

One

My sister Greta and I were having our portrait painted by our uncle Finn that afternoon because he knew he was dying. This was after I understood that I wasn't going to grow up and move into his apartment and live there with him for the rest of my life. After I stopped believing that the AIDS thing was all some kind of big mistake. When he first asked, my mother said no. She said there was something macabre about it. When she thought of the two of us sitting in Finn's apartment with its huge windows and the scent of lavender and orange, when she thought of him looking at us like it might be the last time he would see us, she couldn't bear it. And, she said, it was a long drive from northern Westchester all the way into Manhattan. She crossed her arms over her chest, looked right into Finn's bird-blue eyes, and told him it was just hard to find the time these days.

"Tell me about it," he said.

That's what broke her.

I'm fifteen now, but I was still fourteen that afternoon. Greta was sixteen. It was 1986, late December, and we'd been going to Finn's one Sunday afternoon a month for the last six months. It was always just my mother, Greta, and me. My father never came, and he was right not to. He wasn't part of it.

I sat in the back row of seats in the minivan. Greta sat in the row in front of me. I tried to arrange it like that so I could stare at her without

her knowing it. Watching people is a good hobby, but you have to be careful about it. You can't let people catch you staring at them. If people catch you, they treat you like a first-class criminal. And maybe they're right to do that. Maybe it should be a crime to try to see things about people they don't want you to see. With Greta, I liked to watch the way her dark, sleek hair reflected the sun and the way the ends of her glasses looked like two little lost tears hiding just behind her ears.

My mother had on KICK FM, the country station, and even though I don't really like country music, sometimes, if you let it, the sound of all those people singing their hearts out can bring to mind big old family barbecues in the backyard and snowy hillsides with kids sledding and Thanksgiving dinners. Wholesome stuff. That's why my mother liked to listen to it on the way to Finn's.

Nobody talked much on those trips to the city. It was just the smooth glide of the van and the croony country music and the gray Hudson River with hulking gray New Jersey on the other side of it. I kept my eyes on Greta the whole time, because it stopped me from thinking about Finn too much.

The last time we'd visited was a rainy Sunday in November. Finn had always been slight—like Greta, like my mother, like I wished I was—but on that visit I saw that he'd moved into a whole new category of skinny. His belts were all too big, so instead he'd knotted an emerald-green necktie around his waist. I was staring at that tie, wondering when he might have worn it last, trying to imagine what kind of occasion would have been right for something so bright and iridescent, when suddenly Finn looked up from the painting, brush midair, and said to us, "It won't be long now."

Greta and I nodded, even though neither of us knew whether he meant the painting or him dying. Later, at home, I told my mother he looked like a deflated balloon. Greta said he looked like a small gray moth wrapped in a gray spider's web. That's because everything about Greta is more beautiful, even the way she says things.

It was December now, the week before Christmas, and we were stuck in traffic near the George Washington Bridge. Greta turned around in her seat to look at me. She gave me a twisty little smile and

reached into her coat pocket to pull out a scrap of mistletoe. She'd done this for the last two Christmases, carried a piece of mistletoe around to pounce on people with. She took it to school with her and terrorized us at home with it. Her favorite trick was to sneak up behind our parents and then leap up to hold it over their heads. They were not the kind to show affection out in the open, which is why Greta loved to make them do it. In the van, Greta waved the mistletoe around in the air, brushing it right up into my face.

"You wait, June," she said. "I'll hold this over you and Uncle Finn and then what'll you do?" She smiled at me, waiting.

I knew what she was thinking. I'd have to be unkind to Finn or risk catching AIDS, and she wanted to watch me decide. Greta knew the kind of friend Finn was to me. She knew that he took me to art galleries, that he taught me how to soften my drawings of faces just by rubbing a finger along the pencil lines. She knew that she wasn't part of any of that.

I shrugged. "He'll only kiss my cheek."

But even as I said it, I thought of how Finn's lips were always chapped to shreds now. How sometimes there would be little cracks where they'd started to bleed.

Greta leaned in, resting her arms on the back of her seat.

"Yeah, but how do you know that the germs from a kiss can't seep in through the skin of your cheek? How can you be sure they can't somehow swim into your blood right through your open pores?"

I didn't know. And I didn't want to die. I didn't want to turn gray.

I shrugged again. Greta turned around in her seat, but even from behind I could tell she was smiling.

It started to sleet, and the little nuggets of wet ice splatted against the window as we drove through the streets of the city. I tried to think of something good to say back to Greta, something to let her know that Finn would never put me in danger. I thought about all the things Greta didn't know about Finn. Like the way he'd let me know the portrait was just an excuse. How he'd seen the look on my face the very first time we'd gone down for the painting sessions. How he'd waited for my mother and Greta to go ahead into the living room, and in that moment, when it was only the two of us in the narrow hallway

inside Finn's apartment door, he'd put his hand on my shoulder, leaned in, and whispered in my ear, "How else could I get all these Sundays with you, Crocodile?"

But that was something I would never tell Greta. Instead, when we were in the dim parking garage, climbing out of the van, I blurted out, "Anyway, skin's waterproof."

Greta pressed her door closed gently, then walked around the van to my side. She stood there for a few seconds, staring at me. At my big, clumsy body. She tugged the straps of her backpack tight against her little sparrow's shoulders and shook her head.

"Believe what you want," she said, turning away and heading for the stairs.

But that was impossible and Greta knew it. You could try to believe what you wanted, but it never worked. Your brain and your heart decided what you were going to believe and that was that. Whether you liked it or not.

My mother spent the hours at Uncle Finn's in his kitchen, making pots of tea for us in a magnificent Russian teapot Finn had that was colored gold and red and blue with little dancing bears etched around the sides. Finn said that pot was reserved for serving tea to his favorite people. It was always waiting for us when we came. From the living room we could hear my mother organizing Finn's cabinets, taking out jars and cans, plates and mugs, and loading them back in again. Every once in a while she'd come out to give us tea, which would usually go cold because Finn was busy painting and Greta and I weren't allowed to move. All those Sundays, my mother hardly looked at Finn. It was obvious that she was being broken up into pieces about her only brother dying. But sometimes I thought there was more. She also never looked at the painting. She'd come out and set the teapot down and walk right past the easel, craning her head away. Sometimes I thought it wasn't Finn at all. Sometimes it felt like it was the canvas and brushes and paint she was trying not to see.

That afternoon we sat for an hour and a half while Finn painted us. He had on Mozart's *Requiem*, which Finn and I both loved. Even though

I don't believe in God, last year I convinced my mother to let me join the Catholic church choir in our town just so I could sing the Mozart *Kyrie* at Easter. I can't even really sing, but the thing is, if you close your eyes when you sing in Latin, and if you stand right at the back so you can keep one hand against the cold stone wall of the church, you can pretend you're in the Middle Ages. That's why I did it. That's what I was in it for.

The *Requiem* was a secret between me and Finn. Just the two of us. We didn't even need to look at each other when he put it on. We both understood. He'd taken me to a concert at a beautiful church on 84th Street once and told me to close my eyes and listen. That's when I first heard it. That's when I first fell in love with that music.

"It creeps up on you, doesn't it," he'd said. "It lulls you into thinking it's pleasant and harmless, it bumbles along, and then all of a sudden, boom, there it is rising up all menacing. All big drums and high screaming strings and deep dark voices. Then just as fast it backs right down again. See, Crocodile? See?"

Crocodile was a name Finn invented for me because he said I was like something from another time that lurked around, watching and waiting, before I made my mind up about things. I loved when he called me that. He sat in that church, trying to make sure I understood the music. "See?" he said again.

And I did see. At least I thought I saw. Or maybe I only pretended I did, because the last thing I ever wanted was for Finn to think I was stupid.

That afternoon the *Requiem* floated over all the beautiful things in Finn's apartment. His soft Turkish carpets. The old silk top hat with the worn side to the wall. That big old Mason jar filled to the top with every possible color and pattern of guitar pick. Guitar pickles, Finn called them, because he kept them in that canning jar. The music floated right down the hallway, past Finn's bedroom door, which was closed, private, like it always was. My mother and Greta didn't seem to notice the way Finn's lips moved along with the music—*voca me cum benedictus . . . gere curam mei finis . . .* They had no idea they were even listening to a death song, which was a good thing, because if my

mother had known what that music was, she would have turned it right off. Right. Off.

After a while, Finn turned the canvas around so we could see what he'd done. It was a big deal because it was the first time he'd let us see the actual painting.

"Take a closer look, girls," he said. He never talked while he worked, so when he finally spoke, his voice was a thin, dry whisper. A flicker of embarrassment shot across his face, then he reached for a cup of cold tea, took a sip, and cleared his throat. "Danni, you too—come in, have a look."

My mother didn't answer, so Finn called into the kitchen again. "Come on. Just for a second. I want to see what you think."

"Later," she called back. "I'm in the middle of something."

Finn kept looking toward the kitchen like he was hoping maybe she would change her mind. When it was obvious she wasn't going to, he frowned, then turned to stare at the canvas again.

He pushed himself up from the old blue chair he always painted in, wincing as he held on to it for a second, steadying himself. He took a step away and I could see that, other than the green tie at his waist, the only color Finn had was in the little splotches of paint all over his white smock. The colors of me and Greta. I felt like grabbing the paintbrush right out of his hand so I could color him in, paint him back to his old self.

"Thank God for that," Greta said, stretching her arms way above her head and giving her hair a shake.

I stared at the portrait. I saw that Finn had put me slightly in the foreground even though we weren't sitting that way, and I smiled.

"It's not done . . . is it?" I asked.

Finn came over and stood next to me. He tilted his head and looked at the portrait, at the painted Greta, then at the painted me. He squinted, looking right into the eyes of that other me. He leaned in so his face almost touched the wet canvas, and I felt goose bumps prickle on my arm.

"No," he said, shaking his head, still staring at the portrait. "Not quite. Do you see? There's something missing. Maybe something in

the background . . . maybe a little more with the hair. What do you think?"

I breathed out and relaxed my chest, unable to hold back a smile. I nodded hard. "I think so too. I think we should come a few more times."

Finn smiled back and rubbed his pale hand across his pale forehead. "Yes. A few more," he said.

He asked us what we thought of the painting so far. I said it was fantastic and Greta didn't say anything. Her back was turned to us. She wasn't even looking at the painting. Both her hands were in her pockets, and when she twisted slowly around, her face was blank. That's something about Greta. She can hide everything she's thinking. The next thing I knew she'd pulled out her mistletoe and was standing there holding it up in one hand. She waved it in an arc like she was cutting the air above our heads, like she was holding something more than just a scrap of Christmas leaves and berries. Finn and I both looked up and my heart seized. We looked at each other for the amount of time that's maybe one grain of sand in an hourglass or one drop of water from a leaky tap, and Finn, *my* uncle Finn, read me—*snap*—like that. In that tiny slice of a second, he saw I was afraid, and he bent my head down and kissed the top of my hair with such a light touch it could have been a butterfly landing.

On the ride home I asked Greta if she thought you could catch AIDS from hair. She shrugged, then turned and stared out the window for the rest of the drive.

I shampooed my hair three times that night. Then I wrapped myself in towels and crawled under my blankets and tried to sleep. I counted sheep and stars and blades of grass, but nothing worked. All I could think of again and again was Finn. I thought about his soft kiss. I thought about how just for a second, just as he'd leaned in to me, AIDS and Greta and my mother had disappeared from the room. It was only Finn and me in that tiniest of tiny moments, and before I could stop myself I wondered what it might be like if he really did kiss my lips. I know how gross that is, how revolting, but I want to tell the truth, and

the truth is that I lay in bed that night imagining Finn's kiss. I lay in bed thinking about everything in my heart that was possible and impossible, right and wrong, sayable and unsayable, and when all those thoughts were gone there was only one thing left: how terribly much I was going to miss my uncle Finn.

Two

Going into the woods by yourself is the best way to pretend you're in another time. It's a thing you can only do alone. If there's somebody else with you, it's too easy to remember where you really are. The woods I go to start behind the middle and high school buildings. They start there, but they stretch up north for miles, toward Mahopac and Carmel, and then farther, to places I don't know the names of.

The first thing I do when I get to the woods is hang my backpack on a tree branch. Then I walk. To make it work you have to walk until you can't hear any cars at all, and that's what I do. I walk and walk until all I can hear are the little cracks and snaps of branches and the swish of the brook. I follow the brook to a place where there's a crumbling dry stone wall and a tall maple tree with a rusted-out sap bucket nailed just above head height. That's my place. That's where I stop. In the book *A Wrinkle in Time*, it says that time is like a big old rumped blanket. What I'd like is to be caught in one of those wrinkles. Tucked away. Hidden in a small tight fold.

Usually I put myself in the Middle Ages. Usually England. Sometimes I sing snatches of the *Requiem* to myself, even though I know the *Requiem* isn't medieval. And I look at everything—rocks, fallen leaves, dead trees—like I have the power to read those things. Like my life depends on understanding exactly what the forest has to say.

I make sure I bring along an old Gunne Sax dress of Greta's from when she was twelve. It's way too small for me, so I have to wear a shirt

underneath and keep the buttons open at the back. It looks more like something out of *Little House on the Prairie* than anything medieval, but it's the best I can do. And then there's my medieval boots. Anyone will tell you that shoes are the hardest part to get right. For the longest time I only had plain black Keds, which I would try hard not to look at, because they ruined the whole thing.

I got the boots, which are black suede with crisscross leather laces right up the front, at the medieval festival at the Cloisters with Finn. It was October, and Finn had already been painting the portrait for four months. This was the third time he'd taken me to the festival. The first time it was his idea, but the other two were mine. As soon as the leaves started to brown and curl, I'd start pestering him about it.

"You're becoming a regular medievalist, Crocodile," he'd say. "What have I done to you?"

He was right. It was his fault. Medieval art was Finn's favorite, and over the years we'd spent hours and hours looking through his books together. This third time at the festival, Finn was already getting thin. It was chilly enough for wool sweaters and Finn was wearing two, one on top of the other. We were drinking hot mulled cider, and it was just the two of us, alone with the greasy smell of a pig roasting on a spit and lute music and the whinny of a horse about to go into a fake joust and the jangling of a falconer's bells. Finn saw the boots that day and bought them for me because he knew I'd love them. He stayed with me at that bootmaker's stall, tying up rough leather laces for me again and again like there was nothing he'd rather be doing. If they weren't right, he'd help pull the boots off my feet. Sometimes his hand would brush my ankle or my bare knee and I'd blush. I didn't tell him this, but I made sure to choose a pair two sizes too big. I didn't care how many pairs of socks I'd have to wear with them. I never wanted to grow out of those boots.

If I had a lot of money, I would buy acres of woods. I would put a wall around them and live there like it was another time. Maybe I would find one other person to live with me there. Someone who was willing to promise they'd never speak a word about anything in the

present. I doubt I could find anyone like that. I've never met anyone yet who might make that kind of promise.

There's only one person I've ever told about what I do in the woods, and that's Finn, and I didn't even mean to tell him. We were walking back to his apartment from the movie theater after seeing *A Room with a View*. Finn started talking about how all the characters were so enchanting because they were so tightly wrapped and it was so beautiful to watch them try to unwrap one another. So romantic, he said. He said he wished things were like that now. I wanted him to know I understood—that I would do anything to go back in time—so I told him about the woods. He laughed and bumped his shoulder against mine and called me a nerdatroid and I called him a geek for spending all his time thinking about painting, and then we both laughed because we knew we were right. We both knew we were the biggest nerds in the whole world. Now that Finn's gone, nobody knows that I go to the woods after school. Sometimes I think nobody even remembers those woods exist at all.

Three

The portrait was never given to us. Not officially. Not with words.

That's because it was never finished. That's what Finn said. We had to keep going back for just one more sitting and one more sitting after that. Nobody argued about it except Greta, who stopped going to Finn's on Sundays. She said if Finn was only doing the background, he didn't need all of us there. She said she had other things, better things, she could be doing with her Sunday afternoons.

It was a cold cold morning in January, the first day back to school after Christmas vacation, and we were waiting outside our house for the school bus. Our house is on Phelps Street, which is one of the last streets on the bus route. We live on the south end of town, and school is a little way out of town on the north side. By road it's about two miles, but if you cut through backyards and come in through the woods—which I sometimes do—it's much less.

Because our house is one of the last the bus gets to, it's always hard to know exactly when it will show up. Over the years, Greta and I have spent a lot of time out there waiting, staring down the line of front lawns on our street. Phelps has a mix of capes and ranches, except for the Millers' Tudor, which sits up a small hill on the cul-de-sac. It's obviously a fake Tudor, because there was nobody in Westchester except for the Mohegan Indians in Tudor times, so I don't know who the Millers think they're fooling. Probably no one. Probably it never even crossed the Millers' minds. But it crosses mine. Every single time I see

it. Ours is the light blue cape with black shutters and a sprawling red maple out front.

That morning I was jogging in place to stay warm. Greta was leaning against the maple, studying a pair of new suede ankle boots she had on. She kept taking her glasses on and off, breathing on them, then cleaning off the steam.

“Greta?”

“What?”

“What better things do you do on Sundays?”

I wasn't sure I really wanted to know. I wrapped my arms around my coat, pulling it in tighter.

Greta turned her head slowly and gave me a big close-lipped smile. She shook her head and widened her eyes.

“Things *you* can't even imagine.”

“Yeah, right,” I said.

Greta went to stand on the other side of the driveway.

I figured she meant having sex. But, then again, maybe not, because I could imagine that. I didn't want to, but I could.

She took her glasses off again and turned the lenses white with her breath.

“Hey,” I called over to her. “We're orphans again. It's orphan season.”

Greta knew what I meant. She knew I meant tax-season orphans. Every year it was the same. There'd be the buzz of Christmas and New Year, and then our parents disappeared for all the worst months of winter. They'd leave the house by six-thirty in the morning, and most nights they wouldn't be back until at least seven. That's what it's like to be the offspring of two accountants. That's how it's been for as long as I can remember.

In tax season, when our parents had to leave before the bus came, they used to have Mrs. Schegner across the street watch over us from her living room window. Nine-year-old Greta would stand waiting for the bus with seven-year-old me. Even though we knew Mrs. Schegner was there, it still felt like we were alone. Greta would throw her arm over my shoulder and pull me right into her. Sometimes, if it was taking a really long time for the bus to get there or if it started snowing,

Greta would sing. She'd sing something from *The Muppet Movie* or sometimes that James Taylor song "Carolina in My Mind" from my parents' *Greatest Hits* album. Even then she had a good voice. It was like she was another person when she sang. Like there was some completely different Greta hidden in there somewhere. She'd sing and hold me tight until she saw the bus round the corner. Then she'd say to me, or maybe to herself, "See, that's not so bad. See?"

I didn't know if Greta still remembered that. I did. Even when she was being mean as anything, I could look at her and remember how we used to be.

Greta glanced at me for a second, trying not to be interested. Trying to pretend she didn't care. She put her hands on her hips. "Oh, the drama of it all, June. Your parents work late. Get over it." She spun around and kept her back to me until the bus came trundling up the road.

I went to Finn's with my mother three more times. We'd started going every other week instead of just once a month. And not always on Sundays. I would have loved to go down there by myself, like I used to, at least one of those times. I wanted to have a good long talk with Finn. But every time I brought it up, my mother said, "Maybe next time. Okay, Junie?" which wasn't really a question at all. It was my mother telling me how it was going to be. It started to feel like she was using me and the portrait as an excuse to go down and spend time with Finn. It never seemed to me like they were very close, and I guess maybe she was starting to regret it. Now it was like I was some kind of Trojan horse my mother could ride in on. It wasn't fair, and underneath it all, lying there like quicksand, was the fact that there wouldn't be that many next times. Without ever saying it, it was becoming clear that the two of us were scrapping it out for Finn's final hours.

On the Sunday that ended up being the last Sunday we went to Finn's, Greta was sitting at her desk, painting her fingernails two colors. She alternated—one purple, one black, one purple, one black. I sat on the edge of her unmade bed and watched.

"Greta," I said, "you know, it won't be much longer. With Finn, I mean."

I needed to make sure she understood the way I understood. My mother said it was like a cassette tape you could never rewind. But it was hard to remember you couldn't rewind it while you were listening to it. And so you'd forget and fall into the music and listen and then, without you even knowing it, the tape would suddenly end.

"Of course I know," she said. "I knew about Uncle Finn being sick way before you knew anything."

"Then why don't you come with us?"

Greta put the black and purple nail polishes back on her little wooden makeup shelf. Then she pulled down a bottle of dark red and unscrewed the top. Carefully, she scraped the brush against the bottle's rim. She pulled her knees to her chest and painted her toenails, starting with the pinkie.

"Because he's going to finish that picture one way or another," Greta said, not even bothering to look up at me. "And, anyway, you know as well as I do that if he could have, he wouldn't have even put me in the portrait. It would have been just his darling Junie, all on her own."

"Finn's not like that."

"Whatever, June. It's not like I even care. It doesn't matter. Any day now the phone will ring and you'll find out that Finn's dead, and you'll have a whole life of Sundays to worry about. What'll you do then? Huh? It doesn't matter anymore. One Sunday more or less. Don't you even know that?"

I didn't say anything. Greta always knew how to make me lose my words. She screwed the top back on the polish bottle and flexed her freshly painted toes. Then she turned to me again. "What?" she said. "Stop staring at me."

Four

Tax season always smelled like stew. Most days my mother left her mustard-yellow crockpot sitting on the kitchen counter, slow-cooking something for our dinner. It didn't matter what was in the pot—chicken, vegetables, beans—it all smelled like stew once the pot was through with it.

It was four o'clock and Greta was at play rehearsals at school. She had one of the big supporting parts in *South Pacific*, the role of Bloody Mary, which she got because she can sing like anything and she's pretty dark. Hair and eyes anyway, so all they have to do is put some dark makeup and eyeliner on her to make her look Polynesian. She told us she had to be at the school almost every night "'til late."

It was a well-known fact that, of all the schools in the area, our school put on the best musicals. Some years there were even people from the city who came to see our shows. Theater people, choreographers, directors, that kind of thing. There was a rumor that once, maybe ten years ago, a choreographer saw the play and thought one of the senior girls was so good that he got her a part in *A Chorus Line* after graduation. Every year that story goes around, and even though everyone says they don't believe it, you can tell really they do. Really they want to believe that a fairy-tale thing like that could happen to them.

The temperature had been in the single digits for a few days, too cold for the woods, so I was home alone, sitting at the kitchen table doing geology homework, when the phone rang.

"Mrs. Elbus?" a man said. The voice was blurry. Watery.

"No."

"Oh . . . right. Sorry. Is Mrs. Elbus there?" Not just watery, but with an accent. English maybe.

"She's not home yet. Can I take a message?"

There was a long pause, then, "June? Actually, is this June?"

This man, who I knew I'd never spoken to before, knew my name, and it felt like he was reaching his fingers right down the phone wires.

"Call back later," I said. Then I quickly hung up.

I thought of that movie where there's a girl babysitting and someone keeps calling, saying he can see her and that she should check on the children, and she gets more and more freaked out. That's what that phone call felt like. Even though the guy hadn't said anything creepy, I walked around the house, locking all the windows and doors. I sat down on the kitchen floor next to the fridge and opened up a can of Yoo-hoo.

Then the phone rang again. It rang and rang until the answering machine got it. And there was that same voice.

"I'm sorry, really sorry, if I frightened you. I'm ringing about your uncle. Uncle Finn in the city. I'll try back later. That's all. Sorry."

Uncle Finn. He knew Uncle Finn. My whole body went cold. I stood up and poured the rest of the Yoo-hoo down the sink. Then I paced back and forth over the brown linoleum tiles of the kitchen. Finn was gone. I knew Finn was gone.

I picked up the phone and dialed his number, which I knew by heart. It rang twice before it was answered, and when I heard the click of someone picking up, a flood of joy spread right through my chest.

"Finn?" It was quiet on the other end and I waited. "Finn?" I said again. I could hear the desperation creeping into my voice.

"I'm . . . I'm afraid not. He's not . . ."

I hung up the phone quick. The voice was the same. It was the same man who'd left the message on our machine.

I ran up to my room. It had never seemed so small. So shrunk down. I looked around at my stupid fake candles and my big dumb collection of *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, my gaudy red comforter with the fake tapestry print on it. The city seemed like it was a thousand miles away. Like without Finn it didn't have the weight to stay put. Like it might just float away.

I crawled under my bed and closed my eyes tight. I stayed under there for two hours, breathing in stale stew, pretending to be something ancient and entombed, listening for the back door to open so I could press my hands tight over my ears before I had to hear someone playing that stupid answering machine message again.

Five

What Greta said—that she knew about Finn being sick before I did—was probably true. She wasn't there when I found out. The day I found out, I was supposed to be going to the dentist with my mother, but then, without saying a word, she turned left on Main instead of right and the next thing I knew we were at the Mount Kisco Diner. I should have known something was weird about the whole thing from the start, because Greta and I always went to the dentist together and that time it was just my mother and me. Maybe she was hoping I'd be so relieved not to be going to the dentist that the news about Finn wouldn't seem so bad. She was wrong about that. I like going to the dentist. I like the way the fluoride gel tastes, and I like that for the twenty minutes I'm sitting in Dr. Shippee's chair, my teeth are the most important thing in the world to him.

We sat in a booth, which meant we had a jukebox. Before I even asked, my mother passed me a quarter and told me to pick some songs.

"Something good, okay?" she said. "Something happy."

I nodded. I didn't know what we were about to talk about, so I chose "Ghostbusters," "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," and "99 Luftballons." The jukebox had both the English and the German versions of that song. I chose the German because I thought it was cooler.

My mother ordered a cup of coffee, no food. I ordered lemon meringue pie and chocolate milk.

"Ghostbusters" started to play as I flipped through the jukebox

songs. I turned the pages, reading the titles one by one, wondering if I'd made the best choices. Then my mother's hand was suddenly on top of mine.

"June," she said, looking like she was almost going to cry.

"Yeah?"

She said something so softly I couldn't hear any of it.

"What?" I asked, leaning across the table.

She said it again, but I could only see her lips moving, like she wasn't even trying to make herself heard.

I shook my head. The jukebox blared out Ray Parker Jr. singing about how he wasn't afraid of ghosts.

My mother pointed to the space next to her, and I walked around to her side of the table. She took my head in her hands and pulled me in so her mouth was almost touching my ear.

"Finn's dying, June."

She could have said that Finn was sick—even really sick—but she didn't. She told me straight out that Finn was dying. My mother wasn't always like that. She wasn't usually one for harsh truths, but this time she must have figured it would mean less talking, less explaining. Because how could she possibly explain something like this? How could anyone? She pulled me closer and we stayed like that for a few seconds, neither of us wanting to look the other in the eye. It felt like there was a traffic jam in my brain. A hundred different things I was supposed to say.

"Lemon meringue?"

The waitress was suddenly standing there holding out my pie, and I had to pull away and nod. I looked at that ridiculous fluffy cheerful meringue and couldn't believe that only a few minutes ago I was a girl who would have wanted something like that.

"What kind of dying?" was what I finally said.

I watched as my mother traced her index finger against the table. *AIDS*, she wrote. Then, as though the table was a blackboard, as though it could remember what she'd written, she rubbed it out with the flat of her hand.

"Oh." I got up and went back to my side of the table. The pie sat there taunting me. I stabbed my fork into that stupid hopeful me-

ringue and pulled it apart. Then I slid closer to the jukebox and pressed my ear against the speaker. I closed my eyes and tried to make the whole diner disappear. As “99 Luftballons” started up, I sat there waiting for Nena to say “Captain Kirk,” the two words in that whole song I understood.

Six

The coffin wasn't open at Finn's funeral, and everyone was grateful for that. Especially me. I'd been imagining his closed eyes. His thin-skinned eyelids. I'd been wondering how I would stop myself from laying gentle fingers against them and sliding them open. Just to see Finn's blue eyes one more time.

The funeral was exactly a week after the phone call. It was a Thursday, and we were missing the afternoon of school for it. I was pretty sure that was the only reason Greta agreed to come. This was also one of the few days in my life that I'd ever seen both my parents off on the same day during a tax season.

My mother brought along the portrait Finn had painted of the two of us, because she thought it might be a nice thing to put up somewhere to show the kind of man Finn had been, but when we got to the parking lot of the funeral home she changed her mind.

"He's here," she said. Her voice was a strange combination of anger and panic.

My father parked the car and looked out the window. "Where?"

"Right there, can't you see him? On his own, on the side there."

My father nodded, and I looked too. There was a man sitting hunched on a low brick wall. A tall skinny guy who reminded me of Ichabod Crane from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

"Who is it?" I asked, pointing out the window.

My mother and father both turned to look at me in the backseat. Greta elbowed me in the ribs and said, "Shut up," in her meanest voice.

"You shut up," I said.

"I'm not the one asking stupid questions." She straightened her glasses, then looked away.

"Quiet. Both of you," my father said. "This is hard enough for your mother."

It's hard for me too, I thought, but I didn't say it. I kept quiet, knowing that the sadness I was feeling was the wrong kind of sadness for a niece. Knowing that Finn wasn't really mine to be that kind of sad over. Now that he was dead, he belonged to my mother and my grandmother. They were the ones people felt bad for even though it seemed like neither of them were even that close to him. To everyone at Finn's funeral, I was just the niece. I stared out the car window and understood that I was in a place where nobody knew my heart even a little bit. Nobody had any idea how many minutes of each day I spent thinking about Finn, and, thankfully, nobody had any idea exactly what kind of thoughts they were.

My mother had arranged for the funeral to be held at a funeral home in our town instead of in the city, where all of Finn's friends lived. There was no argument about it. It felt like she was trying to gather him up. Like she was trying to keep Finn all to herself.

My father looked over at my mother. "So, should I leave it in the trunk?"

She nodded, her lips pressed together tight. "Just leave it."

In the end it had been my dad who drove down to the city to pick up the portrait the day after Finn died. He went at night, and none of us offered to go with him. My mother had a key to the apartment, which Finn had threaded onto a piece of red silk ribbon. We'd had that key for years, but I'm not sure anybody had ever used it. My mother always said it was a "just in case" kind of thing. Something Finn wanted us to have.

My dad didn't get home until late that night. He banged the door coming in, and even I overheard him and my mother talking.

“Was he there?” she said.

“Danni—”

“Was he?”

“Of course he was there.”

I thought I could hear my mother crying then.

“God. Just thinking about him . . . You’d think things would turn out a little bit fair. Just a little bit.”

“Shhhh. Danni, you have to let it go.”

“I won’t. I can’t.” There was quiet, then, “Well, where is it anyway? You did get it, right?”

He must have nodded, because the painting was on the table in a black garbage bag the next morning. I was the first one up and I found it there looking like nothing special. I circled the table once, then reached out to touch the bag. I pressed my nose against the outside, searching for a scent of Finn’s, but there was nothing. I opened the bag and stuck my head inside, breathing in deep, but the chemical plastic smell smothered anything that might have been wound up in the canvas. I closed my eyes and breathed harder, slower, tightening the bag around my neck.

“Hey, dorkus.” I felt a slap land hard across my back. Greta. I pulled free from the bag.

“I won’t stop you if you want to end it all, just let us keep the painting, okay? It’s gross enough without another dead-body story all over it.”

Dead body. Finn was a dead body.

“Girls?” My mother stood halfway down the stairs, pulling her pink quilted robe around herself. She squinted at us through sleepy eyes. “You’re not messing around with that painting, are you?”

We both shook our heads. Then Greta smiled.

“One of us has been trying to commit suicide with the garbage bag, that’s all.”

“What?”

“Shut up, Greta,” I said, but she couldn’t. She could never shut up.

“Found her down here with her head halfway in that bag.”

My mother came over and hugged me so tight I thought she might suffocate me. Then she held me away from her.

"I know how you felt about Finn, and I want you to know, Junie, anytime, anytime you need to talk—"

"I was not trying to kill myself."

"It's okay," she said. "You don't have to say anything. We're all here. Me, your father, Greta. We all love you." Behind my mother, Greta goggled her eyes at me and mimed hanging herself with a noose.

There was no point arguing, so I just nodded and sat down at the table.

My mother picked up the plastic bag and took it upstairs. She said we needed a break from the portrait for a while and that she was putting it someplace safe. That was the last I saw of it until the day of the funeral.

Now we walked up the path toward the front door, Greta and I falling behind our parents. My father stopped and put a hand on my mother's arm.

"Go on ahead," he said, pointing up toward the front steps. "Go find your mother. See how she is."

My mother nodded. She was wearing her nice black wool coat over a narrow black skirt with a dark gray blouse, and she had on a little black hat with a veil. She looked good, like she always did. It was snowing lightly, and the snowflakes kept landing and sitting on the top of her hat for a few seconds before they melted into the black felt.

My grandmother was in the entrance hall, talking to someone I didn't know. She was nothing like my mother, but that was the story of the Weiss side of the family. It seemed like Finn and my mother had looked at their parents and decided that, no matter what, they did not want to turn out like them. So there's Grandpa Weiss, who was a big army guy, and then there's Finn, who went off to become an artist. And there's Grandma Weiss, who spent her whole life cooking meals and ironing clothes and getting her hair done for Grandpa Weiss, and then along comes my mother, who would pay anything not to have to iron or cook real food, who cropped her hair short so she wouldn't have to worry about doing anything with it. If the trend continues with Greta and me, that would mean neither of us would ever want to work in an office, which so far was true for me. If things went my way, I would be working at a renaissance fair as a falconer. I wouldn't have to worry

about climbing career ladders or getting promotions, because falconry's not like that. Either you're a falconer or you're not. Either the birds come back to you or they fly away.

My father waited until my mother walked into the funeral parlor. Then he turned to the two of us. I noticed a thin strip of bristle along his jawline, where he'd missed shaving, and I noticed that his brow was constantly furrowed that day. Like a juggler who had to concentrate too hard to keep all the balls in the air. He didn't seem sad about Finn dying. If anything, I thought, he acted like it was a relief.

"I want you two to tell me if you see that man come in, okay?"

We both nodded.

"For your mother's and your grandmother's sake, got it?"

We nodded again.

"Good girls. I know this is rough, and you're both doing a great job." He squeezed my shoulder, then Greta's. "Things will settle down after this, okay?" We nodded once more. He looked at us for another second, then turned to jog up to the open front door.

Greta and I stood there on the ice-crusted front path. Sometimes it felt really obvious that I was taller than Greta even though she was older than me. I leaned in to her and nodded my head toward the man.

"Who is he anyway?" I whispered. I was almost certain she wasn't going to tell me, and I was right. She said nothing, just gestured for me to walk down the path toward where he stood. I glanced up and saw that he was staring right at me. Not at Greta. Only me. He leaned forward like he was about to stand up, like he thought I was coming over to greet him. I was about to turn and walk back the other way, but Greta laid a hand on my arm and pulled me on. We walked until we were maybe a room's length away from the man. Then Greta stopped, waited a second, and cleared her throat.

"He's one of those people who weren't invited to this funeral," she said, loud enough for him to hear.

I looked over at the man who a second ago had seemed to be trying to catch my eye, but now he'd looked away. He'd plunged his hands into his pockets and was staring down at the sidewalk.

"What'd you say that for?"

"I'm not telling you a thing," she said.

The reason Greta knows things that I don't is because she spies. There are places in our house where you can hear everything. I hate those places, but Greta loves them. Her favorite is the downstairs bathroom because hardly anybody uses it, so nobody remembers someone is in there. Even if you are noticed, you can shout out, "Just a minute," before unlocking the door to let someone in. By that time you've heard everything.

I don't like to overhear things, because, in my experience, things your parents are keeping quiet about are things you don't want to know. It doesn't feel good to know that your grandparents are getting separated because your grandfather lost his temper and gave your grandmother a slap across the face after fifty-two years of being married with no problems at all. It doesn't feel good to know ahead of time what you'll be getting for Christmas or birthdays so that you have to act surprised even though you're a terrible liar. It doesn't feel good to know that your teacher told your mother at a conference that you're an average student in math and English and that you should be happy with that.

Greta raced ahead to the door of the funeral home. When she got there, she stopped and turned around.

"On second thought," she said in a loud clear voice. "On second thought, I will tell you." She wiped melted snow off her cheek with the back of her hand.

I felt cold and sick. It was always the same with Greta's information. I wanted to know, but I was scared to know. I gave her the very slightest tip of my head.

She pointed to the man and said, "He's the guy who killed Uncle Finn."

I twisted my head back to look at him, but he'd already turned to go. All I saw was a tall skinny man crouching to get into his small blue car.

I sat in the front row during the funeral service, trying to listen to all the nice things people had to say about Finn. It was stuffy in that room, and dim, and the chairs were the kind that forced you to sit up

straighter than you wanted to. Greta didn't sit up front with us. She said she wanted to sit in the back row, and when I turned to glance at her I saw that her head was down, her hands were over her ears, and her eyes were closed. Not just closed but squeezed tight, like she was trying to shut the whole thing out. For a second I thought she might have even been crying, but that didn't seem likely.

My mother gave a short speech about Finn and her as kids. About what a good brother he'd been. Everything she said was vague, like the details might stab her if they got too sharp. After my mother, a cousin from Pennsylvania said a few words. Then the funeral director babbled on for a little while. I tried to listen, but I couldn't stop thinking about the man outside.

I didn't want to think about how Finn got AIDS. It wasn't my job to think about that. If that guy was really the one who killed Finn, then he must have been Finn's boyfriend, and if he was Finn's boyfriend, then why didn't I know anything about him? And how did Greta know? If she'd known Finn had a secret boyfriend, she would have taunted me about it. She never missed an opportunity to let me know I knew less than she did. So there were two possibilities. Either she just found out about this guy or none of it was true.

I decided to believe the second one. It's hard to do that, to *decide* to believe one thing over another. Usually a mind makes itself up on its own. But I forced myself, because the idea that Finn would keep such a big secret from me made me want to throw up.

The service ended and everyone filed out of the building. A few people stopped to talk in the entry hall, but I went straight out the door and tried to find the little blue car. There was no sign of it. Or the man. The snow had started to come down harder, turning the streets and lawns white and perfect. I zipped my coat up as high as it would go, then I looked down the road in both directions, but there was nothing to see. He was gone.

Seven

After a snowstorm is one of the best times to be in the woods, because all the empty beer and soda cans and candy wrappers disappear, and you don't have to try as hard to be in another time. Plus there's just something beautiful about walking on snow that nobody else has walked on. It makes you believe you're special, even though you know you're not.

I was wearing this pair of orange mittens that Greta had knitted for me when she was in the knitting club in fifth grade. They were huge and sloppy and the thumbs were in the middle instead of on the edges. I didn't bother with the Gunne Sax dress, but I did change into my medieval boots. It wasn't actually all that cold, and I walked in farther than I usually did, across the little brook that ran along the bottom of the hill and then up the hill on the other side of it. I tried not to think about Finn and all the secrets he might have kept from me. I tried to keep my mind on the story I was telling myself, where I was the only one strong enough to hunt for my village and I had to trek across the snow to track deer. Girls weren't supposed to hunt, so I had to tie my hair up and pretend to be a boy. That's the kind of story it was.

There was a layer of old frozen snow under the fresh stuff, and for every step I took up the hill I slipped down a bit. By the time I finally got to the top, I sat down, exhausted. It was all quiet and I let my eyes fall closed. For a second I saw Finn's face and I smiled, pressing my eyes closed harder, hoping to keep him there. But the picture disappeared. I let myself tip backward so I was lying flat out in the snow, looking up

at the twisted patterns the bare tree branches made against the gray sky. After the land settled around my body, everything was still, and even though I tried to keep my brain in the Middle Ages, Finn kept sneaking into my head. I wished he'd been buried instead of cremated, because then I could take off my gloves and press my palms to the ground and know that he was there somewhere. That through all those molecules of frozen dirt there was still a connection. Then the guy from outside the funeral home came into my thoughts, and I felt a blush of stupidity. Of course someone as amazing as Finn would have a boyfriend. Why wouldn't he? This must have been the guy who'd called that day. The English guy who knew my name. The guy who was calling from Finn's apartment. He was actually *in* Finn's apartment. With *my* uncle Finn. A hot tear ran down my cheek.

Then, into the silence, over the top of everything, came a long, sad howl. For a second it felt like the sound had come from inside me. Like the world had taken everything I was feeling and turned it into sound.

By the time I sat up, there were two howls. Dogs maybe. Coyotes or wolves. The howls weren't steady. Both of them had a kind of cracked-voice sound to them, and they were staggered. One would start, then a few seconds later the second one would come in. Then more. Three or four. I listened hard, trying to hear how far away they were, but it was like the sound was everywhere. Near and far. Wrapped around the trees and the clouds. The howls grew louder, and a picture of a big lunging gray wolf with tons of matted fur popped into my mind. For a single dumb moment it really did feel like I was in the woods in the Middle Ages, when wolves could take away babies or eat a person whole.

"I'm not afraid," I called out across the hills. Then I ran, stumbling and tripping. I misjudged the jump and plunged one boot into the brook, then scrambled up the other side, grabbing on to thin saplings, steadying myself. A few minutes later I came out of the woods, into the school parking lot. Almost all the cars were gone and I stood there for a minute, doubled over, catching my breath.

"Shoot," I said, looking down at my right hand. I kicked at the big pile of dirty plowed snow at the edge of the parking lot. One of the mittens Greta had made me was gone.

Eight

“Do you want to go to a party?”

Greta wasn't smiling when she asked me. She wasn't even looking at me. She was bent over her dresser as I walked past the door to her room on my way down for breakfast.

I was sure I'd heard her wrong, so I stopped and waited for her to say something else. I must have looked like an idiot standing there in the hallway with my mouth hanging open.

Greta turned and eyed me up and down.

“Par-ty,” she said, enunciating every syllable and exaggerating her lip movements. “Do.You.Want.To.Go.”

I stepped into her room, which still had the same white furniture it had when she was seven and the same pink walls with that thin strip of Holly Hobby wallpaper across the top. From the way the room was decorated, someone who didn't know anything about Greta would think a nice little girl lived there. I sat on the edge of her bed.

“What kind of party?”

“The good kind.”

“Yeah, right.”

Greta knows that for me there are no good parties. I'm okay with one or two people, but more than that and I turn into a naked mole rat. That's what being shy feels like. Like my skin is too thin, the light too bright. Like the best place I could possibly be is in a tunnel far under the cool, dark earth. Someone asks me a question and I stare at

them, empty-faced, my brain jammed up with how hard I'm trying to find something interesting to say. And in the end, all I can do is nod or shrug, because the light of their eyes looking at me, waiting for me, is just too much to take. And then it's over and there's one more person in the world who thinks I'm a complete and total waste of space.

The worst thing is the stupid hopefulness. Every new party, every new bunch of people, and I start thinking that maybe this is my chance. That I'm going to be normal this time. A new leaf. A fresh start. But then I find myself at the party, thinking, *Oh, yeah. This again.*

So I stand on the edge of things, crossing my fingers, praying nobody will try to look me in the eye. And the good thing is, they usually don't.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Oh, come on, June. I promise it won't be awful."

I raised my eyebrows at her. The whole thing sounded too sincere. Not like Greta at all.

"Really. Cross my heart." She put both hands over the middle of her chest. I tried hard not to smile, but I could feel my face betraying me.

"Well, where is it?" I said after a while.

"Don't know yet, but Jillian Lampton's organizing it. You know Jillian Lampton, right?"

I did know Jillian. She was one of the lighting people for *South Pacific*. She had dyed black hair that she wore in a sharp bob. I always thought she looked kind of how I'd like to look someday. Jillian was a junior, a class below Greta, but she was probably older than Greta.

This is something that only a few people know. Greta's a senior, but she's only sixteen. None of her friends know her real age. Not a single one. We moved from Queens to our town when I was five and Greta was seven. Greta was supposed to go into second grade, but instead she got put in third. Her last teacher had recommended it. She said Greta wasn't being challenged and told my parents she could easily hold her own if she skipped a grade. Apparently my father wasn't sure, but my mother thought it was a fantastic idea. "Opportunities don't come swimming back to you if you throw them away." That was her big motto. Mostly for Greta. As if opportunities were slippery little fish.

Greta didn't care either way. So they did it. Even though she was already one of the youngest kids in her class, she skipped a grade. Now she's at least a year younger than everybody else in her class, almost two years younger than most. But she keeps it quiet. At her birthday parties, my mother would put an extra candle on her cake, just for show. The tradition was that every year Greta would decide which one was the "liar candle" and, if she could, she'd leave that one burning. She was scared that blowing that one out would reverse all her wishes. The age thing is on her school records, but other than that it seems like it's mostly forgotten. Sometimes I can tell though. I would never say anything to Greta, but sometimes I can see that she's a lot closer to being a kid than her friends are.

"I don't know, Greta. I don't think Mom—"

"Don't worry about Mom. I'll deal with Mom. It's a month and a half into tax season. Mom won't care." Greta put both hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. "So you're coming?"

"I . . . Why do you want me to?"

There was a flicker of something in Greta's look. I couldn't tell whether it was a flicker of love or regret or meanness, and then she said, "Why *wouldn't* I want you to?"

Because you hate me, I thought, but I didn't say it.

Three years ago we stopped having Keri Westerveldt babysit us during tax season. Greta was put in charge. My parents trusted her. "You're both sensible girls," my mother said. That first year without Keri Westerveldt, Greta kept track of everything I did. She helped me with my homework and sat next to me on the bus on the way home. She made us little American cheese and mayonnaise sandwiches for snacks and we'd sit up in her bedroom eating them, pretending to be the kind of orphans who had only each other in the world. The house would be so still sometimes, so quiet and empty, that it was easy to believe it was true. If she'd asked me to a party back then, I wouldn't have hesitated for a second. Even though I hate parties, I would have said yes. I wouldn't have doubted her at all.

It's hard to say exactly when we stopped being best friends, when we stopped even resembling two girls who were sisters. Greta went to high school and I was still in middle school. Greta had new friends and

I started having Finn. Greta got prettier and I got . . . weirder. I don't know. None of those things should have mattered, but I guess they did. I guess they were like water. Soft and harmless until enough time went by. Then all of a sudden you found yourself with the Grand Canyon on your hands.

"Come on. Please, June?"

"I don't know, maybe," I mumbled. I wanted to believe her intentions were good. I stared right down deep into her eyes, squinting to find the place where all this had come from. But I couldn't see anything. Then the idea came to me that maybe somehow it was Finn. Maybe when you're dead you can crawl inside other people and make them nicer than they were before. I don't really believe in that kind of thing, but I smiled at her anyway. Just in case. Just on the off chance that it was Finn looking out through Greta's eyes.

"So you'll go?" she said.

I looked around her room. In every corner, clothes lay crumpled and piled. Lipsticks and eyeliners that had rolled to the edge of Greta's uneven desk rested against a photocopy of the *South Pacific* script. A crushed 7Up can sat on top of an unsolved Rubik's Cube. In the upper right-hand corner of her mirror, she'd wedged photo booth pictures of herself and her friends, and I saw my feet sticking out. An old picture of me, of us, my dirty white sandals and the edge of my yellow polka dot sundress peeking out from under all the rest.

Maybe it was the fact that Greta still kept that picture close at hand, or maybe it was how surprisingly good it felt to have Greta asking me to do something with her, or maybe it was that I knew this was my last real year with her. She'd already gotten early acceptance to Dartmouth. It didn't seem possible, but in six months she'd be out and gone. It could have been any of those things, or it could have been that the party just felt far away. I knew there'd be time enough to bow out later. Why spoil the moment now? Maybe that's why I found myself nodding my head.

"Okay," I said, half-smiling. "I guess I'll go."

Greta clapped her hands together and did a little hop off the ground. Then she reached over and lifted my braids up onto the top of my head.

"I'll fix you all up," she said. "I still have some Sun-In, and Megan said that it can work even if it's not summer if you stand really close to a lightbulb. And we can do makeup." She stopped for a second and let my hair fall back down onto my shoulders. She picked her glasses up off the top of her dresser and put them on. Then she looked at me hard.

"We're back, right? Like we used to be? I'll help you forget all about Uncle Finn. Now that Finn's gone, you and me . . ." Greta was smiling. Giddy almost.

I pulled away from her and stared.

"I don't want to forget about Finn."

That's what I said. It came straight from my heart and out my mouth, and although it's as true as anything, I've spent a lot of time wishing I hadn't said it. Wishing I'd told Greta that, yes, we were back. That we were best friends again. That everything could be like it used to be.

She tried to turn away fast, but before she could, I saw the look of disappointment that flooded across her whole face. She fidgeted with something on her desk, keeping her back to me. When she faced me again, the look was gone, replaced by her usual condescending repulsion.

"God, June. Do you always have to be such a moron?"

"I—"

"Just go. You can go."

I got to the door, then turned around.

"Greta?"

She let out an annoyed sigh. "What?"

"I didn't mean—"

She waved the back of her hand at me.

"I don't want to hear it. Just go. Get out."

Nine

Uncle Finn wasn't just my uncle, he was also my godfather. Greta's godparents were the Ingrams: Fred Ingram, who was a quality control manager at Pillsbury, and Becca Ingram, his wife. They have one son, named Mikey, who's younger than me by a couple of years. Greta and I have known Mikey since the day he was born with that weird port-wine-stain birthmark across his shoulder. In the summer, the Ingrams came around a lot for barbecues, and Mr. Ingram always brought his own meat. If we went up to the town pool to swim or had the sprinklers on, Mikey would always wear his T-shirt because of that birthmark. Even in front of Greta and me, who had seen it all before.

The Ingrams were okay, but you'd never know they were Greta's godparents. Finn took the job of being my godfather seriously. I asked my mother once why Finn wasn't Greta's godfather too, and she said that when Greta was born, Finn hadn't settled down yet. He was still "out and about," traveling here and there on a whim. That sounded okay to me, but according to my mother it wouldn't have been suitable.

She said that even if Greta had been born after me, she still wouldn't have asked Finn to be a godfather again because he ended up taking the whole thing to heart too much. She didn't expect him to take so much interest, and now that I was older she thought it was becoming a distraction. Once, before he died, she said it might be a good thing for me not to be able to rely on him so much.

I hated that. And I hated when she said any sentence that started with the words “A girl your age . . .”

I knew Greta hated that I got Uncle Finn and she got stuck with the Ingrams. It wasn't like Finn ever said Greta couldn't come along to anything. He never excluded her. She excluded herself. Sometimes she would say, “I don't want to intrude on your special godfather time with Finn,” in her snotty tone. And I never argued with her because I did want Finn to myself.

Last summer, Mikey tried to kiss Greta. She told him it was gross because he was her godbrother and that was like incest.

“But you can kiss June,” she said. Mikey went red, not knowing where to look. Nobody wanted to kiss me, not even Mikey, and Greta wanted to make sure I knew it one more time. But what I could see was that Greta always remembered the godfather thing. It was always right on the edge of her mind. I'd lucked out with Finn, and she knew it.

Ten

The portrait finally came out of that ugly black garbage bag on the Tuesday morning after Uncle Finn's funeral. There was supposed to be only a two-hour delay that morning, but it kept snowing hard and fast, and we ended up getting the whole day off from school. I like snow days. Especially when there was already piles of snow on the ground and you can go out and walk two or three feet above the grass and pretend you're in a cloud heaven.

When we were little, before Greta turned mean, the two of us would disappear together into the backyard in our fat snowsuits. We'd lie on our backs, both trying not to blink when the snowflakes hit our faces. Greta said that once a snowflake landed right on her eyeball so that she could see every little delicate detail of it. Every single crystal. Just for a second. Like it was carved right into her eye. She said it was the most beautiful snowflake she could ever imagine. More beautiful even than angels. Then she ran into the house. She clutched at my mother's skirt, crying and crying because she knew I'd never be able to see that snowflake. She knew she'd never be able to show that perfect thing to me. That's a story my mother tells sometimes to show what Greta and I used to be like. Sometimes I believe it. Sometimes I don't.

"We have to get it framed," my mother said. My dad had made his way in to the office, but my mother stayed home with us that day. She was pacing the kitchen, holding the bagged painting to her chest. The

kitchen smelled of scrambled eggs and coffee, and the snow was coming down so thick I couldn't even see the car outside in the driveway.

"We don't have to," Greta said. "Who says we have to?"

"That's just what you do with a painting," my mother said. "One of you take it out. Let's have a look."

There was nothing to be afraid of. That's what I told myself. I reached for the bag. My mother handed it to me, then took a step back. Greta leaned in close as I laid the whole thing down on the table and tugged the bag off.

There we were, me and Greta, staring up at ourselves from the kitchen table. My hair was the way I always had it—two thin braids, one on each side, tied together at the back—and Greta had her glasses on, because Finn told her he thought we should look the way we always did. That the portrait should be true. The way Finn painted me made it look like I knew some kind of massive secret but I was never going to tell anyone. He should have painted Greta like that, because that's more what she's like, but instead he made her look like she'd just finished telling a secret to someone and now she was sitting there, waiting for a reaction. If you look at that portrait you can see what a fantastic painter Finn was. I can't even begin to understand how he got the thoughts out of someone's head and onto the surface of a canvas. How can thoughts that are invisible be turned into smudges of red and yellow and white?

None of us could take our eyes off the portrait. My mother put her arms around our waists and eased in between us. I soaked in every brushstroke, every shading of color, every angle and line in that painting. I could feel my mother and even Greta doing the same. I could feel them wanting to dive into that canvas. My mother's grip grew tighter and tighter around me until I felt her hand forming a solid fist around my shirt. She twisted her head away and wiped her cheek against the sleeve of her sweater.

"You okay?" I asked.

My mother nodded quickly, eyes fixed on the painting. "It's such a waste. Look at this. Look at what he could do. He had all the opportunities in the world. . . ."

I thought she was going to cry, but instead she broke the moment with a quick hard clap. Then, in an overly cheerful tone, she said, “Okay. Frames? Ideas?”

I cocked my head to the side. “Does anyone think it looks . . . I don’t know . . . different?”

“I don’t know,” Greta said, rubbing her chin, pretending to consider it, “you still look like a doofus.”

“Not now, Greta,” my mother said, letting out a long slow breath.

But the painting did look different. The last time I’d seen it was the last time I went to Finn’s. The paint had still been wet, and Finn was there looking smaller than I’d ever seen him before. His vision was going, and he said he’d never be able to get it right. He put a hand on my shoulder and said, “Sorry, June. Sorry it’s not so great.” He said we’d keep working on it.

We. That’s what he said. As if I had something to do with it.

“Everybody finished looking?” my mother asked, reaching for the portrait.

“Just a sec.” I searched the painting for the thing that had changed. I looked right into my eyes, then Greta’s. No. Nothing was different there. Then I noticed the buttons. There were five buttons right down the front of my T-shirt. Once I saw them, I couldn’t understand how I hadn’t seen them right away, because they didn’t even look like something Finn would paint. They looked like something a kid might paint. Each one was solid black with a little splotch of white to make it look like light was reflecting off it. Why would Finn put buttons on a T-shirt? I touched my fingertip to the top button. The paint was thicker than it was anywhere else, and somehow that made me sad.

I looked at my mother and Greta and decided not to mention the buttons.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m done. You can put it away.”

On Friday after school we went to the frame store downtown. Chubby little Mr. Trusky told us he understood how important it was that we were all happy with the choice, and he let us stay a half hour after he flipped the CLOSED sign on the door. Over and over my mother had Mr. Trusky frame up the portrait, and over and over one of us decided

it wasn't quite right. At the end of that day the painting was still unframed. It went back in the trunk of the car, back in the same black plastic bag we brought it in.

"We'll try again tomorrow," my mother said in the parking lot. "He says he's got more."

"Why don't you just go by yourself?" Greta asked.

"Absolutely not. This is something Finn made for the two of you. This is your responsibility."

"Well, then, I say we go for the plain black wooden one."

I hated the plain black wooden one. It made us look sarcastic.

Each frame Mr. Trusky put around the portrait seemed to change everything about it. The one my mother liked was called Valencia and was made of dark wood with some small carvings around the edge that looked like coffee beans. I thought it made the whole portrait look boring.

"I like the gold one. The old-fashioned one."

"Surprise, surprise," Greta said.

It was called Tuscan Gold, and I thought it looked classy. Like the painting could go right into a museum with that frame around it.

"Finn would like that one," I said.

"How do you know what Finn would like?" Greta asked, her voice sharp. "Have you managed to jump rope your way to the land of the dead now?"

Sometimes it amazed me the way Greta remembered things. When I was nine I had an idea about time travel. I thought that maybe if I jumped rope backward fast enough, I would go back in time. If I could just churn the air hard enough around me, I could make a little bubble that went backward. I didn't believe that anymore. I didn't believe anyone could have that kind of power.

My mother looked like she might break down any second, so I nudged Greta.

"Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow we'll see things clearer," my mother said.

And somehow we did. We chose the first one Mr. Trusky showed us the next morning. Maybe we chose fast because Greta had found a good excuse not to come with us, so it was only me and my mom. Or

maybe it was because we were worn down or maybe because it really was the best frame. It was medium brown with beveled edges, and it almost seemed to disappear around the canvas, letting the painting be itself.

“Leave it with me for a couple days. I’ll have it all framed up by, say, Tuesday morning.” Mr. Trusky scribbled on a pad.

“Leave it?” I said.

My mother put a hand on my shoulder. “He can’t do it right now, honey. It takes some time.”

“But I don’t like the idea of leaving it here. Away from us.”

“Come on, now, don’t be rude. Mr. Trusky’s doing his very best.” My mother smiled at Mr. Trusky, but he was still writing on his pad.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll come in special tomorrow afternoon, just for you, and I’ll bring it over to your house when I’m done with it. Okay?”

I nodded. It would still be away overnight, but it seemed like the best deal I was going to get.

“Say thank you to Mr. Trusky, please, June. This is awfully nice of him.”

I thanked him and we left. Mr. Trusky kept his promise, and the painting came back to us the next day. He propped it up on the kitchen counter so we could have a good look.

“Now, that’s one handsome piece of art,” my father said, hands on his hips.

“And the frame is perfect. We do appreciate everything you’ve done,” my mother said.

“It makes all the difference, you know,” Mr. Trusky said.

Both my parents nodded, though I’m not sure they were even listening.

“And what about you, June? Are you happy?” Mr. Trusky asked.

It was the kind of question you had to say yes to. But really I wasn’t. All I could see was me and Greta shoved into that frame together. No matter what happened, the two of us would always be trapped inside those four pieces of wood.

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