

FADE INTO YOU

ALSO BY AMBER SMITH

The Way I Used to Be

The Way I Am Now

The Last to Let Go

Something Like Gravity

FADE INTO YOU



AMBER SMITH & SAM GELLAR

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For Kelly, who lived and loved fearlessly, authentically,
wholeheartedly—and inspired the same of everyone lucky
enough to be in her orbit. Your light shines on in our hearts
forever, and you will always, always, always be the epitome
of what it was to be cool in the 90s.

—A. S.

To my brother Ted, who not only survived the halls of high
school with me, but who has been a consummate supporter
of my fiction. Technically, we never locked the teacher in the
closet, but we did ignore her screams for help.

—S. G.

A Note from the Authors

Revisiting 1999 in this novel was a special privilege. For both of us, this was our senior year of high school, just as it is for our protagonists Jessa and Bird. We remember it as an exciting time full of music, art, creativity, and culture. It was a time of change, when the future on the horizon of a brand-new millennium felt promising. But during this time, the past, with its prejudices and old ways of thinking, still cast a very long shadow.

We took a lot of care to authentically represent both the dark and the light that coexisted in this period of history. Because of that, you will find moments in this book where the past and the future clash in ways that may feel uncomfortable or jarring today. This was a world where the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic were still widely felt, and where the concept of mass school shootings had truly just entered the cultural zeitgeist.

During this time, the stigma surrounding mental health issues or illnesses, including attempts to get treatment or help, was strong. Furthermore, a lot of the treatments and medications

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available today either did not exist or were not widely used. If you or a loved one is struggling with mental health, there are resources and options available.

Additionally, the notion of being “out” as a queer person was also much different in the nineties. Homophobia was common and often went unchecked. The reality of the time is that being queer was generally not accepted, and in many, many places, it was simply not safe. Unfortunately, the world today can still be unsafe for LGBTQIA+ individuals. However, gains such as marriage equality and some states’ protections of rights have moved us forward. Still, the fight remains.

The one constant is love, and that is what *Fade into You* is all about. We hope you enjoy getting to know Bird and Jessa, and the beauty they create together in their world.

—Amber & Sam

1999

BIRD

After midnight, it's finally quiet here.

But there's no way I'll fall asleep, not without knowing. For the whole hour drive home from the airport this afternoon, I kept telling myself I didn't care. I *wouldn't* care.

As I unpacked my bags and started my laundry, I wanted that clean break. As I helped Mom make dinner and feed the twins, I accepted it. And as I sat down at the kitchen table, everyone talking over each other, being asked not once but three times by both Mom and Daniel how the summer workshop went—never once being given a chance to answer—I reminded myself that we were being logical. Mature, even.

Except now it's after midnight and it's *too* quiet and all I can think about is how he said he'd write to me when he made it home, even though I told him not to. How she said she *wouldn't* write because it would be too hard.

Every creak of the stairs is amplified as I try, silently as possible, to make my way downstairs to the communal family computer. The dingy screeching static of the dial-up screams

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through the quiet. I hold my breath, hoping the stupid modem hasn't woken anyone.

Dialing . . . I sit in silence, the tiny yellow figure suspended, waiting to run across the screen. I look over my shoulder, try to listen. I hear Daniel snoring from my mom's room—their room. A mattress spring creaking in one of the kids' bedrooms.

Connecting . . . I watch the yellow guy hop to the next box. And, finally, *Connected*.

I'm in.

Then I fumble to turn down the speakers as they blare out, "*You've got mail.*"

"Shhh," I hiss.

Even though I haven't checked my email in weeks, I only have three messages in my inbox. None from him. Or her. I try to ignore the sinking feeling this churns up in my stomach. There's one from my older brother, Charlie; one from my best friend, Kayla; and one from the writing workshop with the subject line: Thank you, staff and students, for a wonderful summer of words and . . . I open the email, but it's too long to read right now. I don't have the attention span—or the heart span—not when I know that across the country, in a different time zone, they both received this same email. I wonder if they thought the same thing I'm thinking: that the summer was filled with a lot more than just words.

Charlie's email is short. No subject.

Hey Bird, Sorry I couldn't wait to leave till you got back.

Had some stuff I needed to take care of on campus but will

call with an update on our “research project” soon. Hope you had a fun time at the writing thing.

X Charlie

Kayla’s subject line is just a bunch of exclamation points. I’m not sure I have the heart span for this one either, but I open it anyway.

Birdie —

hi and MAJOR DEVELOPMENT! I THINK DADE IS MY LITERAL SOULMATE I’M DYING. U GET HOME 2MORROW RIGHT?? WILL TELL U EVERYTHING THEN!!!! Btw so sorry i missed your calls. the rents are being very strict but i got ur letters and the poem and ohmygawd WHAT happened there?!?! Didn’t have a chance to write back but want to hear ALL the juicy details for sure. Gotta go but c u soon! Luv u, kayla

P.S. yes of course i will drive you to your open mic thing

I want to reply in all caps that the details aren’t juicy. They’re painful and scary and confusing . . . and, okay, maybe a little bit epically life-altering and amazing. Followed by five exclamation points. I want to respond that she likely hadn’t found her *literal* soulmate, especially because she has had ten *literal* soulmates since junior year and has barely even exchanged a single word with any of them. But I don’t.

I write back quickly: *No worries! We’ll catch up tomorrow. Well, today!*

I’m about to sign off when a new message pops up. It’s from

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him. I really wish it was her, though, because there are things I still need to tell her, even if I never figured out how to say them.

I hate the way my heart stutters as I read his subject line: *this is why i never liked haiku / 17 syllables isn't enough to say what i mean*. I open it right away.

*miss you already
little bird told me not to
sorry, can't help it*

I start to write back because of that little flutter in my chest telling me, *I matter to someone—do anything, anything, to keep this feeling*. Turns out I'm happy he wrote even though I told him not to. For a few seconds, anyway. Rereading, I'm not sure I truly understood the difference between alone and lonely until right now. But I've learned a lot about words this summer. And I've grown addicted to the feeling of not being lonely. I miss *it* already.

I shut down the computer. Creep back upstairs. In bed again, I pull the covers up to my chin and stare at the ceiling. As my eyes adjust to the dark, the quiet I usually crave echoes all around me, only amplifying the deep empty spaces I feel inside, the ones I've been trying so hard to pretend aren't there.

JESSA

I'm just getting home from Goodwill, where I scored some old, faded *Star Wars* top sheets that will make perfect curtains, when I realize shit is going down. Typical Thursday. Mack's screams slip out the energy-inefficient windows of our old-ass house, and they're the kind of noises that say logic has also slipped away.

"I am not a fucking child! You hate me and that's why. Controlling asshole!!"

Mack is manic and likely on her way to a spiral. I spot her bike in the front yard and pick it up off its side, then wheel it to the backyard and hide it under a tarp near the abandoned sandbox of our youth. (We only used it two weeks before worms took over.) Maybe it'll slow her down, maybe it'll be pointless, but if she stays home, she stays safer.

I turn back to the house, where I can hear from a distance the slow rumble of my father's voice, just starting to pitch up into a storm as he goes from trying to frustrated. I take a deep breath and head in.

Mom is already gone, likely hidden in the bedroom, throwing up her hands and crying that Mack was *just too much*, or *hurting her feelings*. Mack hurts all our feelings, but how much can you blame a fucked-up brain for its actions? Mom can blame it 100 percent, she's good at that.

In the kitchen, Mack and Dad are squared off; she's got wild, red-rimmed eyes and her hair is frizzed out and definitely unwashed. Glaring red lipstick like a bloody smile.

"I can't fucking believe you!" she shrieks, waving her arms. Dad's stopped telling her to watch her language. I'm just happy they're a clear six feet apart so she's not yet throwing punches.

"Heyyyyy," I say, trying to be cool, even though this is starting to be a weekly thing. Inside I feel like the sandbox worms are going to town on all my soft bits. "What's up, guys?"

"He won't fucking give me freedom!"

I look to Dad and he shakes his head. "She wants the keys to the Daewoo."

"Need a ride, Mack? My car's still warm, I can get you where you want to go."

I don't like the thought of her being out while manic, but I also know she's probably going to swing at Dad in a few and that makes for a really shitty evening for everyone. She seems to consider it for a second of quiet and then her face turns—this expression she gets, all determined and crazed, and I hate that look because it isn't my big sister right now, but that brain being cruel and nasty as she opens her blood-colored mouth.

"If I wanted a fucking chauffeur, I would have called a cab.

I'm a goddamn adult, you little fetus, get the hell out of this. It's between me and Dad."

The teensy bit of hope Dad had in my offer evaporates and he puts on his stone face, and I am no longer useful in any way, so I take Mack's advice and go to my room.

I think Mom and Dad gave me my own room so that Mack's problems wouldn't spread to me like a catching disease. I wish they'd realize you can't catch crazy, but I'm not telling them shit because when Dad spent three weeks this summer turning our attic into a short-ceilinged but livable bedroom, I finally got to be a whole floor away from Mack and her constant garbage.

Up two flights of stairs, the entire kitchen and living room between the hall to her room and my little cove, the noise still travels, but not as bad as it used to. Blast some Liz Phair and you can even pretend she's somewhere else, or I'm somewhere else—or we are on different worlds in different atmospheres and whatever mood she's in for once doesn't matter.

I crack my window and grab a joint I rolled earlier in the day. Using my weed chimney, an ingenious build of a paper towel tube filled with dryer sheets my best friend Dade and I came up with, I take a deep drag, cough down the smoke, then shoot it through the tube to the outside. Downy fresh. Liz is working her way through her half monotones of *Exile in Guyville* and the steady buzz of her music complements the warm gentleness of my encroaching high. Dad still thinks I'm burning incense . . . thank god for stinky incense. He's probably aware, I mean he lived through Woodstock . . . I think in this house if you get any peace from anything, no one tries to fuck with it.

Clinical name for what Mack has is bipolar, but sometimes I think it should be called fucking asshole disease. Mack will emerge from her room after an entire week of simmering in her own BO and sadness, suddenly jazzed and planning to take on the world. She and Dad usually get into it and then Mack will hit Dad until he gets outta the way, and then she runs off for three to twelve days until we get a call from a hospital or the cops or she shows back up skinnier and depressed again. Long as she isn't trying to kill herself, Mom's all celebration and denial, and Dad just wants her to behave like less of a wild animal . . . but I guess when your brain is fucked, you can't help being a giant bitch who ruins almost every night whether we're creeping past a closed door or wondering if we should be calling hospitals.

The song ends and I can hear the higher pitch of Mack screaming about the car keys and how Dad isn't giving them to her, which is a good idea. Then I hear Dad using her full name, Mackenzie Annette Papadopoulos, which is a bad idea, and thank fucking god Liz is back with "Mesmerizing" and giving me a whole different world of frustration in her lyrics.

I look back at the big bare walls, coated in an off-yellow paint that Dad thought was "cheerful." I haven't dealt with this "cheer" yet, and it's long coming. This week was just taking my shit up here and getting some crap bookcases from the Goodwill to hold all my stuff. It was weird, since the room is big even if it's short, and even with my stuff spread out, I didn't have enough to fill it. The freedom of it was overwhelming, and some cavewoman part of me missed the smaller space of my old room. With a few curses, and a lot of safety pins and duct tape, I get the curtains

hung. The pillowed sheets dangle from the rods, creating a sloppy separation in the room: a boundary. Once she sees them, my mom will ask if I'd like her to bring out her Singer to do a quick stitch job. She doesn't get it, the safety pins are me, the chaos of my CD collection is me, the fact that I didn't pick actual curtains is abso-fucking-lutely me.

But she doesn't like *me*. She likes her children sewn up into neat little designs—and we like to rip ourselves apart. I think maybe the mess and chaos and me-ness makes her worry I'm gonna get a year further down the line and lose my shit just like Mack. She thinks the big basket of worry she carries around for my delinquent sibling will suddenly be doubled, and god forbid we both lose it at once. She thinks if my seams are machine-sewn and perfectly straight, maybe I can avoid the hell my bipolar sister lives in.

I don't ever tell her how much I worry about going crazy too.

Right now I feel inside me this giant black hole that just keeps sucking, taking in all the light and warmth and leaving me with this huge empty feeling. I wasn't really hurt by Mack calling me a fetus—it's an old insult and has lost its bite. But something else, some atmospheric element, has me feeling dark and sapped and I can see for a minute how Mack can lie down and just not get back up. I can understand her . . . and that's what scares me, that I have a year, maybe, before whatever is in her happens to me, too.

I lean back and thump down on my bed. Dad got me a new one since he said an adult room needed an adult bed, so I got upgraded to a full that's so tight it bounces me like a trampoline if I hit it too hard. I'd asked for black bedsheets, which was a

mistake 'cause I can see every last Falstaff left on my bed after he snuck up here earlier and rolled around.

So far, the wall has a big poster of the Green Day *Dookie* album cover, a full-length mirror, and a *Dark Side of the Moon* black-light poster I'd spotted in my dad's old stuff. I had let go of my childish crap that had just mainly been hanging around in my old room 'cause I was too lazy to take it down. The Care Bears and *Captain Planet* posters were dutifully recycled (gonna bring pollution down to zero), and I finally convinced Mom to Good-will the princess canopy bed she'd forced on me at a young age—no one wanted that abomination hanging over them.

Looking around, I still need more to fill the gaps . . . something that will take up a wall, a space. Liz finishes her song and I cut it off, not quite ready for the next track, "Fuck and Run." Downstairs a door slams . . . hard.

I lean forward to sift through some of the jewel cases on my bed. It's important to get the right music to fit the right mood at all times. No matter where you are, if you're having a good time or a bad time, if some garbage discordant and inappropriate music turns on, then it's gonna make everything worse. It breaks the fourth wall of life, making you stop and think *what the hell*, when really you should be thinking about what's going on. . . . I feel this is incredibly important, and no one has ever convinced me otherwise. In my life goals, up toward the top, is that I'd like to soundtrack my daily existence by the time I get my shit together. Let's say thirty. I think in thirteen years the technology might catch up.

But for now, I get to sift through stacks of hard-earned or

at times hard-shoplifted CDs. All my summer job money went toward the discs. Tower Records at the mall never paid employees enough for them to give a shit when I stuffed a couple of discs in my jacket each time I visited; in fact, I think the dude with the bowl cut saw me pinch the tool that pops them out of the big plastic anti-theft cases.

Mack must have found her bicycle or called one of her “less desirable” friends, ’cause the house is quiet and no one is yelling and Mom and Dad are likely making a pot of tea and pulling out the crossword puzzle to do together. I’m here on my brick of a bed, and I just need the right song to inspire my wall. We’re all ignoring whatever Mack is going to do.

In my lap is a selection of alternative, punk, metal, and even some old fifties stuff that jams, but none of it is right. None of it is the perfect soundtrack. Maybe a bit from the Tool album, a hint of the oldies, a couple of chords from Whitesnake, and the tinny sound of Kurt Cobain (RIP). But alone, none of them fit. None of them can fill this huge, sunny, overwhelming room.

For once, silence itself spurs an idea. I’m not sure if it’s ever really been this quiet for me. Picking up the jewel cases, I start opening them, pulling out the liner notes one by one, laying them flat, the cover art and lyrics telling a half story of what those shining discs contain. Grabbing the heavy green stapler I may have freed from my algebra teacher last year, I hold up the Whitesnake liner notes and *cha-chunk, cha-chunk*, it’s on the wall. Overlapping a corner, I get Tool up there, then Nirvana, STP, Alanis, Liz, every single one of those uniform square cases bringing forth a tiny slim poster of words and art as unique as the music inside.

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Coming together to create a mural of words and artists and art that is still framed by that yellowed silence and emptiness. Which now seems less cheerful.

This is very me.

BIRD

My alarm goes off at six thirty, and the theme song from *Dawson's Creek* turns on midway through. I was feeling ambitious when I went to bed last night; thought I'd get up early and make myself coffee, take a walk, journal in the backyard, and then edit some of my stuff from the summer, all before anyone else woke up. But I reach for the snooze button and mash it three times, instead of getting up and doing any of those things.

Then I'm back in my stuffy dorm room, waking up to the scents of clove cigarettes and coffee already brewing in the kitchenette down the hall. I walk, barefoot, into the hallway and suddenly I'm in the tiny TV room in the Commons, and all seventeen kids from the creative writing workshop are crammed in. They burst into song at once when they see me, crooning, "*I don't wanna wait . . . for our lives to be ove-err-er . . .*"

I start laughing, but it comes out of me slow, like honey.

Dawson's Creek was our Tuesday night guilty pleasure all summer. Someone turned it on that first week to make fun of it—I

can't remember who it was anymore—but then we all quickly got roped into the drama, the love triangles, the small-town scandals. The Capeside fan club grew in numbers, and soon we all adopted their “walk the dog” euphemism as if we'd made it up ourselves, and we came back week after week until it was standing room only.

Silas and Kat call me over now, the crowd parting like some biblical sea to make space for me between them on the dusty old green corduroy-clad couch. But then, behind me, someone shouts, “Turn it off!”

My eyes fly open just in time to see Liv throwing her pillow at my face.

I jolt up and nearly hit my head on the slanted ceiling of our shared bedroom. “What the hell, Liv?”

She tears her eye mask off so she can fully glare at me. “It's the last friggin' Friday of the summer, you reject!”

“Okay, god!” I reach over and switch the alarm off.

“Do you realize I'm not going to be able to sleep in again until December? December!” she shouts. “Cheer practice starts tomorrow morning and I'm juggling student council this year and varsity volleyball, not to mention—”

“Oh my god, it's *off*!” I interrupt what could become an all-day monologue, which only causes her to narrow her eyes even more. “Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep,” I mutter under my breath. It's the best I can do with the better half of my brain still in the happiest place I've ever known.

“Birdie.” There's something about the way she always says my name that makes me hate it, and her. “You have no idea what

kind of pressure I'm going to be under—this is my *senior* year.”

“Um, yeah, it's my senior year too, Liv.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes.

“What?”

“It's not the same thing and you know it.”

“Oh, and why's that?”

She sighs and lies back down, carefully splaying her hair over her one remaining pillow—god forbid her perfect hair gets messy while sleeping. “Don't start with me, Birdie,” she says, whisper-soft and sweet, the way she talks to her friends on the phone.

“I'm not *starting* with you—I just—why? Why is it so different?”

She doesn't answer. She doesn't have to. She thinks I don't have pressure. Because I only have three friends to her three hundred or because teachers don't know my name or find me charming and cute enough to give me higher grades than I deserve. Or because I'm not a member of every single team and club our school offers, and every girl in our school doesn't copy everything I do and say and wear. Or maybe it's because I don't date the captain of the football team that she thinks I don't have pressure.

What a joke.

Simply *being* the Great Olivia Rubens's stepsister is pressure. Sharing a bedroom with Olivia Rubens for the last eight years is pressure. Every day a reminder she resents the fact that nine years ago my mom and her dad went on a date that resulted, nine months later, in our little brother, Bailey. Which also resulted, shortly after, in the two of us wearing matching yellow tulle dresses at our parents' wedding. And every moment since has

been an excruciating reminder that her dad is *not* my dad because my dad is . . . somewhere-elsewhere-nowhere to be found. That's fucking pressure right there. But I don't say any of it; I never do.

I'm one step out of bed when my foot sticks to something. I look down at the line of silver duct tape Liv plastered down the center of the bedroom while I was away. Her part of the room on one side, mine on the other, as if I ever had a doubt that's the way things are between us. I peel the tape off the bottom of my foot and step on her side for just a moment. I want to throw something of mine at her now.

"Nice r-r-re-decorating, by the way, Liv."

She turns her head to look at me and rolls her eyes, sighing again. Then she re-splays her hair, closes her eyes, and says, in that whispery monotone voice again, "It's just so you remember to keep your crap on your own side. You don't have to get a stutter about it."

I hate you, I think. But what I say is, "If anyone asks, I'm going to Kayla's."

She grumbles something incoherent, turning over in her twin bed, identical to mine.

Downstairs in the bathroom I run the faucet to only a pencil-width stream and try not to make too many sounds as I brush my teeth and silently spit into the sink. Being the first one awake means no waiting for the bathroom—this house was not built for the number of people who live here. The twins arrived two years ago, just as Charlie went off to college, and along with them went the chance of me ever having a room to myself. I rummage through Liv's shoebox of hair and makeup stuff under the sink

and find a scrunchie I doubt she'll miss. I start to pull my hair back when I hear the first rumble of toddler tears. If I don't get out now, I know I'll be stuck here all day.

Letting my hair free-fall, I snap the scrunchie onto my wrist instead. Slip out down the hall, through the living room, past the computer, grabbing my bag from the row of hooks lined up next to the front door. Then I jam my feet into the huarache sandals I got on clearance for three dollars last fall during back-to-school shopping. Rushing, I forget to lift up the handle, so the door screeches open. As I close it behind me, I hear my mom call, "Birdie, is that you?"

Holding my breath, I hurry to the end of the driveway. Exhale. I don't mind helping out with the kids, I really don't. It's just . . . I'm not ready to go back to my regularly scheduled life yet.

Two streets over from mine there's a little dirt path that cuts through a wooded lot that belongs to no one and opens to the fields behind the high school. It's littered with beer cans and broken glass and used condoms. I usually prefer to take the long way around, through the maze of suburbs, but the shortcut means it's only a ten-minute walk to Kayla's instead of twenty. The cold dew soaks my feet as I trudge through the soft, tall grass, which hasn't been cut all summer long. If I block out the brick buildings and the football and soccer fields and parking lots, I could convince myself I was somewhere prettier.

Kayla lives at the end of a cul-de-sac in a newer subdivision, where all the houses look too similar and too clean. As I make my

way over, I see her dad in the front yard, wheeling in their garbage can, stopping halfway up the driveway to admire the precise diagonal lines freshly mown into the grass.

I pick up the empty green recycling bin at the curb and say, “Want some help?”

He snaps out of it and turns to see me walking toward him. He has his tie and dress shirt on, ready to go to work. But he’s the kind of person who leaves enough time to do things like bring in the garbage cans and inspect the lawn and talk to his daughter’s best friend without needing to rush off because he’s already running late.

“Hiya! Well, look who’s back from the big city!”

“Just got in last night,” I tell him, following him into the open garage.

“Well, you *look* smarter,” he jokes with me in that TV dad way of his. “The only kid I know who *wants* to go to school over the summer. I only wish some of that would rub off on Kayla.”

“Please don’t tell Kayla that,” I try to joke back.

“What’s that?” he says, taking a step closer to me.

“Is, um, Kayla up yet?”

“Oh, I doubt it,” he answers, and an unfamiliar line furrows his brow—if I didn’t know better, I’d call it worry. “But go on in. By the way, Bird,” he adds, more seriously, “we’re glad you’re back. You’re a good kid, a good influence on Kayla.”

Not sure what to make of that, I just smile and nod in return.

Her mom is in the kitchen, humming to an oldies station playing low on the radio that lives under one of the kitchen cabinets. Her house is always clean and calm, and her parents are

always present. And she doesn't appreciate any of it. Not even when we were little. Her parents' unwavering attention and attendance at every school concert, game, and PTA meeting embarrassed her, even when we first became friends in second grade.

I clear my throat to announce my presence.

"Honey!" Kayla's mom waltzes across the kitchen to me and scoops me into a quick hug, and then she sweeps my hair over my shoulders. "Thank god! We really, *really* missed you around here this summer." She pulls out a stool at the breakfast bar—which Kayla's dad made in his garage woodshop, of course—and says, "Sit, sit. Tell me how your summer was. The university, the dorms, the classes, the *boys*." She laughs. "Did you write an epic poem? The next *Odyssey*?"

I laugh involuntarily, hating myself for how much I love this. "No, not quite." I watch her pour me a glass of juice from the fridge. "But I wrote a lot of non-epic poems."

"Don't be so humble," she says, smiling. "You know, I still have that sweet Mother's Day poem you wrote for me when you girls were, what, eight or nine."

"You kept that?"

"Of course! I'm not letting it go; it's going to be worth something one day." Even though I know she's got to be leaving for work too, she pours herself some more coffee and sits down with me anyway. "So, how was it?"

"Um, it was fun. It was—it was nice. I really learned a lot. Honestly, I miss it there already."

She nods enthusiastically, encouraging me to keep talking—something I'm not used to.

“Actually, I think I might apply there next year,” I lie. There would be no way I could go there, not for real. I got a scholarship for the summer writing workshop because my English teacher filled out the paperwork and sent it in for me. This summer was probably the closest thing I’ll get to college—at least for writing, anyway.

“Really?” she asks, wide-eyed. “You liked it there that much?”

I nod. “I did. I really did. I met some great people—the professors, and the other students were just . . . very cool, I guess. I’ve never—”

“Not cooler than your BFF.” Kayla’s voice echoes behind us. I stand up quickly, not wanting her to catch me trying to steal her mom. And when I turn around, I barely recognize my friend.

“Oh my god, Kay,” I begin, but I can’t think of what to say next. “You—you look . . .”

“Yeah . . . ?”

“Y-you look so different. I mean, wow, your hair,” I say, instead of *Holy fucking shit I can see your hip bones and clavicles through your clothes!* “It’s really cute.” I reach out and touch her formerly dark, formerly long, now bleached-blond Gwen Stefani bob and baby bangs, and try not to gasp when she hugs me and I feel her ribs against my chest and her shoulder blades under my arms.

“And you look . . .” She holds me out at arm’s length and smiles. “Exactly the same, except, well, your hair’s longer and more . . . mermaidier.”

Kayla’s mom gives me a wide-eyed *mom* look as she scoots behind us to place her coffee mug in the sink. “Girls, I’m heading

out to work but I'm leaving some cash here—so why don't you go to the mall and get some pizza or burgers or fries, or you know, whatever. My treat. Okay?" she says, nodding at me pointedly.

"Okay," I answer. "Thanks."

"Kayla, did you hear me?" her mom says loudly. "I want you to get some food. *Real* food. I'm serious."

"Yeah, okay," she mumbles, not looking at her mom.

So, this is new.

Kayla waits until her mom is out the door before she grabs the twenty-dollar bill and stuffs it into her pocket. Then she's pulling me into the living room to sit on their plush oversized couch, which, unlike ours, hasn't endured years of butts flattening the cushions and improperly cleaned food spills.

I thought my first question would be about that watercolor class she was supposed to be taking; ask to see what she's been working on. I'd show her some of the new stuff from my notebook and she'd drive us to the mall and we'd get some Panda Express and Mrs. Fields and try to find a way to sneak into a matinee. But no, that can't be my first question now. Because this is all wrong. Her. *She's* all wrong.

"Sorry. But did you, like, lose a bunch of weight?" I ask stupidly, because it's so freaking obvious, yet how am I supposed to *not* ask?

"Yeah, girl! Twenty-seven pounds and counting!" She does a little catwalk sashay and twirls with her spindly arms over her head. This from the girl whose ideal Friday night used to consist of Pizza Hut buffet followed by movie theater jumbo extra-butter popcorn. This from the creator of our lunch-table battle cry:

Chunky girls unite! “Thank you, Dexatrim and Crystal Light,” she adds with a grin.

“What?”

“And the demonic-possession side effects of fat-free Olean Doritos that had me shitting my brains out for an entire month.”

“*What?*” I repeat.

“Yeah, it was totally gross, but I lost the first thirteen pounds that way.”

“You didn’t *need* to lose anything, though,” I try to tell her, which is something she’s told me and our other friends a million times.

“Please. Yes, I did. Besides, there’s no *thinspiration* like someone seeing you naked to wanna keep the weight off. But, I mean, well, I guess you know how it is . . . I mean, judging from your letters. Which, okay, spill already. Did you end up having sex with that guy from the summer thing? I mean, that’s what it sounded like, anyway. Are you still, you know, a *virg*—”

“Hold on, hold on.” I raise my hand, take a moment to try to digest everything she’s said. Like, did I just seriously hear her say *thinspiration*? “Can we just pause for a sec and back up? You know those pills are really danger—”

“Okay, *Mom*.”

“No, I’m serious. You’ve lost a fuck-ton of weight. Like, do you even realize how skinny you are?”

“Thank you!” she shouts, arms raised toward the heavens. Then quieter, “Yeah, I do realize. I’m finally rid of the baby fat—I was disgusting.” The way her face twists up, I can’t help but think, does that mean she thinks *I’m* disgusting? Because we’ve always

shared clothes and we've always said we didn't care about all those magazine girls and beauty-myth bullshit. "Dade thinks I'm beautiful," she continues, crossing her rail-thin arms over her concave stomach. "And hot and sexy, and you know what? I actually feel good about myself for once in my life. So please don't—"

"Are you okay?"

"Are *you* okay?" she mimics, a sharp edge to her words that makes her sound nothing like the best friend I said goodbye to only two and a half months ago. Her arms unfold and her shoulders soften. "Ugh, Birdie, don't look at me like that. Come on. Just be happy for me, will you?"

I literally have to bite the inside of my cheek to shut myself up.

"So, this guy, Dade?" I try to smile even though I already hate everything about this guy Dade, who apparently thinks women are all supposed to look like fucking waifish Kate Moss clones. "Soulmate, huh? So does that mean you . . . you and him have had . . . you know, sex?"

"Yeah. Well, almost. I don't think it really counted, because we sort of started, then stopped. He said he wants our first time together to be special. And I do too. More special than in the backseat of my car, anyway." She stops and laughs, and I get this sinking feeling in my stomach like I'm in the process of watching my best friend walk off the edge of a cliff.

"So, then. You *didn't* have sex?" I ask.

"No. Not really. There was a lot happening and I was kind of"—she moves closer to me and whispers—"high."

"High?" I repeat. "Like on drugs high?"

She nods, smiling like she's delighted with herself. "Me, high. I know, right?"

"Are you high right now?" I try to laugh, just to let my body release some of this tension I feel stitching itself between us like cobwebs.

"No! I only smoked a couple of times—with Dade and his weird friend. It wasn't a big deal."

"Um, o-*kay*. If you say so."

"All right, enough about me. This writer dude. Tell me. Tell me everything." She leans forward again, practically falling off the edge of the couch, and there's something about her eagerness that makes me want to keep it all close to me. Warm and safe and secret.

But she's my best friend; how can I not tell her everything?

"What's his name, anyway?" she asks, but the questions keep tumbling out. "What happened? Did you do it? Or, okay, what did you do together exactly? I want details. Come on, Bird. Your letter was so cryptic."

"I don't know . . . I—"

"You don't know his name?" she scoffs, tilting her head.

"It's S-Silas," I manage, my stupid old stutter surfacing, and it occurs to me this didn't happen to me all summer long. "Silas," I repeat, with too much effort.

No. This is not how I want to tell her about Silas, or Kat, or the entire lifetime's worth of emotions I felt this summer.

"Sexy name," she interjects while I take a breath. She knows I need the pause. She remembers from elementary school days, after my dad was gone and it was so bad I could barely get two

words out and how it took me three years of speech therapy to get it under control. “Aaand?” she asks, more gently.

“And I’m still trying to figure out what happened or how to describe it. It’s w-w-*weird*.” Pause. Deep breath. “This whole summer was weird. I feel like I was in an alternate reality and I was this totally different version of myself, but also more like myself than I’ve ever been.”

“And you’re *still* being cryptic!” A slow grin turns her mouth into a curved line. “So, does that mean you did or didn’t?”

“I—I—*we*—did. Yes,” I admit. “We did, but . . .”

But before I can explain, she’s keeled over her lap, howling, “Oh. My. God. I cannot believe it! You really did, are you serious? I can’t believe you’d be the first of all of us.”

“What? Wait, *why*?”

“No, it’s not a bad thing. It’s just that you don’t let people in very easily—no pun intended.” She reaches forward and grips my arm, her bony fingers digging into my flesh so hard it hurts. “I’m impressed. I’m in shock. But it really shouldn’t be a surprise after that poem you sent. About *the kiss*. That kiss—” She fans herself and exhales.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling because . . . that kiss.

“You’re blushing!” she shouts. “You have to tell me *everything*.”

I shake my head, place my hands over my cheeks. “That k-kiss, though. It wasn’t him. Silas. It was . . .” *It was Kat. It was a girl.* I could say it right now. But I don’t want this to change anything, and it will. *It has.* “It was,” I begin again, “someone else.”

“*What?*” she shrieks. “Who. *Are*. You?”

“Stop, stop. Really, I’m embarrassed.”

“If it wasn’t him, who?”

“Just another student at the workshop. It—it just happened. It was *just* . . . a great kiss,” I lie—it was so much more than that. “But can we stop talking about this? I’m still figuring out how I feel about everything and I don’t wanna get all carried away and, like, confused.”

“What are you talking about? What’s confusing? Two guys want you. *Poor thing.*”

“They don’t *want* me, first of all. The kiss. It didn’t go anywhere. It was just a thing that happened. And second, I’m probably never going to see either of them ever again, so . . . yeah, it’s sort of sad.” But what I really mean is *I’m sad*.

She nods and looks down for a moment, and when she looks back up at me, I feel like it’s the first time I’ve caught a glimpse of her old self all morning. “Sorry. I’m sorry. Yeah, that is sad.” She pauses, then asks, more earnestly, “Do you love him, Silas? I mean, do you love either of them?”

“No. I don’t think so. I mean, I’d probably know if I did, right? But I liked them.” That much I can be sure of, at least. I liked them both. And they liked me, too. I’ve never had that before. And there’s part of me that’s scared maybe I didn’t try hard enough with either of them. A deeper part of me scared that maybe I *can’t* love. I shake my head and try to smile, pushing those thoughts away. “What about you? Do you *love* Dade?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. Yes. He’s so cute and funny and he will do anything for me. Seriously, anything. I can’t wait for you to meet him. Oh!” She stops abruptly and claps her hands together.

“I know! Oh, I know, I know, I know. I’ll invite him to the poetry reading thing tomorrow night. It’ll be perfect.”

“I don’t know, Kayla. I’m not really—”

“No, don’t say that. You’ll see. It’ll be perfect, okay?” she says, holding my hands too tightly. “It’s perfect. I promise.”

I’m shaking my head no, but the words coming out of my mouth are “Okay. I guess.”

JESSA

When I get in from an afternoon

of sifting through B-side albums at Media Play, Mom's on the kitchen phone, letting something that might have been salmon burn as she twirls the cord in her hand, watching it ravel, unravel, then pop back into the tight rubberized curl it remembers. I remember Mack ripping the previous phone out of the wall and socking Dad in the face with it. Dad told her to leave the house; Mom later told him we should never make Mack feel unwelcome in the home. Currently Mom's playing perfect housewife with her church friends.

“Oh yes, Deirdre, she's likely camping for the weekend, just wanted to check if Andrea went with her . . . yeah, it's incredible Andrea got that scholarship to Cornell.”

She winces, wishing her imperfect Mack was anything like Andrea. Wishes she wasn't fishing for her daughter's location, trying to find out if she's haunting her old high school crew, pretending to be more than the unpredictable phantom she is now. Mom likes to tell the other church ladies Mack's taking a

gap year for travel. Gap year my ass, Mack can't get more than a mile from our home without trouble. She's not the kind for college. She's barely the kind for life. Plus, Andrea and her old friends are a dead end. Mack has a new class of friends—I like to call them Jack and Coke. She's definitely self-medicating, and Cornell-bound scholarship students don't disappear for days on end in whatever wild masochistic ride Mack will take them on.

I've got three early applications out, but Mom's not saying much about me to the other side of the phone. The church ladies stopped asking after me once I came out. It's been years since I let her drag me to the Baptist Hall of Horrors, as I used to call it. My leaving the church was mutually agreed upon between me and the ministers, who just wanted to get back to teaching the same useless lessons without me complicating things for them.

"Of course, Deirdre, I can make the dessert for the women's brunch," she murmurs, and my mouth waters at the promise of the seven layers of sin that are her magic cookie bars. One good outcome of Mom still attending church in spite of it giving up on the rest of us. To think of it, though, I haven't heard her pray in years other than saying "Jesus Christ" under her breath when Mack makes a real mess of things. I think pretending to her church that we're the Beavers or whatever that damn TV family is helps her deal.

"Mail, Mom?" I shout, and she waves at me to hush, but the September issue of *Rolling Stone* gets delivered today and no god-fearing baking bitches are getting in between me and the pages of that musical liturgy. "Moouooooooooomm." I drag it out, and she

covers the mouthpiece with her hand and whispers, “Your father has it in the garage.”

I grab a Tab from the fridge, crack it, and walk out back. Falstaff lopes up to me, all slobber and kisses and white hair just ready to destroy my black pants. “Ugh, down, Falstaff! Down!” His huge paws smear my Smashing Pumpkins T-shirt with streaks of red clay mud, once again proving Mom right that we should have gotten a smaller dog. Pyrenees mix my ass; he’s a freaking yeti. I push him down and distract him by chucking a tennis ball deep into the shitty woods—so named ’cause no one in our family is willing to pooper-scoop the woods behind the house and Falstaff has made it . . . unbelievably narsty.

When Falstaff takes off, I sneak into the garage behind the house. We have never parked a car here, but this is where Dad parks himself—especially when he wants nothing to do with anyone. It’s cool in the garage, even though the day has some heat to it. He’s got the wall AC blasting, and I hear a few dozen fans from all the machines. The wall is lined with computers and mismatched motherboards and hard drives, half of them running, the other half waiting for his deft hands to fix them. He’s been in the insurance game for years, but Dad loves the new computers and that everyone seems to be getting into the technology but most know nothing about them. He sees a possible way out of the office and the chance to tinker on machines. He’s happy video killed the radio star.

I try to grab the magazine and go—it’s the live review issue and I see the Woodstock ’99 cover and want to get into what Rage did—I mean, Kid Rock likely sucked balls as always, but

how did they balance Jewel with DMX? Inquiring minds need to know.

“Jessamine!” Dad seems in a good mood, but I see an angry red scratch down his forearm that wasn’t there yesterday,

I walk to his bench, and he’s got an old tan box of a computer running green lines of code against a black screen—gibberish to me, but his seemingly native language these days. “I got an email from your school, they’re putting in more metal detectors?”

I cringe, thinking about how much earlier I’ll have to wake to get past whatever prison security system they’re putting in.

“Guess the first set wasn’t enough,” I quip, not actually feeling that brave. We’d lost a lot of freedom at school since April, when two kids in trench coats shot up Columbine.

“Seems a bit much, Jessamine, especially for one fluke incident.”

I feel like a traitor to my anti-establishment views, because the new rules and measures have almost been a comfort. . . . No one talks about it, but everyone is a little scared now. Fluke or not, I feel like we tend to look a little sideways at the weirder kids. I get some looks myself, since I’m pretty far from prom queen. Dad wouldn’t understand it, though, so I just grumble “Jessa” under my breath, knowing he hates my nickname. Says it hides my uniqueness. I usually assure him the bright blue Manic Panic dye job will keep me unique, but the one time I suggested a Bad Religion tattoo might assist in the unique department, Mom overheard and lost her shit in a very epic way. They will never know if I ever do get tattooed.

He taps out another line of code and hits enter, and the

computer starts whirring like a helicopter about to take off. Turning around to finally look at me, he says, “Well, just make sure you look over the list of prohibited items. I think they banned lighters and pocketknives now.”

“Sure, I’ll take my Swiss Army special outta my rucksack, Dad,” I say, rolling my eyes but making a mental note to keep my Zippo in the glove compartment.

“Hey, it’s all fun and games until you get another suspension.” He’s back to the screen, which is now shooting out a myriad of gibberish. I thought we weren’t going to bring that up again, the day when I slammed Jonnie Barton against a locker for calling me a dyke in the halls. Little wimp reported me and I got three days’ enforced vacation.

“No knives or lighters, Dad. I’m good unless they start banning us from reading magazines,” I say, waving the *Rolling Stone* at him.

“Magazines aren’t reading!” he calls out as I leave, pointedly ignoring him.

I dig into the new issue, finishing my notes to self, underlined and written in the columns just in time to grab a piece of the pizza Dad ordered. (Mom’s fish was officially declared a burn victim.) I call Dade right at 9:01 because the minutes are free on my so-called emergency cell, and I can hear him chewing on something crunchy (probably Cheetos) and watching something on TV (probably a Romero or Tarantino movie). “Yeah,” he says through his snack.

“Got my room set up.”

“That’s nice.” In the background I hear someone let loose a

Wilhelm scream. Romero. If they aren't dead, they're gonna be a zombie soon.

"More than nice, Mack blasted outta here last night and I've had an amazing afternoon of catching up on all things music-adjacent in my badass new private room."

"That sucks." Another scream. He's giving me the two-word responses, so not Romero, definitely video games and likely *Resident Evil*. He's too occupied to even realize that me having a quiet afternoon is a *good* thing.

"Am I bugging you?" It's irritating that he's not interested in the attic room. I think it's a deal, maybe not a big one, but it's worth at least a few more words.

"Sort of," he says. Two words, another scream. Something screams inside me, too.

"Well, are we still on for Six Roots tomorrow?"

"Uh-huh." He sounds so fucking excited, he might even crack a smile. Damn, if I'm lucky, he might even muster the whimsy to meet up this weekend and celebrate the last bits of freedom before senior year. I'd ask about seeing him at school on Monday, but we've mostly avoided each other since he started growing out of his tubby phase sophomore year and into his cool stage of trench coats and obscure film references, and I've remained the school's resident queer and favorite pariah ever since Olivia Fucking Rubens outed me at thirteen. I keep my head down and my headphones on as much as possible. I can't skate by with his crowd. They have a reliable tendency to make me cry, and I end up looking like more of an ass. So my best friend and I hang out at Six Roots, the best coffeehouse in town,

or at music venues, or at his place watching movie marathons—dark places where if the wrong people show up, I can peel off.

“Okay . . .” I listen to the muted sounds of a video game counting up deaths, the worst kind of soundtrack. I hate watching him play. I want to play too, but I’m too embarrassed. I’m shit at all of it. The one time I did try, I head-shot Dade, who was on my team, and he called me deadeye for a month while laughing at me. It wasn’t my definition of fun, but some of the other guys who hung around him sure thought it was great, so it caught on at school for a while too. “Soooo I’m gonna hang up,” I murmur, wishing he was in a conversational mood. I feel needy tonight.

“Oh, wait,” he calls out, keeping me from flipping the phone closed. “Kayla wanted us to be there tomorrow at seven since her friend is doing a poetry reading or something.”

Of course he’d pause the game for anything Kayla-related. Ever since they met at some pretentious art show he attended to be bougie or something, he’s been obsessed with her and her skinny, bony self with that stringy blond hair. She was trying real hard to look like a skater kid, but I’d never seen her with any kind of board, just the JNCOs and baby tees and Skechers. Bitchy to me too, I think ’cause she’s probably hungry. Girl needs a cracker.

“Ughhhh, Dade, *we hate* the poets. . . . Remember you said Dadaism died long before these wannabe beats bought their stupid berets. . . . Why are we going to watch this sideshow?”

“It means something to Kayla, so it means something to me,” he says, using perfectly complete sentences to discuss her, with polysyllabic words and nouns and verbs and subjects. Yet, for me, it’s just grunts and random sounds. I groan again; this means