

That Summer by Sarah Dessen

CHAPTER ONE

It's funny how one summer can change everything. It must be something about the heat and the smell of chlorine, fresh-cut grass and honeysuckle, asphalt sizzling after late-day thunderstorms, the steam rising while everything drips around it. Something about long, lazy days and whirring air conditioners and bright plastic flip-flops from the drugstore thwacking down the street. Something about fall being so close, another year, another Christmas, another beginning. So much in one summer, stirring up like the storms that crest at the end of each day, blowing out all the heat and dirt to leave everything gasping and cool. Everyone can reach back to one summer and lay a finger to it, finding the exact point when everything changed. That summer was mine.

The day my father got remarried, my mother was up at six A.M. defrosting the refrigerator. I woke to the sound of her hacking away and the occasional thud as a huge slab of ice crashed. My mother was an erratic defroster. When I came down into the kitchen, she was poised in front of the open freezer, wielding the ice pick, Barry Manilow crooning out at her from the tape player she kept on the kitchen table. Around Barry's voice, stacked in dripping piles, were all of our perishables, sweating in the heat of another summer morning.

"Oh, good morning, Haven." She turned when she saw me, wiping her brow with the ice pick still in hand, making my heart jump as I imagined it slipping just a bit and taking out her eye. I knew that nervous feeling so well, even at fifteen, that spilling uncontrollability that my mother brought out in me. It was as if I was attached to her with a tether, her every movement yanking at me, my own hands reaching to shield her from the dangers of her waving arms.

"Good morning." I pulled out a chair and sat down next to a stack of packaged chicken. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" She was back on the job now, scraping. "I'm fine. Are you hungry?"

"Not really." I pulled my legs up to my chest, pressing hard to fold myself into the smallest size possible. It seemed like every morning I woke up taller, my skin having stretched in the night while I slept. I had dreams of not being able to fit through doors, of becoming gigantic, towering over people and buildings like a monster, causing terror in the streets. I'd put on four inches since April, and showed no signs of letting up. I was already five-eleven, with only a few more little lines on the measuring stick before six feet.

"Haven." My mother looked at me. "Please don't sit that way. It's not good for you and it makes me nervous." She stood there staring at me until I let my legs drop. "That's better." Scrape, scrape. Barry sang on, about New England.

I still wasn't sure what had brought me down from my bed so early on a Saturday, aside from the noise of my mother loosening icebergs from out Frigidaire. I hadn't slept well, with my dress for the wedding hanging from the curtain rod, fluttering in the white light of the street lamp outside my window. At two P.M. my father was marrying Lorna Queen, of "Lorna Queen's Weather Scene" on WTSB News Channel 5. She was what they called a meteorologist and what my mother called the Weather Pet, but only when she was feeling vindictive. Lorna was blond and perky and wore cute little pastel suits that showed just enough leg as she stood smiling in front of colorful maps, sweeping her arm as if she controlled all the elements. My father, Mac McPhail, was the sports anchor for channel five, and he and the Weather Pet shared the subordinate news desk, away from the grim-faced anchors, Charlie Baker and Tess Phillips, who reported real news. Before we'd known about my

father's affair with the Weather Pet, I'd always wondered what they were smiling and talking about in those last few minutes of the broadcast as the credits rolled. Charlie Baker and Tess Phillips shuffled important-looking papers, worn thing from a hard day of news chasing and news delivering; but my father and the Weather Pet were always off to the side sharing some secret laugh that the rest of us weren't in on. And when we finally did catch on, it wasn't very funny after all.

Not that I didn't like Lorna Queen. She was nice enough for someone who broke up my parents' marriage. My mother, in all fairness, always blamed my father and limited her hostility to the nickname Weather Pet and to the occasional snide remark about my father's growing mass of hair, which at the time of the separation was receding with great speed and now seemed to have reversed itself and grown back with the perseverance and quickness of our lawn after a few good days of rain. My mother had read all the books about divorce and tried hard to make it smooth for me and my sister, Ashley, who was Daddy's pet and left the room at even the slightest remark about his hair. My mother kept her outbursts about that to a minimum, but I could tell by the way she winced when they showed my father and Lorna together at their subordinate news desk that it still hurt. Before the divorce my mother had been good at outbursts, and this quietness, this holding back, was more unnerving than I imagined any breakdown could be. My mother, like Ashley, has always cultivated the family dramatic streak, started by my grandmother, who at important family gatherings liked to fake horrible incidents if she felt she was not getting enough attention. No reunion, wedding, or funeral was complete without at least one stroke, heart attack, or general collapse from Grandma at which time everyone shifted into High Dramatic Mode, fussing and running around and generally creating the kind of chaos that my family is well known for.

This always made me kind of nervous. I hadn't inherited that flair for the stage that Ashley and my mother had, this snap ability to lose control in appropriate instances. I was more like my father, steady and worried all the time. Back then, we had it down to a science: Mom and Ashley overreacting, thriving on crisis, my father and I standing calm, together, balancing them out. Then my father left, and like a table short a leg, things had been out of whack ever since.

"So are you going?" That was Ashley, standing in the kitchen doorway in a T-shirt and socks. Just looking at her made me acutely aware of my own height, the pointedness of my elbows and hipbones, the extra inch I'd put on in the last month. At twenty-one my sister is a petite five-four, with the kind of curvy, rounded body that I wish I'd been born with; tiny feet, perfect hair, small enough to be cute, but still a force to be reckoned with. At my age she had already been voted Most Popular, dated (and dumped) the captain of the football team, and been a varsity cheerleader. She was always the one at the top of the pyramid, tiny enough to be passed from hand to hand overhead until she stood high over everyone else, a bit shaky but triumphant, before letting loose and tumbling head over heels to be caught at the bottom with a sweep of someone's arms. I remembered her in her cheerleading uniform, short blue skirt, white sweater, and saddle shoes, grabbing her backpack to run out to a carful of teenagers waiting outside, squealing off to school with a beep of the horn. Back then, Ashley seemed to live a life just like Barbie's: popular and perfect, always with a handsome boyfriend and the cool crowd. All she needed was the Dreamhouse and a purple plastic Corvette to make it real.

Now, my sister just scowled at me when she caught me looking at her, then scratched one foot with the other. She had a good tan already, and on the inside of her left ankle I could see the yellow butterfly tattoo she'd gotten in Myrtle Beach when she'd gotten drunk after high school graduation two years earlier and someone double dared her. Ashley was wild, but that was before she got engaged.

"No. I don't think I should go," my mother said. "I think it's in bad taste."

"Go where?" I said.

"She invited you," Ashley said, yawning. "She wouldn't have done that if she didn't want you there."

"Where?" I said again, but of course no one was listening to me. There was another crash as a block of ice fell out of the freezer.

"I'm not going," my mother said solidly, planting a hand on her hip. "It's tacky and I won't do it."

"So don't do it," Ashley said, coming into the kitchen and reaching across me to pick up a pack of frozen waffles from the table.

"Do what?" I said again, louder this time because in our house you have to make a commotion to even be heard.

"Go to your father's wedding," my mother said. "Lorna sent me an invitation."

"She did?"

"Yes." This fell into the category of whether Lorna, the Weather Pet, was either downright mean or just stupid. She did a lot of things that made me question this, from telling me it was okay to call her Mom once she married my father to sending my mother a framed picture of an old family Christmas card she'd found among my dad's junk. We'd all sat around the kitchen table, staring at it, my mother holding it in one hand with a puckered look on her face. She'd never said a word about it, but instead when outside and ripped up weeds in the garden for forty-five minutes, handful after handful flying over her head in a massive horticultural tantrum. I believed Lorna was mostly mean, bordering on stupid; my mother refused to even voice an opinion; and because Ashley couldn't bear to criticize anything about Daddy she said Lorna was just stupid and left mean out of it altogether. All I knew was that I would never call a woman only five years older than Ashley Mom and that that framed Christmas card was what Ann Landers would call In Quite Poor Taste.

So my mother was not with us as we set off for the church that afternoon, in our matching shiny pink bridesmaid dresses, to see our father be bonded in holy matrimony to this probably stupid but quite possibly just mean Weather Pet. I'd felt sorry for my mother as she lined us up in front of the mantel to take a picture with her little Instamatic, cooing about how lovely we looked. She stood in the doorway behind the screen, waving as we walked out to the car, the camera dangling from her wrist, and I realized suddenly why Ashley might have wanted her to come, even if it was tacky. There was something so sad about leaving her behind, all of a sudden, and I had an urge to run back and take her with me, to pull that tether tight and hold her close. But I didn't, like I always don't, and instead climbed into the car next to Ashley and watched my mother waving as we pulled away from the house. At every wedding someone stays home.

As we got out of the car at the church, I saw Ashley's fiancé, Lewis Warsher, heading our way from the other end of the lot where he'd parked his little blue Chevette. He was fixing his tie as he walked, because Lewis was a neat dresser. He always wore shiny shoes and skinny ties in pastel colors. When Ashley saw him I swear she shrank about two inches; there is something about Lewis that turns my sister, who is tough as nails, into a swooning, breathless belle.

"Hey, honey." And of course they were immediately connected, his arms slipping around her small waist, pulling her close for one of those long, emotional hugs where it looked like he was the only thing that was keeping her from collapsing to the ground. Ashley and Lewis spent a lot of time hugging each other, supporting each other physically, and whispering. They gave me a complex, always with their heads together murmuring in corners of rooms, their voices too low to catch anything but a few vowels.

"Hey," Ashley whispered. They were still hugging. I stood there fiddling with my dress; I had no choice but to wait. Ashley hadn't always been this way; she'd had boyfriends for as long as I could remember, but none of them had affected her like Lewis. For years we kept track of major family events by who Ashley had been dating at the time. During the Mitchell period, I got my braces and grandma came to live with us. The Robert era included my mother going back to night school and Ashley getting in the car wreck that broke her leg and made her get the stitches that left a heart-shaped scar on her right shoulder. And it was during the year-long Frank ordeal that the divorce came down, complete with law proceedings, family therapy, and the advent of Lorna, the Weather Pet. It was a boyfriend timeline: I could not remember dates, but I could place each important event in my life with a face of a boy whose heart Ashley had broken.

But this was all before Lewis, whom Ashley met at the Yogurt Paradise at the mall where they both worked. Ashley was a Vive cosmetics salesgirl, which meant she stood behind a big counter in Dillard's department store, wearing a white lab coat and putting overpriced makeup on rich ladies' faces. She thought she was something in that lab coat, wearing it practically everywhere like it meant she was a damn doctor or something. She was just coming out of the messy breakup of the Frank era and was consoling herself with a yogurt sundae when Lewis Warsher sensed her pain and sat himself down at her table because she looked like she needed a friend. These are their words, which I know because I've heard this story entirely too many times since they announced their engagement six months ago.

My mother said Ashley missed our father, and needed a protective figure; Lewis just came along at the right time. And Lewis *did* protect her, from old boyfriends and gas station attendants and bugs that dared to cross her path. Still, sometimes I wondered what she really saw in him. There was nothing spectacular about Lewis, and it was a little unsettling to see my sister, whom I'd always admired for being plucky and tough and not taking a bit of lip off anyone, shrinking into his arms whenever the world rose up to meet her face to face.

"Hey, Haven." Lewis leaned over and pecked me on the cheek, still holding Ashley close. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks," I said. Lewis had the arm clamp on Ashley, steering her towards the church, with me following. Even though we were wearing the same god-awful pink fluffy dresses, we looked totally different. Ashley was a short, curvy pink rose, and I was a tall, pink straw, like something you'd plunk down in a big fizzy drink. This was the kind of think I was always thinking about since my body betrayed me and made me a giant.

When I was in first grade, I had a teacher named Mrs. Thomas. She was young, sported a flip hairdo that made her look just like Snow White, smelled like Lily of the Valley, and kept a picture of a man in a uniform on her desk, staring stiffly out from the frame. And even though I was shy and slow at math, she didn't care. She loved me. She'd come up beside me in the lunch line or during story hour and smooth her hand over my head, saying "Why, Miss Have, you're just no bigger than a minute." I was compact at six, able to fit neatly into small places that now were inaccessible: under the crook of an arm, in the palm of a hand. At five-eleven and counting, I no longer had the sense that someone like Mrs. Thomas could nearly enclose me if danger should strike. I was all bony elbows and acute angles, like a jigsaw puzzle piece that can only go in the middle, waiting for the others to fit around it to make it whole.

The church was filling up with people, which wasn't surprising: my father is kind of person who knows everybody, somehow. Mac McPhail, sportscaster, beer drinker, teller of tall tales and big lies, the latter being told mostly to my mother in the last few months of the marriage. I can remember sitting in front of the TV

watching my father on the local news every night, seeing the sly sideways looks he and Lorna Queen exchanged during the lads into commercial breaks, and still not having any idea that he would leave my mother for this woman best known for her short skirts and pouty-lipped way of saying "upper-level disturbance." She didn't know the half of it. There had been no disturbance before like the one that hit our house the day my father came home from the station, sat my mother down at the kitchen table right under the vent that leads to the floor beneath the counter in my bathroom, and dropped the bomb that he'd fallen hard for the Weather Pet. I sat on the side of my tub, toothbrush in hand, and wished the house had been designed differently so I wouldn't have been privy to this most painful of moments. My mother was silent for a long time, my father's voice the only one wafting up through the floor, explaining how he couldn't help it, didn't want to lie anymore, had to come clean, all of this with his booming sportscaster voice, so agile at curving around score and highlights, stumbling over the simple truth that his marriage was over. My mother started crying, finally, and then told him to leave in a quiet, steady voice that made the room seem suddenly colder. Two weeks later he had moved into the Weather Pet's condo. He met me and Ashley for lunch each Saturday and took us to the beach every other weekend, spending too much money and trying to explain everything by putting his arm around my shoulder, squeezing, and sighing aloud.

But that had been a year and a half ago, and now here it was wedding day, the *first* wedding I was dreading this summer. We walked into the lobby of the church and were immediately gathered up in the large arms of my aunt Ree, who was representing the bulk of my father's side of the family, most of whom were still upset about the divorce and sided with my mother, family loyalty notwithstanding. But Aunt Ree was ample enough to represent everyone in her flowing pink muumuu, a corsage the size of a small bush pinned to her chest.

"Haven, you come over here and give your aunt Ree some sugar." She squashed me against her, and I could feel the flowers poking into my skin. She'd clamped Ashley in her other arm, somehow getting her away from Lewis, and hugged us both as tightly together as if she was trying to consolidate us into one person. "And Ashley, this should all seem pretty familiar to you. When'd your big day again?"

"August nineteenth," Lewis said quickly. I wondered if that was the answer he gave to any question now. It was what I usually said.

Aunt Ree pushed me back, holding me by both arms as Ashley made a quick dash back to Lewis. "Now you are just growing like a weed, I swear to God. Look at you. How tall are you?"

I smiled, fighting the urge to slouch. "Too tall."

"No such thing." She tightened her grip on my arm. "You can never be too tall or too thin. That's what they say, isn't it?"

"It's too rich or too thin," Ashley said. Leave it to my short, curvy sister to correct even a misworded compliment.

"Whatever," Aunt Ree said. "You're beautiful, anyway. But we're running late and the bride is a mess. We've got to go find your bouquets."

Ashley kissed Lewis and clung to him for a few more seconds before following me and Aunt Ree through the masses of perfumed wedding guests to a side door that led into a big room with bookcases covering all four walls. Lorna Queen was sitting at a table in the corner, a makeup mirror facing her, with some woman hovering around picking at her hair with a long comb.

"We're here!" Aunt Ree said in a singsong voice, presenting us in all of our pink as if she'd created us herself. "And just in time."

Lorna Queen *was* a beautiful woman. As she turned in her seat to face us, I realized that again, just as I always did when I watched her doing her forecasts in

her short skirts with color-coordinated lipsticks. She was pert and perfect and had the tiniest little ears I'd ever seen on anyone. She kept them covered most of the time, but once at the beach I'd seen her with her hair pulled back, with those ears like seashells molded against her skin. I'd always wondered if she heard like the rest of us or if the world sounded different through such small receptors.

"Hi, girls." She smiled at us and dabber her eyes with a neatly folded Kleenex. "Ya'll look beautiful."

"Are you okay?" Ashley asked her.

"I'm fine. I'm just" – she sniffled daintily – "so happy. I've waited for this day for so long, and I'm just so happy."

The woman doing her makeup rolled her eyes. "Lorna, honey, waterproof mascara can only do so much. You've got to stop crying."

"I know." She sniffled again, reaching out to take my hand and Ashley's. "I want you girls to know how much I love your father. I'm going to make him just as happy as I can, and I'm so glad we're all going to be a family."

"We're very happy for you," Ashley said, speaking for both of us, which she often did when Lorna was concerned.

Lorna was tearing up again when a man in a suit came in through another door and whispered, "Ten minutes," then flashed the thumbs-up sign as if we were about to go out and play the Big Game.

"Ten minutes," Lorna said, her hand fluttering out of mine and to her face, dabbing her eyes. The makeup woman spun her back around in the chair and moved in with the powder puff. "My God, it's actually happening."

Ashley reached into her purse and pulled out a lipstick. "Do like this," she said to me, pursing her lips. I did, and she put some on me, smoothing it across with a finger. "It's not really your color, but it'll do."

I stood there while she added some more eye shadow and blush to my face, all the while looking at me through half-shut eyes, practicing her craft, her face very close to mind. This was the Ashley I remembered from my childhood, when the five-year gap didn't seem that large and we set up our Barbie worlds in the driveway every day after school, my Ken fraternizing with her Skipper. This was the Ashley who painted my nails at the kitchen table during long summers, the back door swinging in the breeze and the radio on. This was the Ashley who came into my room late one night after breaking up with Robert Losard and sat on the edge of my bed crying until I wrapped my arms awkwardly around her and smoothed her hair, trying to understand the words she was saying. This was the Ashley who had climbed out on the roof with me all those nights in the first few months of the divorce and told me how much she missed my father. This was the Ashley I loved, away from Lewis's clinging hands and the wedding plans and the five-year-wide impasse that neither of us could cross.

"There." She capped the lipstick and dumped all the makeup back in her purse. "Now just don't cry too much and you'll be fine."

"I won't cry," I said, and suddenly aware of Lorna looking at us behind her in the mirror, I added, "I never cry at weddings."

"Oh, I do," Lorna said. "There's something about a wedding, something so perfect and so sad, all at the same time. I bawl at weddings."

"You better not be bawling out there." The makeup lady dabbed with the powder puff. "If this stuff doesn't hold up you'll look a mess."

The door opened and a woman in a dress the same shade as ours but without the long flowing skirt came in, carrying a big box of flowers. "Helen!" Lorna said, tearing up again. "You look lovely."

Helen was obviously Lorna's sister, seeing as how she also had those tiny little seashell ears. I figured it had to be more than coincidence. They hugged and

Helen turned towards us, clasping her hands together. "This must be Ashley and Haven. Lorna said you were tall." She leaned forward to kiss my cheek, then Ashley's. "And I hear congratulations are in order for you. When's the big day?"

"August nineteenth," Ashley said. It was the million-dollar question.

"My, that's soon! Are you getting nervous?"

"No, not really," Ashley said. "I'm just ready to get it all over with."

"Amen to that," Lorna said, standing up and removing the paper bib from around her neck. She took a deep breath, holding her palm against her stomach. "I swear, I have never been so nervous, even when I did that marathon at the station during the hurricane. Do I look all right?"

"You look lovely," Helen said. We all nodded in agreement. An older woman appeared, gesturing frantically. Her lips were moving as if long, unpronounceable words were coming out, but I couldn't hear a thing she was saying. As she came closer I made out something that sounded like "It's time, it's time," but she was warbling so it could have been anything.

"Okay," the Weather Pet said with one last sniff. Ashley checked my face again, licking her lips and telling me to do the same, and with Lorna Queen behind us, her sister Helen carrying her train, we proceeded to the lobby of the church.

We'd practiced all this the night before, when I'd been wearing shorts and sandals and the aisle seemed like a hop, skip, and jump to the spot where the minister had been standing in blue jeans and a T-shirt that said Clean and Free Baptist Retreat. Now the church was packed and the aisle seemed about a hundred miles long with the minister standing at the end of it like a tiny plastic figure you might slap on a cake. We got pushed into figuration, with me of course behind Ashley since I was taller and then Helen and Lorna, who was telling us all how much she loved us. Finally the mad whisperer walked right to the front of the line, waved her arm wildly like she was flagging a plane in to land right there in the middle of the church, and we were on our way.

The night before, they'd said to count to seven after Ashley left, so I gave it eight because I was nervous and then took my first step. I felt like the man on stilts in the circus who walks as if the wind is blowing him sideways. I tried not to look at anything but the middle of Ashley's back, which was not altogether interesting but somewhat better than all the faces staring back at me. As I got closer to the minister I got the nerve to look up and see my father, who was standing next to his best friend, Rick Bickman, smiling.

My father only does one impression, but it's a good one. He can do a perfect rendition of the munchkin who greets Dorothy right after she lands on the witch in the *Wizard of Oz*, the one who with two others sings that silly song about being the Lollipop Guild. They rock back and forth and their faces get all contorted. My father only does this when he's drunk or when a bunch of what my mother calls his bad seed friends are around; but suddenly, it was all I could think of, as if at any moment he might forget all this nonsense and start singing that damn song.

It didn't happen, of course, because this was a wedding and serious business. Instead my father winked at me as I took my place next to Ashley and we all turned and faced the direction we'd come and waited for Lorna Queen to make her entrance.

There was a pause in the music, long enough for me to take a quick glance around to see if I recognized anyone, which I didn't because all I could see was the backs of everyone's heads as they waited for Lorna to appear. Charlie Baker, Important Local News Anchor, was giving her away. There had been a long story in the paper this very morning about the novelty wedding of the sports guy and the weather girl, which went into detail about the mentoring relationship and the intern he'd taken under his wing during her first shaky days at the station. My mother had

left the article out on the kitchen table, without comment, and as I scanned I realized it could have been about strangers for all the attachment I felt to my father's fairytale second marriage.

Lorna was beaming as she came down the aisle. Her eyes sparkled and the waterproof mascara wasn't holding up the way it should have but no matter, she was still beautiful. When she and Charlie got up to the front she leaned forward and kissed Helen, then Ashley, and then me, her veil scratching my face as it brushed against me. It was the first time I'd seen Charlie Baker, anchorman, close up, and I would have bet money he'd had a facelift sometime during those long newsdoing years. He had that slippery look to him.

The minister cleared his throat, Charlie Baker handed Lorna over to my father, and now, finally, it was really happening. Some woman in the front row, wearing a purple hat, started crying immediately, and as the minister got to the vows Helen was tearing up as well. I was bored and kept glancing around the church, wondering what my mother would think of all this, a fancy church and a long walk down the aisle, pomp and circumstance. My parents were married in the Party Room of the Dominic Hotel in Atlantic City, with only her mother and his parents in attendance, along with a few lost partygoers who stumbled in from a bar mitzvah a couple of doors down. It was low-key, just what they needed, seeing that my mother's father disapproved and refused to attend and my father's family couldn't afford much more than the Party Room for a couple of hours, a cake, and a cousin playing the piano; my father had paid for the justice of the peace. There are pictures of them all around one table together, my mother and father and grandmother and my father's parents plus some white-haired man in Buddy Holly glasses, each of them with a plate of half-eaten cake before them. This was the wedding party.

I watched my father, thinking this as he said his vows, speaking evenly into Lorna's veil with his face very red and serious. My sister began to cry and I knew it wasn't for the happiness of weddings but for the finality of all of this, knowing that things would never go back to the way they were. I thought of my mother at home in her garden, weeding under a hot afternoon sun, away from the pealing of church bells. And I thought of other summers, long before my father lifted this veil and kissed his new bride.

CHAPTER TWO

Of all of Ashley's boyfriends, there were only a few that I can remember past the dates and events they represent. Lewis, of course, who would be the end of that line come August nineteenth. Robert Parker, who two months after breaking up with Ashley in my eighth-grade year was killed in a motorcycle accident. But of all of them, only Sumner really mattered to me.

Ashley met Sumner Lee at the beginning of tenth grade, before I turned ten. He wasn't like anyone she'd brought home before: Ashley was into well-formed boys, mostly athletes – wrestlers, football players, the occasional tennis guy, but that was rare. These boys with their thick necks and muscled legs traipsed up our front walks with my sister on their arms like a trophy. They were polite to my parents, uncomfortable around me, and drank all of our milk when they came around after school. They run together like a blur, these boys, their names three letters: Bif, Tad, Mel. My father liked them because he was on his home turf, with sports as a common ground. My mother eyed her dwindling milk supply but said nothing. We all pretty much saw this to be the norm, at least until she brought Sumner home.

It was right after a nasty breakup with Tom Acker, quarterback of the Lincoln High Rebels. He was skinny and fast and chewed tobacco but only when Ashley let

him. When she broke up with him he lurked around the neighborhood after school, football tucked under his arm like Ann Boleyn's head, haunting.

But Sumner wasn't an athlete. He was skinny and smooth, with black curly hair and bright blue eyes that almost didn't seem real. He had a long, lazy Alabama accent and wore tie-dyes and beat-up Converse high-tops that thwacked when he walked. Sumner was the kind of person that you wanted to sit with in the sun and spend the day. He was interesting and hysterically funny and it just seemed like if you tagged along with him you'd never be bored because he never was. My mother said that Sumner was the kind of person that things just happen to, and she was right. Weird, amazing, incredible things. He led a charmed life, always by stumbling into something interesting totally by accident.

One time right after he and Ashley started dating, he took us to the mall because he had to buy a shoe tree for his father for his birthday. We were walking along looking for one when we bumped into this camera crew filming one of those taste-test commercials right there in front of Cheeseables, the gourmet cheese shop where they also sell that snobby expensive coffee. They had some guy tasting a piece of cheese and they were trying to get him to say something snazzy they could film for the commercial, but he was hemming and hawing and spending too much time staring at the camera.

"So you like the cheese?" a woman holding a clipboard said to him, prodding. "Would you say it's the best cheese you've ever eaten?"

"Well, it's good," the guy said real slowly, "but I've had better when I was abroad."

"But it's still pretty good?" the woman asked while the cameraman rolled his eyes. "Maybe the best you've eaten in a while?"

"It's good," the guy said. "I mean, I like it fine but I would say --"

"Just say it," the cameraman said in a low, growly voice. "Just say it's the best damn cheese you've ever eaten."

The man nibbled at the cheese a little more, taking his time. The woman with the clipboard glanced around, looking for other prospective participants, and all of a sudden, Sumner says in this loud, happy voice, "This is the *best cheese* I've ever eaten!" And then he just smiled a big cheese-loving smile while the onlookers watched him and Ashley turned bright red and socked him in the stomach for saying anything in the first place. That was the thing about Ashley; she loved Sumner's craziness, but it embarrassed her to no end.

The woman with the clipboard walked over to us and looked at Sumner. "Can you say that again?"

"This is the *best cheese* I've ever eaten!" He said this in the same bouncy voice and added for extra effect, "I swear."

The woman turned around and gestured to the cameraman. He made fast business of shooing the first cheese guy away and setting up a fresh plate for Sumner, who grinned at us as he was escorted behind the makeshift counter and took his place in front of the camera.

"I don't believe this," Ashley said to me.

The cameraman was talking to Sumner, who was nodding and saying at random intervals, "This is the *best cheese* I've ever eaten!" as if anyone was not clear on that point yet. They set him up with the cheese, which he took hesitantly at first, nibbled with an inquisitive look, and then let a big smile slowly work its way across his face before saying as if it had just popped into his head, with clear intonation and stress on all the right syllables, "THIS is the BEST CHEESE I have EVER eaten."

The woman with the clipboard smiled, the cameraman shook Sumner's hand, and everyone applauded except for Ashley, who just shook her head. Sumner

collected a bunch of free cheese samples and gave them his name and number and signed an autograph for a little boy who had seen the whole thing.

We went on and got the shoe tree and thought little else about it, except that Sumner made it his signature line and said it whenever the mood struck him whether or not cheese was in the vicinity. Then one evening we were all watching "Jeopardy! And, right after we'd cleared a category on water fowl, who pops up on screen but Sumner, with his cheese and his big grin and of course the line, which was by that point known to the entire family and a few neighbors, all of whom called to make sure we'd seen the commercial. And suddenly, Sumner was the famous Cheeseables cheese guy. His tag line became very cool and they had him back to the Cheeseables in the mall to sign autographs and pose for pictures, and there was even talk of a national campaign, which never happened but was still very exciting. It wasn't that Sumner went looking for adventure on purpose, more that it just stumbled across him. And for Ashley and me and my entire family, it was fun just to be along for the ride.

The best time with Sumner was the summer after fifth grade, when all of us went to Virginia Beach for a whole week while my dad was covering a big gold tournament there. Mom let Sumner drive me and Ashley down in his old Volkswagon convertible, since he had to come late because he was working that summer selling shoes at the mall. Old-lady shoes, really, the kind with thick, springy soles in neutral colors and supertough laces that won't break under tension. The summer before, he'd sold aluminum siding over the phone, sitting behind a counter all day convincing people to make major improvements to their homes, sight unseen. He said he liked to try different jobs every summer, just to see what was out there. At the old-lady shoe store, which was formally called Advantage Shoe Wear, he's already won salesman of the month. The only bad thing was that he had to wear a tie to work, which he got around by rummaging through thrift shops on weekends with Ashley for the widest, brightest, and plaidest ones he could find, clip-on preferred.

I can remember the tie Sumner was wearing that afternoon just as clearly as I can remember everything about that one week at the beach that summer when things were still good in my family. The tie was yellow, with big green shapes on it that from a distance looked like broccoli but up close were actually just splotches with no resemblance to anything. He pulled up in the VW still in his work clothes and with that tie fluttering over his shoulder, flapping along. Ashley and I were sitting on the curb with all our stuff out on the lawn, chewing gum and waiting on him. Ashley leaned across the seat when she got in and kissed him, slipping her hand up to unclip the tie as she did so.

Normally Ashley wouldn't have stood for me coming along with her and her boyfriend, but with Sumner even she was different. He made her loosen up and laugh and enjoy stuff she usually didn't – like being with me. When he was around she was nice to me, really nice, and it closed up that five-year gap that had been widening ever since she'd hit high school and stopped looking after and started slamming doors in my face whenever I got too close to her. It's strange, but over the next few years when things got back between us I always looked back to that day, when we waited for Sumner on the grass, as a time when things had been okay.

We piled into the VW, which sputtered and spit as Sumner tried to negotiate our cul-de-sac. The VW was old and faded blue and had a distinctive rattling purr to it that I could pick out anywhere. It woke me up when he dropped Ashley off late at night or cruised by just to see the light in her window. Sumner called it his theme music.

The trip to the beach was about four hours, and of course going down the highway in a convertible, you can't hear anything going on in the front seat. So I just sat back and stared up at the sky as the sun went down and it got dark. Once we

turned off onto the smaller roads that wound along up the Virginia coast, Sumner turned up the radio and found nothing but beach music, so we sang along, making up our own words when we didn't know the real ones. The engine was pattering and my sister was laughing and the stars were so bright above us, constellations swirling. It was just perfect, just right all at once.

Ashley and I had one room, my parents had the other, and Sumner took the couch in the main room, which my mother made up for him every night. The couch was against the same wall that Ashley's bed was, and because Sumner was sure they could make up a code and communicate, even though Ashley spent most of the time knocking just whatever and then opening the door and whispering "What?" to which Sumner would tell her what he'd just knocked and they'd both laugh and start the whole thing over again. Ashley never laughed before like she did with Sumner; she'd always been kind of pouty and quiet, always with a stomachache or some ailment, real or imagined. But Sumner made her happy and shiny all the time, her hair long and feet bare and a boyfriend driving a convertible. She became warm and easygoing, like summer itself.

When I think back to that week in Virginia Beach I can remember every detail, from the bathing suit I wore each day to the smell of the clean hotel sheets on my bed. I remember my mother's freckled face and the way my father could so easily slip an arm around her waist and pull her close, kissing the back of her neck as he passed. I remember steamed shrimp and cool, sweatshirt nights and the pounding of the waves in the distance lulling me to sleep. I remember the walks we took every night we were there, throwing a cheap Frisbee my father bought at a gas station on the way up and chasing each other across the sand in the dark, waiting for the moonlight to catch it as it sailed through the air. I remember that week in a way I can't remember anything else.

After it was over I rode back home with my parents, Ashley and Sumner staying for a last day on the beach. There was sand in my shoes when I got home and my suntan lotion spilled all out in my suitcase, carrying the smells and sensation of that week all the way back to my landlocked bedroom. Only the sounds of Mr. Havelock's lawnmower in the distance reminded me it was really over, I was home. It was a different world and I sat in the quiet of my room that night, wishing I was back in the sand, with sky and ocean so close, lost in the thick of it all.

At the reception everyone was drinking and the band was playing and it took about ten years for me to finally locate my father in all the confusion. He was surrounded by a crowd, like he always is, his face red and beety, a drink in one hand. I waited until he saw me standing there and made a big production of putting his arm around me, always conscious of the fact that now I was edging taller than him, just a little. It is disconcerting to look down at your father, the one person you can always remember being bigger than the rest of the world.

"Haven." He kissed my cheek. "Are you finding everything you need? Did you get some food?"

"Not yet," I said. Another group of well-wishers passed by, practically yelling out encouragements. It was always a challenge to compete for my father's attention in public. "I'm really happy for you, Dad." This seemed like the right thing to say.

"Thanks, honey." He put his arm around my waist, that same simple gesture I associated with my mother. "She's really something, isn't she?"

Of course he was looking across the room at Lorna, who was surrounded by her own group of people, all admiring the ring, laughing, and looking at my father and me looking at them. Lorna was seated in a chair with a glass in her hand, fanning herself with a big piece of paper. The reception was outside, under a big tent at Charlie Baker's house, and it was hot as blazes. Lorna Queen smiled at me,

wagging her fingers, and blew a kiss to my father, who I am embarrassed to say pretended to catch it.

"She's very nice," I said, waving back at Lorna.

"It's real important to me that you girls are comfortable with this," my father said. "I know these past few years have been tough, but I know things are going to be smooth from here on out. I know your mother would want them to be as well."

I felt my stomach churn. I didn't want to think of her now, in this place with the white-topped tables and tuxedoed waiters and my father's new life. It seemed horribly inappropriate if not blasphemous in some way. I was trying to think about something else when Ashley and Lewis came up behind us.

"Daddy, I'm so happy," Ashley said, letting loose of Lewis long enough to throw her arms around my father. Her eyes were still red and puffy and my father didn't know that after the ceremony she and Lewis had driven around the block a few times so that she could gather her composure before going to the reception. I'd walked with Aunt Ree to Charlie Baker's and watched them make several passes, each time with Ashley wiping her eyes and Lewis wearing his most concerned expression. Now she just hugged my father and Lewis stared off across the room, holding her purse for her. Ashley kept some things to herself.

"Thanks, honey." My father kissed her on the forehead, then reached to shake Lewis's hand. "Not too long for you, eh, Lewis? Just a month or so away, right?"

"Twenty-nine days," Lewis, ever exact, replied.

"We'll be glad to have you in the family," my father said with his smooth drinking tongue, as if we as a family were still one flawless unit, without cracks and additions, the most recent of which was making her way across the room in a blur of white, throwing her arms around his neck while the rest of us stood and watching. Even Ashley, who had long been the only one who could stomach my father's new romance, looked somewhat uncomfortable.

I spent the reception listening to comments about how tall I was, everyone trying to make it sound like it was a good thing to be a giant at fifteen. I towered over everyone, it seemed, and Ashley kept coming up behind me and poking me hard in the center of my back, which was my mother's subtle and constant signal that I was slouching. What I really wanted to do was curl up in a ball under the buffet table and hide from everyone. After four hours, several plates of food, and enough small talk to make me withdraw into myself permanently, we finally got to go home.

Ashley had too much wine and Lewis drove us home, leaving her car in the parking lot to be retrieved the next day. She was talking too loudly and being all kissy with him while I sat in the backseat and thought about how quickly summer was passing. In a little over a month I'd be back in school with new notebooks and pencils, and Ashley would be gone from our house and the room she'd had next to mine for as long as I could remember. She and Lewis would be moving to Rock Ridge Apartments, off the bypass, into a two-bedroom place with peach carpet and a skylight and unlimited access to a pool that was within steps of their front door. She already had mailing labels, just sitting on her desk waiting to be used: Mrs. Ashley Warsher, 5-A Rock Ridge Apartments, with a little rose next to her name. She was ready to become someone else. She would take her dramatics and her tattoo and her legends of boyfriends to a new home, and we would be left to remember what we could as we passed by her empty room.

When we got home my mother was out in her garden. It was falling into dark and I could just see her hunched over her rosebushes, pruning shears in hand. Before my father left we had the perfunctory subdivision yard, with straight edges and our weeds whacked away from unwanted places. My mother had a few geraniums by the back door that struggled each year to bloom and failed, maybe a

sprinkle of red and pink in the early season before giving up altogether. After the separation, however, my mother was a changed woman. It wasn't just the support group she joined, or her new interest in Barry Manilow, both of which she was introduced to by Lydia Catrell, our divorcee neighbor who moved in next door just about the same fall day my father moved out. Not two weekends later my mother was in the yard with a rented Rototiller and a stack of books on gardening, ripping up the ground with all the energy and abandon she'd controlled so well in the weeks since we'd found out about the Weather Pet. She bought seeds and raided nurseries and mulched and composted and spent full days with her hands full of earth, coaxing life out of the dry, dull grass my father had spent years pushing a mower over. All through the house there were seed packets and Xeroxed pictures of perennials and biennials and alpines and annuals and roses in every color you could imagine. I loved the names of them, like secret codes or magical places: coreopsis, chrysanthemum, stachys. The next summer my mother had the most beautiful garden on the block, far better than the evenly planned and scaled plots of our neighbors. Hers stretched itself across the entire yard, climbing over walls and across the grass, glazing out in colors that were soft and bright and shocking and muted all at once. There was always a huge bouquet on our kitchen table, over-flowing, and the smell of fresh flowers filled the house the way a heaviness had since that October. I loved to see her out there, hair tied back and the world blooming all around her, the colors so alive and constant and all by her own hand.

"So how was it?" She smiled at me as I came walking up, my bridesmaid's bouquet dangling in my hand. I held it up as I got close and she examined it. "That's beautiful. You know what that's called? *Polemonium caeruleum*. I don't think I've ever seen it used in a bouquet before. Maybe I should try some of that next year." She bent over and tugged at a weed until it gave way, coming up with a poof of dirt around it.

"It was fine," I said, wondering what words I should use to describe such an event, the details I should go into/ "The food was good."

"It always is at weddings." She reached down and picked a few shiny leaves, rubbing them together in her hand. "What do you think of this?"

I took them from her and held them to my nose when she motioned for me to do so. They smelled sweet and lemony, like the cough drops my grandmother always gave me instead of candy. "What is it?"

"Lemon balm." She picked some for herself, pressing it to her nose. "I just love the way it smells."

I could hear Ashley laughing from the front porch, where she was sitting on the steps, leaning against Lewis. "Ashley's drunk," I told my mother, who only smiled that sad smile again and yanked up another weed. "She had about a million glasses of wine."

"Oh well." She tossed the weed aside and wiped her hands against each other. "We all have our ways of getting through."

I could have said it all right there, all the Hallmark kind of things that I felt I should say to my mother, words of support and solidarity and comfort. But with this opportunity so neatly presented I could do nothing but follow her down the stone walk past her rosebushes and flower beds and bird feeders to the back steps and into the kitchen. She went to the sink and washed her hands, and in the suddenly bright light I looked at her in her faded jeans and flowered shirt and thought how much she looked like Ashley: her long, dark hair done up behind her head, her tiny feet that tracked garden mud across the floor. They were both so small and precise. I wondered what she'd done that afternoon and watched my mother at her sink and said no right things, only pressed those shiny leaves to my face and breathed in their strong, sweet smell.

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**Sarah's new title *ALONG FOR THE RIDE*
goes on sale June 16, 2009!**