

honey



Isabel Banta



CELADON
BOOKS

NEW YORK

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2002

New York, NY

Let's begin with my body. Look to the corner of west Forty-Second and Eighth, where a girl is reaching for a magazine on a newsstand. Around her, skyscrapers beheaded by mist, the stink of a city weaning off summer.

Women are splayed out like bars of candy, ready to be unwrapped. The girl picks up the latest issue of *Rolling Stone*, recognizing me on the cover. I am draped in fabric the color of honey, of syrup, of ooze. She flips through the heavy paper and finds the article—"WE ARE ALL TRAPPED IN AMBER"—nestled between perfume and cigarette ads. Sonny said I owed everyone an explanation, and here it begins: "Amber Young licks her lips before she speaks. Now they are wet as sap. Her auburn hair is the color of redwoods, her eyes mahogany brown. She speaks so softly I have to lean in closer to hear her properly. This is what she wants, right? When she looks up at me through thick lashes, I can't help but wonder if the rumors are true. Did these eyes blink and, like a Trojan horse, cause the great city to come crashing down? The city, in this case, being the relationship between Gwen Morris and Wes Kingston?"

If the girl loiters too long, the man behind the counter might ask

her if she wants to buy something. She'll return the magazine to the stack, the pages closing like legs. Or maybe she'll buy it.

When I imagine what this girl might presume about me, how I might flicker in the backdrop of her life, I want to suck up everything I've ever done, wipe away anything I've ever stained.

VERSE 1

1990–1992



1990–1991

Morristown, NJ

The night before the Christmas talent show, I can't sleep because of the crickets. Dozens have escaped from our bearded dragon's cage, and now they are singing. If not for the lines of snow on our windowpanes, it could be summer, the air thick with vibration and sound.

When we first moved here, my brother and I asked for a dog, not a lizard, but my mom said our apartment was too small. Where would it run? At first, I didn't understand—we drove by tidy houses with buzz-cut lawns and bicycles kicked over in driveways, sleek retrievers that chased us to the edges of their electric fences. But then our sedan slid into the lot behind our apartment complex, only a few doors down from the orthodontist's office where my mom works as a receptionist. I immediately understood what she meant. The stairwell was littered with cigarette butts, the halls moldy with neglect. There would be no space for an animal here. No space even to spread my arms out wide. To open my mouth and have something come out.

This is why I hide my voice away, I think. I have pushed all my urges down, past my ribs and into my gut, because I am afraid of the hair growing between my legs, the hard buds in my chest. When I

asked about these changes, arriving too soon, my mom said, “You’re becoming a woman,” and I started to cry.

So the crickets keep me up. Might as well practice alongside them. I stand in front of my mirror, pretending my hairbrush is a microphone. I’ve chosen “Tell It to My Heart” by Taylor Dayne for the talent show, and when I let myself sing, I understand the purpose of gods. It is belief taking on shape. Something I can’t name moves inside me; something finally magnetizes. I release all that is pent up, yearning to burst forth. From every corner of the apartment, crickets hum.

The next night, I walk onto the stage, a rickety old thing with a stack of dusty gym mats in the corner. A red curtain hanging over my head like a guillotine. Rows of parents and grandparents with itchy holiday sweaters and grocery store flowers. My mom, chewing her Nicorette gum, and Jack Nichols, sitting in the second row with Lindsey Butler and Rachel Morrow. Just last weekend, a group of us gathered in Lindsey’s basement and pushed *The Silence of the Lambs* into the VHS player, but none of us actually watched; the television was only color and sound in the background. Inside me, a similar glint. First shaft of desire. All my shapeless lust thrust at Jack Nichols, warped, then returned to me. He is the boy at school everyone wants; a collision of eyes always follows him. So when the spinning bottle landed on me, and he took my hand and led me into the closet, all the other girls visibly withered, and I expanded. In the dark, we leaned toward each other. Warmth bloomed between my legs, but the swipe of his lips was like a credit card through a slot. Behind the door, I could hear the others breathing, someone stifling a laugh. And, after, Lindsey took me into the bathroom. Said, “You know why he likes you, right? He only likes you because you have big boobs.”

I glanced down at my chest.

“Do you want to date him?” Lindsey asked. “Like, you have a crush on him?”

“Yes.”

She exited the bathroom and returned a minute later, then told me she had spoken with Jack.

“He’s not into you,” she said. “Sorry.” She tried not to laugh but a little escaped. She’s not the type to push someone over, but she loves pointing when they’re already sprawled on the ground.

This humiliation is still fresh. Now they will watch me perform. Good. I am desperate to prove them wrong.

I step into the spotlight, my small hands wrapped around the microphone. My heart punches my ribs. The audience is whispering. I want to drag their eyes to me and hold them all in place.

As I begin to sing, I don’t know a talent agent named Angela Newton is somewhere in the back row. She’s driven down from the city to watch her nephew perform magic tricks. Her sister promised her the show would be only an hour, but now it’s stretching into the second, an endless train of tap dancers and baton twirlers and pitchy singers. Then the light travels from the stage to her eyes. There—who is that? She sees a girl wobbling on unsteady foal legs. She sees a girl who would burn the stage if she could, just to step beyond it. Reaching for a pen in the dregs of her purse, she circles my name in her program.

I remember this performance as if it is trapped in amber. Memories like this sink into the earth in perfect condition, fossilize, and become a life.

Days pass. The year curls up. Many months later, in October, the phone rings. My mom taps her fingers impatiently against her jeans. There is a lasagna in the oven, Anita Hill’s testimony crackling on our small television.

She places a finger in one ear and leans into the phone. “Sorry, who am I speaking to?”

“Angela Newton,” says the voice on the other end. “I’m with Newton and Croft Management. I’ve been trying to reach you for months. I’ve left messages. Didn’t you get them? I’m calling because I want your daughter to audition for us.”

“I’m sorry, what? Audition for what?”

“For representation.”

“Representation for what? I didn’t sign up to receive your calls or anything, did I?”

“I saw your daughter perform at her talent show back in December. I’d like to have her come to New York. It’s just an audition, of course. I can’t offer representation at this time, but I’d like to see her again.”

1992

New York

After I am signed by Angela, my mom calls in sick to work and takes me to auditions. Most are for acting, not singing, which is what I really wish I could do. And they are all in Manhattan, an hour and a half away on a good day, two hours in traffic.

At a tollbooth, she picks through her wallet, plucks out a dollar bill. Then she curses, searching under the seat and inside the cup holder for stray coins. When we are ground back into traffic, she says, "You know, I have to pick up your brother from school right after this. Look." She points to the lane going in the other direction. Cars inching forward, like ants carrying heavy leaves. "That's our way home." She sighs. "Do you have your headshots?"

I do. I pull the heavy manila folder out of my bag. The photos inside are thick and glossy. The photographer who took them kept asking me to try on different sweaters, and I pulled and pulled but there was always a small gap in the curtain as I changed, his eyes always waiting there.

Now I run my hands along the edge of the photographs. *Amber Young*, it says. *Newton and Croft Management*.

We have trouble parking in the city, as always. There is the stench of fried food, piles of trash that shudder with rats. My mom curses again, turning onto a one-way street. "We'll have to use a garage," she says. What is left unsaid: we can't afford all these parking garages.

The car doors slap shut, and I fish my underwear out of my butt crack, straighten the long jean skirt so it rests below my knees. My mom licks her hand and flattens my flyaways with her spit. A swipe of lip gloss across my mouth, gooey and sweet, but I lick it off by the time we've found the audition location: an inconspicuous door next to a dollar pizza joint.

In the waiting room, girls fidget while their mothers flip through magazines: *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *McCall's*, the bibles of white suburban women. Michelle Pfeiffer on one cover. Strategically placed around her face, the headlines say: "What She Did to Become a Star," "The Sex Life of the American Wife," "AIDS & the Woman Next Door," "GREAT GUYS: What Turns Them On." Each daughter is a miniature of her mother, and I can see exactly how their noses will lengthen, their limbs will stretch. I think daughters must lie inside their mothers like Russian dolls. Stacked bowls, one on top of the other.

Instead of taking a magazine, my mom sets her purse down and pulls out a shiny copy of *Jewels* by Danielle Steel. Last week, I searched for a sex scene, eyes darting like hummingbirds to flowers, but then I heard the floorboards tremble and shoved the book back onto her nightstand.

They call names. My mom's eyes flit over the pages, I strum on a hangnail. Then, my name. It is time. I enter a white room, where a casting director and her assistant stare dully at me. The assistant reaches for my headshot, glances at it, then flings it onto a table already piled with stacks of girls, all of us white, slim, beaming. From the top of the pile, I grin in my green sweater, an adolescent gap between my teeth. My mouth and eyes too big for my face.

"Name, age." The casting director smacks on gum. It is the sound of wet batter being stirred. "Look into the camera, please."

I raise my voice two octaves. "My name is Amber Young, and I'm twelve years old."

"Great. Now, what I want you to do for me is to look here." She points to a piece of tape on the floor. "That's where the Easy-Bake Oven and Snack Center will be. Pretend you wanted it more than anything, and now you have it. You're totally shocked. You can't believe it. Okay? Can you do that for me?"

I kneel on the ground and cup my hands around the invisible Easy-Bake Oven. Crumbs from their lunch dig into my knees. I stroke the air and lean forward, widening my eyes. "Wow! An Easy-Bake Oven! This is so great!"

The casting director shakes her head, confused. "No, honey. Can you start again, but this time act *surprised*? Pretend your dad surprised you with it. You've been wanting it for Christmas, and you *finally* got one. Okay?"

"Wow! Dad, this is the best present ever. I've always wanted an Easy-Bake Oven!"

The casting director and her assistant exchange a glance. "Thank you, honey. That's enough."

Months later, the commercial comes on during an episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210*. I recognize a beautiful girl from the waiting room. She's ecstatic about the Easy-Bake Oven her dad got her; she wants it more than anything. She makes cupcakes and cookies and brownies that drip with molten chocolate. And I want to shove it all into my mouth at once. I imagine the softness of the cake, my teeth bursting the cherry on top of it, the rush of juice down my throat.

I feel like a fruit swinging from a tree. Plump and flush with color, waiting to be plucked.

The auditions sting for days afterward. They are scrapes all over my body. I leave school early most days, don't turn in my work on time,

return with nothing. I float around inside myself. Before auditions, I watch the older girls in the waiting rooms. Some of them are so beautiful, I pray to trade faces with them at night.

I hold the hairbrush up to my mouth. My dad's old tape recorder is perched on my dresser. I rewind the tape. Begin again.

My brother, Greg, bangs against the wall. "Will you shut the hell up?"

"Um, no!" I scream back. Doesn't he understand? I can't stop. Because I can only find well-oiled gears in my lungs, I love this part of my body more than anything else. More than my thighs, my chest. My eyes, which jolt away like an engine each time I catch another man staring. But my lungs, my vocal cords? These haven't changed. They are dependable in a time of great betrayal.

My mom throws open the door. She is always upset after her shift. "What's with this noise?" she slurs. "What are you doing?"

"Making an audition tape."

Her eyes mark the clothes on the rug, a wet towel slung over my desk chair. She picks each of them up one by one, lets them fall and crumple again. "Do I look like a maid? Clean up."

I put everything in the hamper.

"This place is such a pigsty," she mumbles under her breath. The door slams. Then she knocks on Greg's door, and their voices seep through the walls. It's your fault dad left. Move out, then. I hate you. You're an asshole. Bitch. Your grades are shit. You're a terrible mother.

I take a deep breath and press record. When my voice shields me from the outside world, it is the strongest it will ever be. I sing myself into silver armor, into tough lichen that crawls on volcanic rock. This is the tape Angela will send to *Star Search*. Until we hear back, there's nothing to do but wait to be plucked from a pile.

Later, Greg sits on my bed, pink and bristling from their argument. "I'm leaving here and never coming back," he says. "I'm going to go to college across the country, in California or New Mexico or Arizona."

“Will you look up Dad?”

He laughs. This makes me feel stupid for even suggesting it.

“Maybe living with him would be better than this,” I say.

“Yeah,” agrees Greg. “Maybe.”

Greg and I have never been very close; we both retreat behind closed doors. At seventeen, he has been cultivating a type of manhood I don’t particularly like, moving in a throng of boys from the liquor store to the park. If our mom is out drinking, he brings girls home. Some are perky and athletic, others inky-haired and pierced. Each has made a clear choice about how to present herself. Most are prickly around him—cruelty that is just flirtation—but I can tell this is for their own protection; they really want him to slash through this front, to find what is soft. Greg is too dumb to understand this.

Sometimes I can hear him having sex with them. On these nights, I fall asleep listening to my mom’s Walkman, the volume on full blast.

Out of habit, I press the button to hear our messages as I search the cabinet for bread and peanut butter. It’s Angela. She’s heard from *Star Search* casting about my tape, and she’s screaming into our answering machine.

Orlando is sticky. Bogs spread in my armpits. We stay in a hotel with itchy peach sheets, a pool full of floating, washed-up flies. One morning, I ride the coasters at Disney alone, since my mom says she’s used her vacation time from work for the trip and wants to lay out on the beach. When I return at midday, I find her snoring and reeking of liquor. I practice my songs in front of the bathroom mirror while she sleeps, using her hair dryer as my microphone.

Backstage at the Disney-MGM Studios, they have a buffet of chicken wings and other fried foods. A production assistant guides us through cinder block hallways to a green room, where I’m deposited in a makeup chair. There are jewel-toned eyeshadow palettes, wands and brushes and powders, the same objects my mom hoards. But her

palettes are cheap and flimsy—pharmacy-bought. I close my eyes and enjoy myself as a mask of womanhood hardens on top of my face. I'm wearing my favorite overalls over a baby tee, a red flannel tied around my waist, messy plum polish on my nails. I tried to paint them on the plane ride *Star Search* paid for, but I screwed them up during turbulence.

A middle-aged man, a comic, comes up behind me. We both watch my reflection changing in the mirror. "You must be in a dance group," he says. "You look like a dancer."

I shake my head and tell him I'm a Junior Vocalist. A singer. Strange to say this out loud. To declare myself.

"I bet your voice is real sweet," he says, but his voice doesn't match the look in his eyes. He's one of those men who flatter and console but have hidden shards behind a soft exterior. And his gaze is so righteous, so claiming, it feels like I should step out of my skin and hand it over as a gift.

He slinks away as soon as my mom arrives, pausing only to shake her hand.

"Good luck!" she calls to him, but she makes a face as soon as he's gone. Fixing her hair in the mirror, she says, "I've found out who you're challenging." I follow her gaze—who?

He looks older than me, but not by much. A makeup artist is patting foundation under his eyes, and he chews on his full bottom lip. He has dark, slick hair. Loads of zits on his cheeks, a whole mountain range of red. He would be a troublemaker at school—one of the boys with impish smiles who light firecrackers in the parking lot and dare one another to jump over the sparks, who carry pocketknives just to show off, not intending to ever use them.

Our eyes meet in his mirror, and I quickly look away.

I feel like I've been strapped into a roller coaster. The metal handlebars are pressing too deep into my skin, and I want their grip to release me. But the car is already vibrating; it is about to shoot into the sky, and there is nothing I can do now. How else do you become somebody? How else are you finally chosen?

. . .

“To find our next challenger, we traveled all the way to New Jersey,” says Ed McMahon. “Here’s Amber Young!”

The theater is starred with thousands of eyes. They blink at me, expectant. Cameras tilt and flow in my direction as I step onto the stage. My mom is in the wings, her lips pursed. And my competition, Wes Kingston, watches me from a monitor. His mother’s hand grips his shoulder, digs in.

I have never sung in front of so many people, and I feel like a nude statue in a museum, assessments coming from all angles, but I’m on a pedestal, too. The light is streaming down from above. I love this more than anything—to watch mouths fall open in delight, to hear a chorus of cheers and whoops whenever I hit a high note.

Then it is my turn to watch. As soon as Wes starts to sing, I know it is over and done with. He knows how to work the crowd; he’s probably been doing it for years. His performance is much more rehearsed than mine. I had thought, naively, that if I just showed up and sang my little heart out, I could win, that I needed no flourishes, no choreography, only my voice.

After Ed McMahon reveals the scores, 3.75 stars to 3.25, I am led offstage. There, I fold into a corner. My body cannot hold itself up; my weight sags. Hot tears flow down my cheeks. I wasn’t good enough—what a mortifying thing to discover about yourself.

There’s a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turn around.

“You were amazing,” Wes tells me.

I blink up at him.

“Really,” he insists. “I thought you’d beat me. When you started to sing, I thought I was done for.”

It is a kind thing to say. It makes me cry even harder. “Thanks.”

He kicks the wall with his white sneaker, scuffing the front. “I’ll probably lose in the next round, anyway.”

I use my sleeve to collect more tears.

“I just wanted to tell you. You should have won.”

When he’s gone, and the color of this memory fades, I will still

remember the texture of his voice, his kindness, how his head appeared before me like a satellite reflecting the sun.

My mom says the auditions need to end. Maybe I'm not cut out for this. What she won't admit: my breasts are too big for kid parts now. I have a woman's body.

Besides, she says, I haven't gotten a single part. Remember how much I cried when I didn't get the McDonald's commercial? Or the off-Broadway musical? After two callbacks, too. What a waste of time. And we don't have the money for dance lessons, voice lessons, theater camps, all these tollbooths and parking garages in the city. Don't I know what I've taken from her? She never sees her friends, never does absolutely anything for herself—and all for nothing.

So I agree to quit, and she makes the call. This time, I don't listen to her on the phone with Angela. I only hear the click of the receiver, which means it's done.

Most singers say they loved performing as a kid. There are grainy VHS tapes of them wearing feather boas, sashaying around the living room with their siblings. Gwen was like that, and so was Wes, but I didn't like to perform. I liked to be loved.

But now? I think these two things might stem from the same want: to be inflated. To have hot air blown into you by another person's lips. For helium to lift your bones until you're caught in whetted branches.

PRE-CHORUS

1997–1999



1997

New York

Angela's office is still in Midtown. On my walk over from Penn Station, people weave around one another like hands braiding hair. Taxis honk and loiter and fume. I don't remember much about the agency, and for some reason, I am expecting an impressive reception area, a man at the front desk leading me to an elevator, which will shoot up like a missile. Through the glass windows, there will be a spread of buildings all the way to the Twin Towers, car-bombed four years ago.

Instead, the office is in a run-down building with chipped paint on the stairwell. The waiting room smells like an ashtray. Files are thrown around in haphazard piles. The receptionist stares blankly at me, then says Angela will be with me in just a minute, she's on the phone with a client right now, but why don't I take a seat? I flip through an issue of *YM* as I wait.

When I'm called in, Angela is still on the phone. She holds up a finger for me, pointing toward the peeling leather chair in front of her desk. After she smacks the phone into the receiver, she says, "Hi, honey, sorry about that." She cranes her neck toward the waiting room. Frowns. "Is your mom with you? Does she want to come in?"

"She doesn't know I'm here."

Her eyes trail over my face, the very same beam that settled on me when I was ten and marked me forever. I wonder what she was hoping to see in me, what she sees now, what the difference is between these two things. Something was building before, each atom accumulating kinetic energy, but now there is only wasted potential. Now I am sixteen, almost seventeen, and this age is a hinge; I could swing forward or backward.

"You've dyed your hair," she observes.

"Oh, no, I haven't. It just got darker over time." When I was younger, it was more auburn, streaked with sun each summer. Now all the red undertones have faded. Now it is the same shade of brown as my mother's.

"Very pretty."

I take a strand between my fingers and comb it. "Thanks."

"Are all the boys nuts over you? Do you have a boyfriend?"

I laugh. "Um, no."

"I remember when I first met you, you know," she says. "So much talent. It was almost falling out of you."

Yes. She understands. But when we first met, I was so porous, so easily wounded, a sponge for failure. But nothing will happen to me unless I ask for it. Unless I lean forward here, at her desk, and say, "That's why I'm here. I want to audition again. I made a mistake—quitting, you know. I shouldn't have done it. I didn't really want to."

She frowns. "You can't go out for the same roles, sweetie. It's different now."

Together, we glance down at my body. I wish I could spread my life out before her so she can understand the ways in which it has diverged from my hopes.

"I don't think I can take you on again," she says.

"I don't want to act. I want to sing." Naive again, I think singing must have nothing to do with looks, that all that's needed is a capable voice.

She leans back in her chair. "You want to sing," she repeats.

I nod. I want to sing, yes, but it's more than that: I also want to be heard. I want specific people to listen.

"Well, I haven't heard you sing in years."

"Here," I say. I hand her the tapes I've stuffed into my bag. "I've gotten better."

She taps a fingernail on her desk. "Why did you quit, Amber?"

"My mom wanted me to. She thought it was pointless. And it just hurt too much." Doesn't she remember calling us after every audition? I would rush to the phone, and Angela would break the news: the part had gone to someone else. There are just so many talented girls, she would say. Amber needs more training. Amber is too young. Too old. Too enthusiastic. Too shy. She doesn't have the right look.

Now she nods. "Most of the kids we take on get nothing," she says. "One commercial, maybe. And their whole lives, someone—their parents, a teacher, maybe, but someone—has been telling them they're special. This business is especially cruel to them. Especially brutal."

"But no one has ever told me that," I say. It's just the opposite. Years ago, no one chose me after hundreds of auditions, but I am still desperate for praise, hoping someone important will say, "Yes, *you* are the one we want." And in that moment, I will finally change from a gaseous to a solid thing.

Angela considers me, crossing her arms. "Well, I'll listen. If these are any good, I'll give them to a former colleague of mine. I think he knows some people in A&R at the labels. He might be able to advise you."

She slips the tapes inside her desk.

This is how my voice makes its way to my manager Sandy Anderson, though I will always call him Sonny. He's worked for various talent agencies—briefly with Angela—but now he is hoping to manage musicians and bands independently. I am his first and only client. Sonny has ruddy, sunburned skin that never peels, no matter what season it is. A brassy laugh that can shake a room. "You know what success looks

like, Amber honey?" he'll say. "You'll only know when we get there. It's something that can only be felt."

But before my tapes reach Sonny, nothing happens. I slip back into junior year. Parties held in basements, weekends of loose, humiliating emotion that we contain again by school on Monday. Tests slid onto my desk, mediocre grades circled in definitive red. Unlocking the apartment door each night to find it dark. But when my mom is gone, I know I can blast my favorite albums as loudly as I want to. I slide the CDs out of my backpack and into the player in our living room. They spin and spin, and so time passes. So music moves across me, the water carving into my stone, until I am widened and deepened by other voices.

In May, Lindsey drives Rachel and me to the shore in her new car. We are friends because older boys pay attention to me: this is valuable currency to these girls, so I am now rich. "Dreams" by the Cranberries is playing. I lean my head against the window, closing my eyes, the highway thumping below the tires. It's true—I *want more, impossible to ignore*. Sometimes a song sounds exactly the way you want your life to feel. Sometimes it makes you believe you can change it.

We carry the warm beer we bought at a 7-Eleven to the sea. Dune grass rocks in the wind; a raccoon scavenges for turtle eggs. When Lindsey and Rachel begin gossiping about the slut list found in the bottom of a desk (*Number two: Amber Young*), I walk along the shore and skip rocks. Each slap: *more, more, more*.

Afterward, we get ready at Lindsey's for a school dance. We're always there, since her house is the largest, but tonight she wasn't invited and has been sulking about staying in. She's flipping through a CD—*Jagged Little Pill*—never waiting long enough to listen to the entirety of a song before she begins the next.

Lindsey has begun to smoke, but really she just likes to hold the cigarette between her index and pointer fingers, inhaling once or twice before stamping it out. Now she takes a single drag and leans out the window, lazily watching the smoke escape.

“Here,” she says, holding it to me. I take it. “Are you going to wear that again?”

I glance down at my outfit, the leather jacket and tight black dress. The pins in my hair nip at my skull. She likes to remind herself that I don’t have a lot of clothing. “Didn’t you wear that exact same thing on Monday?” she will say on Friday. I space outfits at least three days apart, hoping no one will notice, but she always does.

Ash falls on her rug. I say yes. I forgot I wore it last weekend.

I can see her eyes inhale this answer, but she chooses not to press further. She knows she can, and I’ll let her, which is enough.

I lean over her shoulder to check her driveway. There is a charge of expectation, a current traveling through the circuit of my body. Tonight, something will happen. We all keep glancing outside, waiting for a flash of metal, and then there’s the car pulling up, packed with senior boys, their hands stretched out the windows, “Bop Gun (One Nation)” oozing from the radio.

In the car, Rachel sits shotgun next to her date. The other three seniors are squished into the back, thigh against thigh. My date, Nathan, pulls me onto his lap because there aren’t enough seats. His cheeks and neck are flushed. He smells like beer, body odor, sweat—all beneath cologne. It is like a pile of leaves covering up dog shit.

Rachel’s date, Colby, takes his hand off the steering wheel to pass Nathan a bottle of liquor. He chugs it for a few seconds, then holds it out in front of me, eyebrows raised. A challenge. I take the bottle between my hands and raise it to my lips, desperate to prove myself to him. The vodka burns my mouth and throat. My entire face clenches.

Nathan’s hand brushes my leg. “Bad?”

“Awful.”

“Here, I brought us chasers.” He reaches under the seat, fumbling around for something: a pack of apple juices, the same brand my mom used to buy me when I was little. Each box has a clear straw in plastic wrapping, a body of red-and-green cardboard.

I poke the straw through the top and suck out the juice, which is warm from sitting in the car for days.

“Better?” Nathan asks. He pushes my hair behind my ear. The alcohol has started to settle in my chest. It is far easier to lift a hand now, to laugh at Nathan’s jokes. The night whips by, fences and houses blurring like insect wings.

We’re at the dance for only an hour, maybe two. The gym is hung with white and silver streamers and a table is laid out with pretzels, chips, sherbet punch. Hands dig through bowls. Plastic cups are tossed by the trash. On the dance floor, girls sway to “Rhythm Is a Dancer” by Snap! in tight rings, looking over their shoulders self-consciously. We sit at a corner table and pour alcohol into our cups under the vinyl tablecloth.

“You’re chill,” observes Colby. “You’re not like the girls in our grade.”

“How?” asks Rachel.

“They don’t put out,” says Colby, but then Nathan smacks him on the arm, as if he’s revealed a terrible secret: we are just a calculation they’ve made. Which girls have the highest probability to lead to sex?

Later that night, Nathan hoists me onto his bathroom sink and I wrap my legs around his waist. Nathan says if we’re quiet, no one will hear us.

When his fingers struggle with my bra, I hop down from the sink and show him what to do. “There,” I say, and suddenly I am undone. He pulls me through the door, revealing his sparse, clinical bedroom. It is devoid of any personality. Who is Nathan Ross? I know so little. A senior, popular, admired by the other boys for his height. Now he’s lying on the bed beneath me, cupping my breasts in his hands. “Jesus,” he says. He presses them together and then releases, so they swing apart.

“Nathan.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve never had sex before.”

He shrugs. “No worries.”

I realize then how little I mean to him. But something has already

been set in motion, lights whirring, and it never occurs to me that I can change my mind. What would he say if I did? I wait for the stab, the bulldoze. But he is small. It is a shock at first, but then he is inside me and there is no pain like my friends or magazines said there would be, but no pleasure either. He doesn't really know what he is doing; neither do I. He probably believes he can start a flame just by striking me again and again. All I can think is, *I am having sex, this is sex, I am having it, I am having it now*. I explore the strange machinery of my body, and I pull all the levers inside myself in order to please him. When he gasps and collapses against my chest, I remind myself to moan.

"Did you come?" he asks.

I tell him I did, and he nods, pleased with himself.

Everyone says there is a boundary crossed, a before and an after. I have become something new. When exactly did it happen? Was it when he used his tongue, which felt like a wet fish flopping on land, or when he entered me? Or was it all over years ago, when I first surveyed myself, moving across my own terrain? All I know is tonight Nathan Ross caused no landslides, no floods.

A week later, I am watching *Daria*, a new show on MTV. My mom walks in front of the television, scowling at the cartoon. "I hate this crap," she says. "Someone on the phone for you."

I jump up and race over to the landline.

Before I press the phone to my ear, I close my eyes and take a breath. I tell myself it could be anyone—Lindsey, Rachel, a telemarketer. But my heart is an insistent fist pounding on a door.

"Hello?" I breathe.

"This Amber Young?" The voice on the other end has a Long Island accent and is midchew.

"Yes, this is she."

"It's Sandy Anderson from Anderson Management. Honey, I've got to tell you, this is the best tape I've listened to in a long time."

"Really?"

He laughs. "Don't bullshit me with that false humility, hon. You know you can sing."

"Loads of people can sing." I am not bullshitting him, not even close. Many people have talent like mine. The tragedy is wasting it.

Sonny then says my tape is in the hands of an A&R representative at Siren. Artists and Repertoire, he clarifies. These are the people in the music business who weave careers together. They scout the artists, choose the songwriters and producers, craft the albums.

"He's looking for the last member of a girl group. He'll need a demo tape of the four of you."

"But I don't have a demo tape."

"Well, you'll go to New York to audition for the label first. You'll record one there."

"Today?"

"Next week."

"I have school."

Sonny laughs. "What's school for if you want to sing? Are you going to ace choir?" And the line goes dead.

Early morning. I'm woken by a crash from the kitchen. It's my mom, collapsed on the floor. Her taupe lipstick is smeared across her face. There's an open cut on her forehead. A wine bottle leans reverently against the back of the couch, which divides our tiny kitchen from the living room.

We are alone now—Greg is in Arizona, the lizard is dead, and she has no one left but me. I pour the wine down the sink. I lean over her and rub antibiotic ointment over her cut, then tuck her into bed on her side so she won't choke on her own vomit. As I close the door, I tell her I love her, even though I know she can't hear me. The apartment makes its sounds: the radiator mumbles; the floorboards creak under my feet. I try to fall asleep again, because this is just another day, and my mom will sober up and brighten, like the light gathering strength underneath my blinds.

Later that morning, I laze in our bathtub, running my hands through the lukewarm water. I'm supposed to get on the train in thirty minutes for the audition. The futures before me: senior year with Lindsey and Rachel, or the possibility of a different life. A life that holds a charge. My mom wants me to think practically—to consider college, a career—and chasing your own talent to its conclusion is anything but practical. It's a kind of relentless insanity. It's believing in something higher and unknowable—a god—while everyone around you is shaking their heads in confusion. "I just don't see it," they say, again and again, until you wonder if you are deluded in your fanaticism. Am I deluded?

I submerge myself. The water zips shut. Now, I think, some path will clear for me. But I don't consider how to cut down a forest, what I need to slash and burn.

I want this moment—the before—to stretch on forever. Now. No, *now*. My head breaks the surface.

In a glass room, a dozen silver-haired men sit at a cold table and watch me sing. They have hungry eyes. These men want another song, so I clear my throat and sing something else a cappella. My voice is the only sound in the room other than the clicking of pens, the shuffling of papers, my own needy, insistent pulse. Sonny taps his fingertips against his knee. My mom's lips are a thin line, and her purse has tipped over, the contents scattered on the floor. At first, I am conscious of my pitch, the slight crack in my voice on a belt. One man winces slightly. Then I rein in my voice, corralling it, and I can tell they like this better. Their approval is a guidepost, and they clearly want me to contain myself. Fine. In their eyes, I can see myself reflected: someone elastic, someone they can press on.

Outside, skyscrapers like stalagmites are spread across the horizon. This is the nicest building I have ever been inside, and I know I'm shaking. The building is, too: this high up, we are swaying and groaning in the wind.

After I finish, I dig my nails into my palms.

"Let's get her in a room with the other girls," the head of the label says. His eyebrows are much lighter than his hair. "We'll put her up in a hotel, and tomorrow we'll see."

I glance at Sonny. Does this mean no school tomorrow? There's a history final I haven't studied for. Rachel was going to lend me her notes. But the label head is purposefully vague. No promises, of course. Don't get your hopes up. He pushes a smile onto his face and asks what grade I'm in. He has a daughter, he says, just about my age.

After small talk lobbied back and forth, one of the younger men ushers us from the room. "I'm Simon," he says, shaking our hands. He has a thin face and rheumy eyes, the look of someone who never calls in sick but should. "I'm the A&R rep who saw your tape."

"So why did you pick her?" my mom asks. She hasn't had time to put her things back in her purse, so she shoves it all in as we walk.

Simon slows to accommodate her, wrongly assuming she is the stage parent he needs to impress, the battery powering all my ambition. "I was listening to so many tapes, from managers and agents and what have you," he says. The elevator dings; we step inside. My stomach flips with the swiftness of the drop. "This guy—" And he claps his hand on Sonny's shoulder. "He sent Amber's in and I just—well, the girl she'd be replacing couldn't even hit some of those notes."

"Why did this girl drop out?" I ask. I can't picture anyone not wanting this the way I do.

"She was a bit difficult, and she had a problem being part of a group." He says this very quickly, hardly pausing for breath. Then he smiles at me, because he senses what all the other men in that room have already sniffed out: I'm the opposite. I will do anything, whatever they want me to do, and that's why I'm perfect.

We weave through rows of cubicles to another set of elevators. He says, "We'll have you back here tomorrow. My assistant will take care of everything. Leslie, can you come here?" He waves a girl over from her desk. "Leslie can help you. The thing is, we're trying to rush this,

Ms. Young, to be completely frank with you. We need to be on top of trends, you know? The kids want to see groups. They want different characters they can identify with. And I think they'll aspire to be just like your daughter."

"Who will?" my mom asks.

Simon smiles. "Other girls."

When I lie in the hotel bed that night, I toss and turn because of the pressure of my heart against my pillow. Bugs crawling through my body, the labor of my breath. My mom's luxurious snores from the bed beside mine. Outside, an urban cacophony—sirens, shouts, honks, a peal of laughter. Layer upon layer of sound, rising and collapsing, and it sounds just like voices.

I meet Gwen Morris for the first time in the recording studio bathroom. There is a sudden bang, then the door opens and swings on its hinge. Flip-flops against the tiles. A tap turning and water spurting out of the sink. Through the slit in the stall, I see her for the first time, but only in fragments. A slice of pale thigh, strands of dark hair.

Staring at her reflection, she bends over and smacks her lips. Then she tugs on her eyelashes and starts pulling out clumps of mascara, rubbing the black goo on the sink's edge. Her lips part in concentration, and a pink tongue flickers inside her mouth.

I make a sound and her eyes jump to my stall. I startle, quickly wipe and flush, then shimmy my underwear up my thighs and unlock the door.

"Sorry," I murmur. I don't know what else to say to her. She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. Her face is a golden ratio. She has no sunspots or freckles, just a dark mole above her left eyebrow. Her eyes are resort-water blue, and she has thin, Linda Evangelista limbs. As I pump soap out of the dispenser, I stand on my tiptoes to lengthen my reflection beside hers. My beauty takes more convincing than hers does. All my features are larger.

"Hi," she says, a little reluctantly. "I'm Gwen."

I introduce myself.

"Pretty name," she says. "I've always wanted a name like that."

"Um, no, you don't. It sounds like a stripper's name."

"Let's see how you dance, then." When she smiles at me, I notice her teeth are covered in streaks of plaque. An imperfection. It soothes me somewhat.

In the vocal booth, the four of us are lined up in front of music stands. Gwen Morris, Claudia Jeong, Rhiannon Walsh, me. The producers and Simon sit behind the mixing board in the control room, arms crossed over their chests. Only Gwen doesn't show her nerves. The rest of us fidget and pick at ourselves.

"Let's just sing something you all know," says Simon. "The national anthem. Let's just see how it sounds. Okay? Great." He claps his hands together.

Before we begin, before it all begins, Rhiannon leans over to whisper in my ear: "They expect us to know the words to the fucking national anthem?"

I swallow a laugh. We suck air into our lungs. Our voices are tentative at first, then full. Rhiannon hums most of the words, while the rest of us grasp at lyrics. When we've hit the final note, the four of us look at one another and begin to laugh. I think we are all eager to be a part of something. Until this moment, we were alone as the world began to look at us differently, catching another glance over its shoulder.

"We've got something here," Simon says, clapping. "We've got something. Again, girls. Let's go again."