of trouble you found on *this* adventure, huh?"

The cat sneezed. Then he wriggled out of my arms, pushed off, and landed with a thud not unlike the wrestler's. He was obviously not a cat who did a lot of jumping; it was at least a second before his considerable girth caught up with him.

"Oh, you're terrible!" she scolded as he walked off, taking his time. Then she looked at me, shaking her head. "He's the light of my life, but he's in his terrible twos right now and going through a real distant

phase. It's just breaking my heart."

"The cat," I said, verifying.

"Norman," she corrected me.

"Oh, Norman," I said, looking outside where I'd last seen him. "He does seem kind of spacey."

"He does?" She raised her eyebrows. "Well, it *is* summer. The heat gets to him, you know. You should see the hairballs he coughs up."

I looked back outside. "Norman does?"

"The cat," she said. "Cat Norman." She pointed under a chair by the door where he'd settled himself and was now licking his back leg, loudly.

"Oh," I said. "I thought you meant . . ."

"Oh, Norman," she said, and then she burst out laughing, one hand covering her mouth. She had deep dimples, like a child's. "Oh, no, not *that* Norman. I mean, he might have hairballs, with all that long hair of his. But I've never seen him coughing anything up. . . ."

"I just -didn't know," I said in a low voice, and I had that sudden flash that I was fat again, could feel it on me, like I always did when someone laughed at me.

"Well," she said, linking her arm in mine, "it's an honest mistake. Cat Norman was, after all, named after Norman Norman. They are so much alike in temperament. Not to mention they both move slower than molasses."

"Norman Norman," I repeated, as we stepped into the back room. It was big and sunny and, like the porch, ran the length of the house. On the TV another match was in progress, with two small redheaded men in black trunks circling each other.

"But I need them both desperately," Mira said dramatically, glancing at the TV and then back at me. "If Norman Norman -didn't live downstairs I'd have no one to open jars for me, and Cat Norman is my baby."

"Norman lives downstairs?" I said.

"Oh, yes," she said easily, sitting down in the overstuffed chair across from the television and folding the kimono neatly over her legs. On the wall was a large painting of Mira and Cat Norman sitting on the grass in front of the house. In the painting she had on a white dress and pink sunglasses shaped like stars; she was smiling. Cat Norman was beside her, his back arched as her hand brushed over him. "He stays in the downstairs room. He's no trouble. I forget he's there half the time."

As I sat down I took in the view of the ocean, the water blue and sparkling. There was a path that led down to the beach, and when I craned my neck I could see an open door and then Norman, dragging one of the headless mannequins. To the right of the path I could see a smaller house, painted the same white as Mira's. There was a clothesline beside it, with a row of brightly colored clothes flapping in the wind.

"So," she said, settling back in her chair. "How was the trip?"

"Good."

"And your mother?"

"Good."

She nodded, flashing her dimples. "Did that hurt?"

"What?"

"That thing in your lip," she said. "Ouch."

"No," I told her. "It didn't."

She nodded again. We were running out of topics. I glanced around the room. Everything was old, with a kind of tacky charm, and in need of some sort of repair: a rocking chair missing a few back slats, a small chest of drawers with faded pink paint and no knobs, a cracked fishtank full of seashells and marbles.

And then, as I looked more closely, I saw the notes. Just like the one out front, they were on index cards, written in nice block printing. Window sticks on left side, it said next to the back door. Center light switch does not work was posted by a switchplate on the other side of the room. And, taped to the TV set, right by the channel knob, my personal favorite: jiggle to get 11.

It was going to be a long summer.

"Oh, my!" Mira said suddenly, startling me. She lurched forward in her chair toward the television; like the cat, it took a second for everything to catch up. "Just look at that horrible El Gigantico. This isn't even his match and he's going in to attack that poor little Rex Runyon."

"What?" I said, confused.

"Look!" She pointed toward the screen. "El Gigantico's girlfriend, Lola Baby, left him for Rex Runyon last week. And now he's going to beat poor Rex to a pulp. Oh, no. Why don't the referees stop him? It's just ludicrous."

I just looked at her; she was leaning forward, eyes fixed on the screen. "Well," I said, "it *is* all—"

"Oh!" One hand flew to her mouth, her pink toes wiggling as she reacted to something on the screen. "He's pulling that figure-four move. Poor Rex. Oh, he's going to feel *that* tomorrow. I don't even know why El Gigantico cares about that Lola anyway, she's just as trashy as she can be. . . ."

"Mira," I said, "you know it's . . ." She tore her eyes away from poor Rex Runyon, who was having his head slammed into the corner of the ring, repeatedly, while the crowd counted along.

"Know it's what?" she said brightly. And I wished for a moment that she had a sign too, some index card with instructions to let me know how to proceed.

"Nothing. I . . . I forgot what I was going to say," I said, and she settled back into the action. I was new here. I wasn't about to be the one to tell her that it was all fake.

So I watched with her as Rex Runyon got a second wind and came back at El Gigantico, jumping on his back and bringing him to the mat like David slaying Goliath. The sun slowly set over the water while, downstairs, Norman dragged in the rest of his mannequins neck-first. Mira clapped her hands and cheered, with absolute faith, while Cat Norman sat in the windowsill, licking his paws one by one, as my summer began.

CHAPTER TWO

We watched wrestling for about an hour. There were four matches, several arguments, and two referees chucked into the action and beaten severely.

"So," Mira said finally, clicking off the TV as the local news came on, "I am dying for a grilled chicken salad. Are you hungry?"

"Yeah," I said, realizing I was.

"Well, there's a place just up on the corner," she told me. "The food is *great*."

"Okay," I said, getting up and digging into my pocket for the money my mother had slipped me as I'd gotten on the train.

"Wait, wait. It's your first night. Let me treat." She picked up her purse—a big pink vinyl thing, which had to be a thrift shop find—drew out her wallet, and selected a twenty, which she held out to me.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I'll stay here. I've already been to town once today. And this way you can get a feel for the place, find your bearings, right?" she said easily, pulling the pen out of her hair and repositioning it with a jab. "Besides, there's only room on the bike for one, unless you want to ride on the handlebars. But the last time we tried that, I hit a rock and Norman got pitched off and crash-landed into this fence and a bunch of poison ivy. It was just *awful*."

"Wait," I said, struggling to catch up. "The bike?"


"Yep. She's out front." She stood up, tightening the belt on her kimono. "Don't worry, there's a light and everything. And it's a straight shot up to the Last Chance. Just watch out for the huge pothole and the Masons' rottweiler and you're home free."

"What?"

"Their chicken Caesar salad is so *good!*" she said. She was already heading -toward the kitchen, the

door creaking as she pushed it open. "And you just get whatever you want, okay?"

I turned to say something, but she was already gone, humming under her breath, as if she'd forgotten me already. I looked at the note on the doorbell and felt like I'd been caught up in some wild cyclone, like Dorothy thrown into Oz, with not a good witch in sight to save me.

But my stomach was growling, so I looked at the bike, thought better of it, and set off on foot down the steps, past the brightness of the porch light, into  the dark.

The Last Chance Bar and Grill was a small building on the corner, right before the exit to the bridge that crossed over to the mainland. It had one lone streetlight, a few parking places, and a neon sign that said,
Mira style, FOOD.

When I walked in, the first thing I saw was a tall bony girl throwing some kind of a fit.

"I am telling you," she was saying to another girl, a curvy blonde with her hand on her hip. "If I get less than fifteen percent again tonight I am going to *kill* someone."

"Uh-huh," the blonde said. She was standing by the coffee machine, watching it brew.

"Mark my words," said the bony girl. She had a short haircut with bangs straight across her forehead. She turned and looked toward the back corner of the restaurant, where a group of men in suits were standing up and pushing in their chairs, making leaving noises.

The blonde turned from the coffee machine and looked at me. She had on bright red lipstick. "Can I help you?"

"I need to order some takeout," I said. My voice sounded loud in the almost-empty room.

"Menu's right there," she said, pointing to a stack right beside my elbow. She was staring at my lip. "Let me know when you're ready."

The tall girl brushed past me as she came out from behind the counter, then stepped aside as the suits left. One man toward the back was chewing on a toothpick, smacking his lips. The blonde settled in against the opposite side of the counter, watching me.

"Y'all have a good night," the tall girl said.

"You too," one of the men mumbled.

I went back to scanning the menu, all of it standard beach food: fried seafood, burgers, onion rings, the kind of stuff that had been banned from our house since my mother was born again as Kiki Sparks. It had been months since I'd had a french fry, much less a burger, and my mouth was already watering.

"I knew it," the tall girl said from across the room. She was standing by the table the suits had just abandoned, a bunch of change in her hand. "A dollar seventy. On a thirty-dollar tab."

"Well." The blonde was clearly used to hearing this.

"*Goddammit*," the tall girl said. "Okay, then. That is *it*."

The blonde looked at me. "You ready?"

"Yeah."

She took her time coming over, pulling out a ticket from the apron tied loosely around her waist. "Go ahead."

"I'm not going to take this anymore," the tall girl said as she started across the room. She had big, flat feet that smacked the floor with each step.

"Grilled chicken salad," I said, remembering Mira's request, "and a cheeseburger with fries. And onion rings."

The blonde nodded, writing this down. "Anything else?"

"No."

The tall girl stopped right next to me and slammed the handful of change down on the counter, one dime bouncing off to hit the floor with a *ping*. "I can't take it anymore," she said dramatically. "I will remain silent no longer."

"You need ketchup with that?" the blonde said to me, ignoring her.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

The tall girl was taking off her apron, balling it up in her hands. "I don't want to have to do it," she said.

"Mayonnaise?" the blonde asked.

"No," I said.

"I *quit!*" the tall girl announced, throwing her apron at the blonde, who reached up and caught it without even looking. "And now, I will go out and give those rude, inconsiderate fascists a *piece* of my mind." She took two strides to the door, kicked it open with a bang, and was gone. The door swung shut, the screen rattling.

The blonde, still holding the apron, walked to the window and stuck my ticket on a spindle. "Order up."

"All right," a guy's voice said, and then I saw Norman Norman poke his head out and grab the ticket. The blue sunglasses were parked on top of his head. "Where's Morgan?" he asked.

"Quit," the blonde said in a bored voice. She'd pulled out a *Vogue* magazine from somewhere and was flipping the pages.

Norman smiled that sleepy smile, then glanced toward the door and saw me. "Hey, Colie," he said. "This for you and Mira?"

"Yeah," I said. The blonde looked at me again.

"Cool," Norman said, and he waved before disappearing back behind the window.

I stood there, waiting for my food; in the kitchen, a radio was playing softly. About ten minutes passed before the door creaked behind me and the tall girl—Morgan—came back in, mumbling under her breath.

"Already gone?" the blonde said in that same flat voice.

"Drove off just as I got out there," Morgan grumbled. As she passed, the blonde gave her the apron, flipping another page of the magazine.

"Too bad," she said.

"This is the last summer I work here," Morgan declared, pulling her apron strings into a perfect bow. "I mean it."

"I know." The blonde turned another page.

"I'm serious." Morgan went over to the soda machine and filled a cup with ice, shaking some into her mouth and crunching it with a determined look. Then she saw me. "You been helped?"

"Yeah," I said.

"She's Mira's niece," said the blonde.

Morgan looked at me with new interest, eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"You remember. Norman told us about her." The blonde put down her magazine and turned her full attention back to me. "Kiki Sparks' kid. Can you imagine?"

"I can't," Morgan said, but she smiled. "What's your name?"

"Colie," I said warily. I'd had enough experience with girls in groups to be on my guard.

"What's the deal with that thing in your lip?" the blonde said bluntly. "It's creepy."

"Isabel," Morgan said, elbowing her. "How old are you, Colie?"

"Fifteen," I said.

Morgan came closer to me, tucking her hair behind her ear. On her right hand, she wore a ring with a tiny diamond, just big enough to flash in the light. "How long you down for?"

"Just the summer," I said.

"Order up!" Norman yelled from the kitchen.

"That's great," Morgan said. "You'll be right next door. Maybe we can go to the movies sometime or something."

"Sure," I said, but I kept my voice low. "That would be—"

"Here you go," Isabel, the blonde, said, dropping my food right in front of me. "Ketchup's inside the box. That'll be fifteen-eighteen with tax."

"Right," I said, handing her the twenty. She turned on her heel and went to the register.

"Well, tell Mira I said hi," Morgan said, "and that I'll be by for Triple Threat tomorrow, since I'm off."

"Triple Threat," I repeated. That *had* to have something to do with wrestling. "Okay. I will."

"Here's your change," Isabel said, slapping it on top of one of the boxes.

"Thanks," I said.

She stepped back, next to Morgan, and squinted at me. "Can I tell you something?" she said.

"No," Morgan told her, her voice low.

I didn't say anything. So she did.

"That thing in your lip is, like, repulsive." She scrunched up her nose as she said it.

"Isabel," Morgan said sternly in a Mom voice. "Stop it."

"And next time you decide to dye your hair," Isabel went on, ignoring her, "you should try to get all of it one color. I'm sure your mom can afford to send you to a professional."

"*Isabel*," Morgan said, grabbing her by the arm. Then she looked at me. "Colie," she said, like she knew me. "Just don't listen . . ."

But I didn't hear her, couldn't, was already gone, turning and walking out the door with the food in my hands to the parking lot before I even knew what was happening. Over the years I had perfected removing myself from situations. It was kind of like automatic pilot; I just shut down and retreated, my brain clicking off before anything that hurt could sink in.

But every once in a while, something would get through. Now I stood under that one streetlight and the fries and onion rings stank in my hands. I wasn't hungry anymore. I wasn't even me anymore. I was bigger, a year younger, and back in my neighborhood the night Chase Mercer and I took that walk down to the eighteenth hole.

I didn't cry as I walked back to Mira's house. You get to a point where you just can't. It never stops hurting. But I was glad when I didn't cry anymore.

I -didn't even know this girl, this Isabel with her blonde hair and pouty lips. It was like I wore a permanent "Kick Me" sign, not only at home and school but out in the rest of the world, too. *It isn't fair*, I thought, but those words were as meaningless as all the rest.

Mira was sitting in front of the TV when I came in. She'd put on a pair of blue old-lady slippers and replaced the kimono with a faded plaid bathrobe.

"Colie?" she called out. "Is that you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you find it okay?"

I looked at myself in the full-length mirror by the door: my black hair, my piercing, my torn-up jeans and black shirt, long-sleeved even in this summer heat. Isabel had hated me on sight, and not because I was fat. Just because she -could.

"Colie?" Mira called out again.

"Yeah," I said. "Your salad's right here." I took it into the back room. She opened the box immediately and popped a piece of lettuce into her mouth.

"Oh, I just love their Caesar dressing!" she said happily. "Norman sneaks some home to me every once in a while. It's wonderful. What did you get?"

"Just a burger and fries. Here's your change." I put it on the coffee table, where she had two plates and two iced teas and a stack of napkins waiting.

"Oh, thank you. Now sit down and let's eat. I'm ravenous." Cat Norman hauled himself out from under the couch and nudged the bottom of the box with his nose.

"I'm not that hungry," I said.

"Bad cat," she said, pushing him back with one foot. To me she added, "But you must be starving! You've had such a long day, all this excitement."

"I'm really tired," I said. "I think I'll just turn in."

"Oh." She stopped eating, glancing up at me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." This came instantly, like a reflex.

"You sure?"

I thought of Isabel, the way her eyes narrowed as she zeroed in on me. Of my mother in her purple windsuit, new shoes squeaking, waving good-bye. Of an entire summer stretching ahead. "Yes," I said. "I'm sure."

"Well, okay," she said slowly as if we were striking a bargain. "You probably are worn out."

"Yeah," I said, starting out of the room, my cold smelly burger still in my hand. "I am."

"Okay, well, then good night!" she called after me as I started out of the room. "And if you change your mind . . ."

"Okay," I said, "thanks." But she was already settling back in her chair, Cat Norman leaping with a bit of effort to the arm beside her. She turned up the volume on yet another wrestling match, and I could hear the crowd roar, cheering and screaming, as I climbed the stairs to my room.

"Colie!"

It wasn't morning. The room was dark, with the moon big and yellow and hanging just where I'd left it in the corner of the window.

"Colie!"

I sat up in bed, forgetting for a second where I was. Then it came back: the train, Norman, wrestling, Isabel's beauty tips. My face was dry and tight, my eyelashes sticky from the crying I didn't do anymore.

"Colie?" It was Mira, her voice right outside my door. "You have company, honey."

"Company?"

"Yes. Downstairs." She tapped the door with her fingers before walking away. I wondered if I was dreaming.

I pulled my jeans back on and opened the door, looking down the stairs at the lighted room below. This had to be a joke. I didn't even get company at home, much less at a place I'd been less than a day.

I started down the stairs, squinting as the light got brighter and brighter. Everything felt strange, as if I'd been sleeping forever. I was close to the bottom when I saw a set of feet, in sandals, by the door. Two more steps and there were legs, knees, and a small waist with a windbreaker knotted around it. Another two steps, and the beginnings of blonde hair, a pair of pouty lips, and then those same eyes, narrowed at me. I stopped where I was.

"Hey," Isabel said. She had her arms crossed over her chest. "Got a second?"

I hesitated, thinking of Caroline Dawes and all the girls like her I'd left behind.

"I just want to talk to you, okay?" she snapped, as if I'd already said no. Then she took a deep breath and glanced outside. This seemed to settle her down. "Okay?"

I don't know why, but I said, "Okay."

She turned and went out on the front porch, leaving the screen door in half-swing for me to catch. Then she leaned against one of the posts, bit her lip, and looked out into the yard. Up close, I hated to admit, she was even prettier: a classic heart-shaped face, big blue eyes, and pale skin without a zit in sight. Somehow that made it easier to dislike her.

Neither one of us said anything.

"Look," she said suddenly. "I'm *sorry*, okay?" She said this defensively, as if I'd demanded it of her.

I just looked at her.

"What?" she said. "What else do you want?"

"Isabel." Morgan stepped out of the shadows by the bottom of the steps. Her face was stern. "You know that is not how we discussed it."

"It is too," Isabel snapped.

"Do it like I told you," Morgan said evenly. "Like you mean it."

"I can't—" Isabel said.

"Do it. Now." Morgan came up to the second step and nodded toward me. "Go ahead."

Isabel turned back to face me, smoothing her hair. "Okay," she began, "I am sorry I said what I said. I tend to be very critical of what I don't . . ." Here she paused, looking at Morgan.

"Understand," Morgan prompted.

"Understand," Isabel repeated. "What I said was rude and hurtful and uncalled for. I'd understand if you never respected me again." She looked at Morgan, eyebrows raised.

"But?" Morgan said, prodding her.

"But," Isabel grumbled, "I hope that you can forgive me."

Morgan smiled, nodding at her. "Thank you." Then she looked at me.

"It's okay," I said, taking the hint. "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks," Isabel said. She was already inching off the porch, toward the steps.

"See?" Morgan said to her, squeezing her arm. "*That* wasn't so hard, now was it?"

"I'm going home," Isabel told her, her duty done. She was lighter on her feet now, practically bounding down the steps and across the yard to the little white house I'd seen earlier.

Morgan sighed. Close up she looked older and pointier: bony elbows, prominent collarbone, a nose that jutted out sharp and sudden.

"She's not so bad," she said to me, as if I'd said otherwise. "She can just be a real bitch sometimes. Mark says she's friendship impaired."

"Mark?" I said.

"My fiancé." She smiled and extended her right hand, that tiny diamond twinkling.

There was a sudden burst of music from the little house. Lights were coming on in the windows, and I caught a glimpse of Isabel passing by.

"Then why do you put up with her?" I asked.

She looked over at the house; the music was cheerful, bouncy and wild, and now Isabel was dancing, a beer in one hand. She shimmied past the windows, shaking her hair, hips swaying. Morgan smiled.

"Because, for the most part, she's all I've got," she said. And then she went down the steps, across the yard, and up the path to that little house. When she got to the doorstep she turned and waved.

"See you around," she said.

"Okay," I said.

I watched as she opened the door, the music spilling out; it was disco, some woman wailing. And as Morgan stepped in, Isabel whirled by, grinning, and grabbed her arm, pulling her into that warm light before the door swung shut behind them.

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