

CHAPTER ONE

The last time I saw my uncle, he bought me a dog. A golden retriever puppy with sad eyes and a heart-shaped nose. I didn't have her long enough to give her a name. One moment she was running around my living room with the promise of many adventures together and the next she was gone. It was the same way with Uncle Billy. One moment he was waving goodbye as he reversed out of my driveway. Then I never saw him again.

Mom never wanted a dog. I'd begged her, promising to walk the dog every day, to scrub the living room rug after any accidents, but Mom was insistent. It wasn't about the rug, or the countless shoes the dog would ruin. It wasn't about love, either. She had no doubt I would love the dog. Of course, she would love it, too, but a pet, like any relationship, was about accountability, not love. I was on the brink of my teenage years, of boys and friends who mattered more than allowance, more than dogs, more than family. We'd been over it. No dog. I knew this. Uncle Billy knew this, too.

The dog was a birthday present. For my twelfth birthday, my parents had rented out an arcade and batting cages in Culver City. It was the beginning of 1998. We always celebrated in January, since I was born so close to the end of the year.

My friends crowded behind the plate, cheering as I nudged the batting helmet out of my face and timidly stepped into the cage. Dad offered me last-minute advice to keep my feet shoulder-distance apart, my right elbow up. I expected Mom to remind me to be careful, but she was at the concession stand, making a phone call.

All right, Miranda, you can do this, Dad said after a swing and a miss. Mom appeared at his side and whispered something into his ear. I swung at the next pitch once it had already sped past the plate. *You should know by now not to count on him*, Dad said to Mom. *Miranda*, he called to me. *Keep your eyes open*.

He promised he'd be here, I heard Mom whisper.

Let's not get into this now, he whispered back.

He shouldn't make promises if he isn't going to keep them.

Suze, not now.

I tried to focus on my cocked elbow, my loose knees, just as Dad had taught me, but their hushed tones distracted me. There was only one person who made them whisper like that. I hated when they talked about Billy that way, like they were trying to protect me from him, like he was someone I needed to be shielded from. I turned away from the pitching machine, toward my parents. They were leaning against the cage, staring each other down.

The impact sounded before I felt it. An incredibly loud clap and then my shoulder ignited. I screamed, falling to the ground. Two more balls whizzed by my head. Dad shouted for someone to turn off the machine as he and Mom raced into the cage.

Sweetheart, are you okay? Mom pulled the helmet off my head and brushed the sweaty hair off my forehead. The pain had knocked the wind out of me. I panted on the cold cement floor, unable to respond. *Miranda, talk to me*, she said a little too frantically.

I'm okay, I said between exerted breaths. *I think I just need some cake*.

Normally, this would have made them laugh, but they continued to cast concerned and disappointed looks at each other as if the welt rising on my shoulder was somehow Billy's fault, too. Mom huffed at Dad, then stormed off to the concession stand to collect my birthday cake.

Is Mom okay? I asked Dad as we watched her talk to the teenager behind the counter.

Nothing a little cake can't fix, Dad said, ruffling my hair.

After the cake was devoured and the bag of ice Mom made me hold on my shoulder had melted down the front of my T-shirt, I joined my friends in the arcade, ignoring the sharp pains that shot down my arm as I rolled the skee-ball up its narrow lane. Between rolls, I glanced over at my parents. They were cleaning up the remains of my birthday cake, Mom furiously scrubbing the plastic tablecloth until Dad pulled her away and held her in his arms. He stroked her hair as he whispered into her ear. I couldn't understand why she was so upset. Billy often didn't show up when he said he would. In fact, I couldn't even remember the last time he'd been to one of my birthday parties. If an earthquake hit in Japan or Italy, he'd be on the first plane out with the other seismologists, engineers, sociologists. He didn't usually have time to let us know he was leaving. Instead of disappointment, I felt pride. My uncle was important. My uncle saved lives. Mom taught me to see him this way. After a recital or debate, a Sunday barbecue without Billy, she would tell me, *Your uncle wants to be here, but he's making the world a safer place.* He was my superhero. Captain Billy, who saved the world not with superhuman powers but with a superior brain. Even when I was too old to believe in superheroes, I still believed in Billy. I thought Mom believed in him, too, yet there she was, crying over a birthday party.

My best friend, Joanie, and I went to bed early that night. I was half-asleep and hazy, but the ringing doorbell was

real, the tiptoes downstairs, the whispers. I slipped out of bed, into the hall where I saw Mom at the front door below, her satin bathrobe pulled snugly around her small frame. Billy stood outside on the porch.

I started to run toward the stairs, ready to pounce on Billy. I was getting too big to jump on him, yet I thought even when I was an adult I would greet him that way, breaking his back with my love for him. When I got to the top of the stairs, Mom's words startled me.

What the fuck is wrong with you? It's 3:00 a.m. I froze. Mom rarely raised her voice. She never cursed. *You've got some nerve, showing up in the middle of the night and blaming me. Some fucking nerve.*

I stood paralyzed at the top of the banister. Her anger was glorious, unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

You made things this way. She tried to keep her voice down. *You hear me? This was your choice. Don't you dare blame me.*

Billy turned away as Mom continued to yell about the hour, telling him he was an asshole and something called a narcissist and other names I didn't understand. When he spotted me at the top of the stairs, his cheeks were red, his eyes were glassy. Mom followed his gaze to me. Her cheeks were pale and she suddenly seemed very old. I looked between their expressive faces. They weren't fighting about my birthday. Something else had happened.

Honey, go back to bed, Mom called to me. When I stalled, she added, *Please.*

I darted back to my room, disturbed and inexplicably embarrassed by what I'd seen.

Joanie tossed when she heard me crawl into bed beside her.

What time is it?

It's after three.

Why is someone coming over so late?

I don't know.

Joanie rolled over, mumbling incoherently. I couldn't fall back to sleep. Mom's words raced through my brain—*some fucking nerve and asshole and don't you dare blame me. This was your choice.* Sunlight bled through the curtains as dawn became morning. I'd stayed up all night, and I still couldn't figure out what choice Billy had made, what he'd blamed on Mom, what I had witnessed at our front door.

Later that morning, Dad took Joanie and me for pancakes.

Where's Mom? I asked Dad as we got into his car.

She's sleeping in. Mom never slept past seven, but Dad's tone discouraged further questions.

When we returned from breakfast Mom was still in her satin robe, her auburn hair tangled around her face as she folded chocolate chips into batter. Normally, singing was an essential ingredient in any recipe. Mom's mellifluous voice would weave its way into a pie or lasagna, making the cherries or the tomatoes sweeter. As she continued to flip the cookie dough, over and over again, the kitchen was painfully silent.

She looked up when she heard me in the doorway. Her eyes were puffy, her cheeks still colorless. *How was breakfast?*

Dad let us get three different kinds of pancakes.

Did he? She returned her attention on the bowl of cookie dough. *That was nice of him.* I wanted her to start singing, to break her own trance. She continued to watch the dough thud against the sides of the mixing bowl, and I wondered if the cookies would taste as good without her secret ingredient.

We didn't hear from Billy for a few weeks, not until he stopped by to take me out for my birthday. I had no idea where we were going. That was the fun of a day with Billy. Whatever activities I would have proposed—an afternoon at the pier or

Six Flags—wouldn't have been half as exciting as whatever adventure he had in store for us.

The labored breaths of Billy's old BMW echoed through the house. I waited for the familiar sounds of his car door shutting, of Mom rushing to meet him at the front door, peppering him with questions. Where were we going? Would there be other children? Were there cliff edges or high distances I could fall from? Seat belts? Life jackets? She never seemed completely satisfied with his answers.

That afternoon, Billy honked his horn and Mom called, *Billy's here*, from behind her closed bedroom door.

Don't you want you say hi? I shouted to her.

Not today, she shouted back.

I hesitated before I left the house. Mom's bedroom door remained closed. It didn't matter, anyway. Billy didn't ring the bell, just waited in the car with the engine still running.

There's my favorite girl, Billy said as I hopped into the car. He always called me that, his favorite girl. It would have embarrassed me if my parents said anything so sappy. With Billy, it made me feel like the kid I still wanted to be but knew at twelve was no longer cool. We turned out of the driveway, and my house retreated into the distance. I wondered if Mom was watching us leave from her bedroom window.

Boy, do I have a surprise for you. Billy shot me one of his oversized smiles. I searched his face for any of the strain I'd seen on Mom's. Billy looked content, giddy.

A surprise? Although I never would have admitted it to Joanie, a surprise from Billy was still a greater thrill than stealing lipstick from the drugstore, a better rush than driving too fast down Highway 1 with Joanie's older sisters.

Hey, reach in there for me. Billy pointed toward the glove compartment where a black envelope rested on top of his car registration. It was the right size to hold tickets to Universal Studios or a concert at the Hollywood Bowl, but Billy never would have

given me a present so straightforwardly. There'd be no fun in it. I had to earn his gifts through solving his clues.

I tore open the envelope and read the riddle aloud. *My flag is red, white and blue, though I'm not a land you call home. You might think it a lozh' – I didn't know how to pronounce that word – but at my closest point, I'm two and a half miles from American soil.*

France? I guessed. Billy looked dubiously at me. *Canada?*

Canada's flag is only red and white. You're getting warmer, or should I say colder, much, much colder.

Russia? I asked uncertainly.

Vernvy! he said in his best Russian accent.

You're taking me to Russia? Was there an earthquake? I pictured Billy and me in shearling hats, trekking through snow to survey the damage to a remote town.

I think your mom would have my head for that, Billy said.

With the mention of Mom, Billy and I quieted. I knew we were both remembering how our eyes had locked while he fought with Mom in the middle of the night.

Is everything okay with you and Mom?

Nothing for you to worry about. He paused, began to say something, then paused again before rolling to a stop outside a building on Venice Boulevard that looked condemned. *Now, let's see about that clue.*

This is where we're going? I asked, counting the storefront's boarded-up windows. Usually, his adventures involved state parks and mountaintops, secluded beaches. *Something in that building has to do with Russia?*

Vernvy! He hopped out of the car and bowed, motioning me toward the metal front door. It was unlocked, and he held it open for me.

Are we allowed to be here? I hesitated, peeking behind him into the dark interior. *It looks closed.*

It's not open today, but the manager owes me a favor. It's always more fun to have a museum to yourself, don't you think? He walked

inside and waved me to follow. *Trust me*, he called. Trust me. His mantra. And I always did.

The front room was dimly lit. Glass cases lined the austere walls. Opera played softly from hidden speakers. The case beside the door was filled with taxidermy bats, moles and other small rodents. The next case held shimmering gemstones.

It's modeled off nineteenth-century oddity museums, Billy explained. *Science, art and nature displayed together for the well-rounded mind. A wunderkammer, if you will.*

A wunderkammer. I tested the word in my mouth, waiting for its magic to hit me. Billy's eyes drifted toward a case in the far corner of the room. It was filled with miniature figurines – painted elephants, clowns, a ringmaster, acrobats. The case was labeled The Russian Circus.

I peeked inside the glass, searching for something amiss, a figurine that didn't belong, a riddle scribbled across the circus tent. Sure enough, the next clue was taped to the back of the case.

Like the fabric of my name, my title is lowly yet noble.
I'm named not for the rough wool I bear but the origin
of a river in Northumberland.

Billy laughed when he saw the bewildered look on my face. He rubbed my head and guided me into the next room. It was as overwhelming as the first room was sparse. The walls were cluttered with detailed renderings of dogs in garish frames. There was one portrait of a person, a faded painting of a man with a beard and top hat called Baron Tweedmouth. Beside his portrait, a placard offered a brief history of the lord, a Scottish businessman and member of the House of Commons.

Rumor has it, Billy said, *in 1858 Lord Tweedmouth went to a Russian circus where he saw this fantastic performance by Russian sheepdogs. After the show, he made an offer to buy a pair of dogs, but the ringmaster refused to separate the troupe. So, story goes, Tweedmouth bought the whole lot and bred those sheepdogs to create the retriever.*

Billy gestured toward a filing cabinet beside the portrait. *Open it. It's part of the exhibit.* I tore through reproductions of Baron Tweedmouth's papers, fairly certain where this was headed. I loved that about Billy's adventures. Even though I always figured out where the quest was going before we got there, he refused to let me rush through the lesson. Billy stopped me when I discarded a copy of the baron's breeding records. *Historians found those records in the 1950s and realized the Russian circus was a myth.* Billy pointed to a description of a retriever's keen nose. *See here? Retrievers were already used for tracking before 1858, so Lord Tweedmouth couldn't have bred Russian sheepdogs to create the retriever.* His finger continued down the page, tracing the lineage of Tweedmouth's dogs. *Instead, he bred the retrievers he already owned to produce the perfect hunting companion.*

Does this mean what I think it means? I danced like I had to pee.

Depends on what you think it means.

I flipped over the breeding records and found the next clue written on the back.

Don't call me a beauty, a goddess, the prettiest of the lot. You might consider these pet names the same but only one has a certain ring to it.

I examined each portrait until I located a tweed water spaniel named Belle. Beside her portrait, a plaque explained that Belle was bred with Nous, a yellow retriever, to create the golden retriever.

No way, I shouted. *No freaking way.* I jumped up and down, hugging Billy, screaming unintelligibly.

Not so fast, Billy cautioned. *You have to find her first.*

I searched the crowded room for an envelope that may have contained the next clue. On the far wall, a photograph of a modern golden retriever hung between its ancestors. Its simple black frame pulled away from the wall. I slid my hand into the

empty space, removing an index card. It listed an address on Culver Boulevard.

Outside, I didn't wait for my eyes to adjust to the light, just took off down Venice past other storefronts that looked condemned and auto-body shops.

Miranda, slow down, Billy shouted, panting as he raced to catch up with me.

At the light at Culver and Venice, I jogged in place like a runner trying to keep her heart rate up. *A dog, a dog, a dog, a dog,* I said. The light changed and I sprinted across the street.

Billy's laughter trailed me as we raced past the historic hotel, the restaurants that lined Culver Boulevard. The address was a few blocks down, a pet shop that sold parakeets.

The owner also breeds goldens, Billy explained as he caught his breath.

Inside, the store smelled faintly of nuts. A large, balding man stood behind the counter reading the paper. When he saw us, he disappeared below the register, returning with a golden retriever puppy. I carefully lifted the dog from his hands. The puppy's body was warm and emitted a sweet barnyard scent. She was drowsy at first. As I nestled her against my chest and rubbed my cheeks across her silky fur, she roused to life, offering me sticky kisses. I did my best to keep hold of her, but she was too excited for the embrace. The storeowner suggested I let her run around the store. We watched her sniff the dusty corners and pounce at the metal bases of the birdcages. Billy rested his arm on my shoulders, and I was ready to tell him that he was positively, absolutely my favorite person in the world, then I remembered Mom.

You talked to Mom? She's okay with this?

Billy lifted the dog off the floor, laughing as she lunged at his face. *How could your mom say no to this face?*

Seriously, Uncle Billy. She said I can't get a dog.

You want a dog, don't you?

More than anything.

Billy put the dog on the floor and put his arm around me. *Sometimes your mom needs a little help seeing things clearly. Once she sees how much you love this dog, no way she'll say no. Trust me, okay?*

Even as he said it – *Trust me* – I knew I shouldn't. Mom was never going to let me keep the dog. But I wanted to believe in the power of Billy, the magic that everything would turn out fine simply because he promised it would. And I wanted Mom to believe in it, too.

Joanie's going to be so jealous, I gloated on the drive home. *A puppy. A freaking puppy. Uncle Billy, this is the best birthday present ever.*

We pulled up outside my house, and Billy held the puppy as I lugged the dog supplies out of the back seat. When I went to collect the dog, he didn't let go. He rubbed behind her ears, suddenly serious. *I'm sorry you had to see that, between me and your mom.*

It's no big deal, I said uncertainly.

It is a big deal, he asserted. The dog squirmed in his hands. *Things with me and your mom, whatever happens, I just want you to know it isn't your fault.* I tried to take the puppy, to run into the house so Billy would stop talking, but his grip was too firm. It hadn't occurred to me that anything was my fault until he said that. *Just keep her out of your mom's shoes, and your mom won't be able to resist her.* Billy handed me the dog. *I'll see you soon*, and I decided to trust those words more than the ominous ones that preceded them. We would see Billy soon. Everything would be fine.

Mom, I screamed as I ran inside. *Mom, come quick, you won't believe what Billy got me.*

Mom tore open her bedroom door and raced into the hallway above the foyer. She was in her robe. Dark circles engulfed her eyes. *Jesus, Miranda.* She put her hand on her chest. *You frightened me. I thought something was wrong.*

Look. I held the dog toward her.

Stillness immobilized her face as she looked between me and the yelping puppy. *You can't keep that.* Mom raced downstairs and lifted the puppy from my hands. *We're taking this back immediately.*

You haven't even met her yet. The dog licked Mom's face. *See, she's sweet?*

You know it's not about that, Mom said. The puppy continued to bark.

I just thought once you saw her you'd change your mind.

Miranda, we've been over this. We're all too busy to take care of a dog.

I'll take care of her by myself. You won't have to do anything.

It's too much responsibility, she said.

I'm not a kid anymore. I don't need you to tell me what's too much responsibility. My tone shocked us both. Mom waited for me to calm down. When it became clear she wouldn't engage, I stomped upstairs, screaming, *You won't let me do anything.* I knew I was being dramatic, prematurely acting the temperamental teenager, but I slammed the door so hard my bedroom floor shook.

Mom threw open the door. *Don't you slam this door.* Her voice was calm, her golden eyes clear and furious. *You broke the rules. You knew you weren't allowed to get a dog. You do not get to throw a tantrum.*

I knew she was right, but I was at that age where it didn't matter if she was right, not if it meant I couldn't do what I wanted.

Where's the dog? I said instead. She was no longer holding it.

Crap. Mom raced downstairs and cooed to the puppy. *Miranda, she called up to me, where'd Billy take you to get this dog?*

I'm not telling you, I yelled. When she didn't shout back, I admitted, *A pet shop in Culver City.* I didn't tell her it was a bird store.

Once Mom had left with the puppy, I called Billy to tell him

what had happened. He didn't answer his car phone, so I tried him at home. *You won't believe it*, I screamed into his machine. *Mom made me return the dog. She's such a bitch.* After I hung up, I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. I'd never called Mom a bitch before. I said it again to our empty house. *You're such a bitch.* I kept saying it, hoping it might feel fair. It never did.

All afternoon, I stayed in my room. I heard Mom come home. I heard Dad return from the tennis club. I heard them talking in the kitchen. I knew she was telling him what had happened, that Dad would come upstairs and act the mediator.

At six-thirty, Dad knocked on my door.

I'm not hungry.

Dad opened the door and sat on the bed beside me. *I know you're upset. We've been over this. It isn't the right time to get a dog.*

That's bull – Dad shot me a look. It's never going to be the right time.

Maybe so. You have to respect that, Mimi. We're a family. We make decisions together. Why don't you come downstairs. We'll have a nice dinner. I think that will be best for everyone. Dad nodded approvingly at me, a gesture I knew well. I would make the right decision. I wouldn't disappoint him.

At the table, I watched Mom poke her chicken breast without taking a bite, uncertain what I should say to her. I wanted to apologize for calling her a bitch even if she hadn't heard me.

Instead, Mom broke the silence. *I'm sorry we fought. Billy shouldn't have put you in that position. That wasn't fair of him.*

I stabbed a bite of chicken and threw it into my mouth, chewing aggressively. So this was how she wanted to play it. It wasn't my fault. It sure wasn't her fault, either. It was all Billy. He had chosen to buy me the dog, just like he had chosen to do whatever it was she'd blamed on him the night of my birthday party.

So, this was Billy's choice, too? You're saying I shouldn't blame you?

I'll never forget the wounded expression on Mom's face as she

realized I was referring to the fight I'd overheard, that I was using her words against her.

It doesn't have to be anyone's fault, Dad said. We can all take responsibility for our actions.

I'm sorry I slammed the door, I said, but the damage was done. Mom nodded, accepting my apology. Accepting what had shifted over that dinner.

Later that night, I called Billy again.

Me and Mom are done, I shouted into his machine. I'm going to stay mad at her forever.

When Billy didn't return my message, I figured he probably didn't want to risk Mom answering if he called me back. I tried him again the next day. He didn't pick up, so I told his machine, *I'm going to call you tomorrow at exactly 4:15. Make sure you're home, so we can talk.* The following afternoon, he still wasn't there. The only other place I knew to reach him was at Prospero Books.

In addition to his work with earthquakes, Billy was the owner of a neighborhood bookstore, not in his neighborhood in Pasadena, but in Silver Lake, Los Angeles. Billy called seismology his real job, Prospero Books his fun job. When I asked him why he didn't make his fun job his real job, he said he had a responsibility to protect people because he knew how to learn from earthquakes what others couldn't.

On afternoons when he hadn't planned a scavenger hunt, he would take me to Prospero Books, and the store was its own kind of adventure. We'd walk through the maze of shelves, and Billy would tell me to pick a book, any book, but to choose wisely for I would only get one. It was there I discovered Anne of Green Gables, Mary Lennox and, more recently, Kristy, Claudia, Stacey and their friends in the baby-sitters club.

A male voice that wasn't my uncle's answered the phone. *Prospero Books, where books are prized above dukedom.*

It was probably the manager, Lee, but I didn't want to get into a whole conversation with him about how he couldn't believe that I still hadn't read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.

Is Billy there?

I think he's at the lab. He's planning to stop by on Sunday. Can I take a message?

I hung up before Lee realized it was me.

Sunday was still five days away. I couldn't wait that long, so I tried Billy's house again that night, once Mom had gone to bed and Dad was in the living room watching the nightly news. *Billy? It's your favorite girl*, I said pathetically into his machine. *Are you getting my messages? I really need to talk to you.*

After a few more messages, I started to panic.

I tried to keep the dog, I pleaded into his machine. *You have to believe me. I did everything I could. You know Mom. You know how she is. Please don't be mad at me. Just call me back.* He didn't return my calls, and by the weekend, I knew calling him again was pointless. Billy's silence spoke louder than words. He wouldn't be coming over for Sunday barbecues, not any time soon. He wouldn't be picking me up for any more adventures.

I decided I needed to see him in person. He couldn't look me in the eye and banish me from his life. I knew where he was going to be on Sunday. I knew I could find him at Prospero Books.

Joanie helped me plot the route across the city. Silver Lake may as well have been San Francisco, it took so many freeways to get there. The bus took the residential route, Santa Monica Boulevard all the way until it ended at Sunset Junction. No transfers necessary. If everything went smoothly, it would take an hour and a half.

I told Mom I was staying at Joanie's where the supervision consisted of her teenage sisters sequestered in their rooms. I'd gone there enough times without anything terrible happening

that Mom had stopped calling Joanie's mother to make sure she was home.

Before I mounted the bus steps, Joanie smothered me in a hug. *You're sure you'll be okay? Remember, when the bus passes Vermont, you have two more stops.*

Thanks, Mom, I said sarcastically, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

The bus wasn't as crowded as I'd expected. I found an empty row and sat by the window. Traffic was slow along Santa Monica Boulevard as we passed Beverly Hills into West Hollywood and the grimier blocks of Hollywood. At Hyperion, I got off the bus and headed toward the sign at Sunset Junction, pretending I was the daughter of an artist or musician, the type of kid who grew up in Silver Lake. Prospero stood tall on the sign above the bookstore, staff in his right hand, a book in his left, purple cape and white hair windblown behind him. I stopped outside the storefront, looking through the picture window filled with books. Jitters rose in my stomach, same as every time I saw the store's lime-green walls. I had a relationship to this space that no one else had, even if they came here every week, every day. Billy didn't tell anyone else to pick a book, any book, free of charge, as though the books were waiting just for them. I threw open the door, certain I would see Billy and everything would be fine.

Prospero Books wasn't a large store, but with high ceilings and well-spaced shelves, it seemed vast, even spacious. It had a unique smell, different from Billy's home in Pasadena, unlike any other bookstore. The earthiness of freshly cut paper mixed with the white musk perfume of the pretty girls who frequented the store and a trace of coffee that was almost floral.

Miranda? Lee said when he noticed me by the door. *What a nice surprise. Is Billy with you?*

I thought he was here. I didn't see Billy's leather satchel beneath

the desk chair or his mug with the San Andreas Fault marking California like a scar on one of the tables in the café.

I could feel Lee watching me. I didn't meet his eye because I already knew what he was going to say.

I'm sure he's on his way, Lee said. *Let me go call him.*

Lee told the woman working in the café to get me whatever I wanted. She winked as she handed me an enormous chocolate chip cookie, like it was some sort of secret between us. I took the cookie to a table in the far corner and watched Lee behind the front desk, talking on the telephone. He glanced up and found me watching him, a conflicted look contorting his face.

Billy can't come in today, he said when he sat down at my table. *He told me to call your mother. She's on her way.*

You called my mom? The lies raced through my brain. I wanted to pick up the latest *Baby-Sitters Club*. Dad said I could come. They were transparent lies that would only make Mom angrier. I'd told her I was at Joanie's, then taken the bus to Silver Lake when I wasn't even allowed to take the bus within our neighborhood. I'd gone to see my uncle even though I knew they were in a fight. I'd totally and completely disobeyed her. I was beyond dead. Grounded for eternity. But that wasn't the worst of it. What truly wrecked me was that Billy didn't want to see me. I fought back tears. I was twelve, which was almost a teenager, which was almost an adult. I was too old to cry.

Hey now, Lee said when he noticed I was crying. *What do you say you and me pick out a book? Would you like that?*

Okay, I said even though I didn't want to pick a book, any book, not with Lee. I followed him to the teen fiction section where the spines were bright, the titles blurred from my tears. Lee showed me a few thrillers – R. L. Stine and Christopher Pike, not the type of books he normally tried to get me to read. I shook my head at every offer. I had thought that by the time I graduated high school I would have read every book in Prospero Books. Now I didn't want to read any of them ever again.

Lee had to ring up a customer, so I returned to my chocolate chip cookie, no book in hand. I broke the cookie into pieces, then I broke the pieces into pieces, too upset to eat.

The tables around me emptied and repopulated. Lee remained behind the front desk. Every once in a while, he stood and checked the café to make sure I was still there. The sky began to darken and I started to worry Mom was so mad she'd decided not to get me.

What felt like hours later, the bell on the door chimed. I looked up to find Mom scanning the crowded tables. Relief washed over her face as she spotted me. When our eyes locked, I forgot I was mad at her and ran into her arms. I took in her warmth, the sweet lilac smell of her skin, feeling like a child and not caring who saw.

I'm so sorry.

She kissed my forehead. I'm just glad you're okay.

I understood then that my plan had been doomed from the start. Even if Billy had been at Prospero Books, he'd made his choice not to call me back. Here I was blaming Mom when she was the one to come to my rescue, not Billy.

Along the I-10, I could tell Mom wanted to tell me all the ways I'd been stupid, how Silver Lake was dangerous and something could have gone terribly wrong. Instead, she asked, *What were you hoping would happen if Billy was there?* She didn't sound mad, simply curious.

I don't know, I admitted. I want you guys to make up.

It's not always that easy with adults.

Why not?

Mom's hands gripped the steering wheel. *Billy and I have a complicated relationship.*

What are you talking about? What happened when I saw you guys fighting?

Her face softened as she turned her attention away from the road toward me. *It's too difficult to explain.*

Will you try? I held my breath. This was Mom's chance to tell me her side of their fight. I was willing to believe anything she said about Billy, no matter how terrible.

Mom's eyes narrowed as if she was having difficulty seeing the traffic ahead.

You're too young to understand. She said this gently, but it would have been better if her words were harsh, if she'd intended them to bruise rather than to protect me. I didn't want to be protected.

Will you work it out? I asked.

I honestly don't know, she said.

She did know. Whatever had passed between her and Billy, it had been too much for them to forgive. They'd said things they couldn't unsay. They lost each other in that fight. Or maybe they'd been lost to each other for years. I had no idea anymore. One thing I did know, what I felt acutely, was that Billy had lost me. I didn't want to be his favorite girl. I didn't want to hear why he'd sent Mom to Prospero Books, why he hadn't met me himself. Even if he turned up next Sunday, our relationship would never be the same.

Turns out it didn't matter what I wanted because Billy didn't stop by our house the following Sunday or the one after that. He didn't pick me up for an afternoon at Prospero Books. He didn't take me on any more adventures.

For months after he disappeared, I searched for signs of his imminent return. Instead of clues that would lead me to him, I found markers of his absence. The cloisonné plates Billy had bought us in Beijing were no longer displayed in the living room. The photograph of Billy and me at the aquarium was replaced with one of Dad pushing me on a swing. The cupcakes from the Cuban bakery in Glendale that Billy always brought over, no longer dessert at our Sunday barbecues.

By the time I reached high school, I stopped looking for Billy. He became a person of my family's past, someone I virtually forgot. When he finally returned, I hadn't thought about him in at least a decade. And at that point he was already dead.

But Billy's death wasn't the end of our story. It was only the beginning.