

THE  
ONLY GIRL  
IN TOWN  
ALLY CONDIE

Dutton Books

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*For Hope,  
for everything.  
And for the Game Farm Girls.  
It was a gift to run with you.*



THE

ONLY GIRL

IN TOWN



# 1.

## now

I am walking back from the water when it happens. I am looking down at my hands in the late-summer sun. It is the time of day when afternoon slides into dusk. I am looking at them, thinking, these are my hands, that is so strange.

My hands are my hands. Like in kindergarten when you have to practice writing your name over and over again until it looks so weird. You start to wonder, *Is this really my name? This can't be my name.* Like a straggle of string unraveled from a sweater, a trail made by a snake in the mud.

I am thinking that and then

I feel the world

empty around me.

Cicadas stop screaming.

Cars stop humming along the road past the edge of the wood.

My phone, which had been buzzing buzzing buzzing in my pocket, goes silent. When I pull it out, it's cold and dead. When I turn it on, there is no signal.

In the distance, the water splashes over the spillway, but no one calls or cries out.

I know before I know

that everyone is gone.

## 2.

# now

*Just your mind, my brain says. Just your mind playing tricks on you. Everyone's not gone. The world's not empty. That's impossible. Get in the car. Go home. Everything will be fine.*

I've made it through the woods and I'm standing where we leave our cars when we go to the jump. Parked under a heavy-branched tree is my beat-up old Subaru. Silver. Long scratch on the driver's side door and an old, peeling KEEP LITHIA GREEN bumper sticker on the back.

But there is no sense of coming and leaving. No engines turning off or on, no crunch of footsteps in the gravel of the parking area, no people calling out to one another in greeting or farewell.

I unlock the car and get in and lock it.

The car is hot and muggy inside, an empty Gatorade bottle rattling around in the front seat where Sam or Sydney or Alex or Ella or Jack used to sit.

*I hear my friends laughing. I see Sam turn his head to look at me, the lights from the dashboard illuminating his face. The air rushes in through the windows and it smells of summer rain.*

I turn away from the memories and put my hands on the steering wheel. Then my forehead against it.

*Breathe, I say.*

*Just your mind.*



3.

**now**

I send a message to everyone in my contacts. The message says:

*Hello?*

I wait.

*Nothing*, no one writes back.

4.

**now**

Not a single other car on the road.

No one out with their dog

walking across the yard with a plate of cookies for their  
neighbor

pushing a lawnmower into the garage

talking at the mailbox

the curb

the little park at the end of the road.

No kids playing in the yard

or runners on the street

or teenagers walking together in knots on the sidewalks.

Not a soul along the wide grassy areas by the college dorms.

5.

## **now**

I drive, slowly, down the street.

There is no screen-blue light seeping through windows. Nobody playing in their yards. No snick-hiss of backyard sprinklers, no smell of burgers grilled for dinner in the air.

I get out of the car and go up the sidewalk to my house.

My heart tick-tocks with hope.

Someone has to be there.

They can't all

be gone.

## 6.

# now

The dishes sit on the table, clean. The chairs are tucked in nice and neat.

My brother, Jack, would never leave his that way. He's always on his way to a baseball game or a night out with friends or a morning practice and so his chairs are left askew, his sentences are half-finished, his life is *in medias res* all the time.

"Hey?" I call out. "Mom? Dad? Jack?"

I check all the rooms, the closets, under all the beds, in the backyard, the side yard, the front yard.

It's like they haven't been here for a long time.

*But they were just here.*

Weren't they?

I look down at my phone.

Still nothing.

From anyone.

## 7.

**Therapist:** *You should make a list.*

**July:** *Of what?*

**Therapist:** *Of ways to calm yourself. To settle the weather pattern in your head.*

**July:** *I don't—*

**July:**

**Therapist:** *You don't what?*

**July:** *See how that's going to help.*

**Therapist:** *You don't have to do it now. That can be your homework, okay? Bring it with you next time.*

## 8.

# now

*Think.*

In the event of a disaster, our neighborhood's designated meeting place is supposed to be the high school. Maybe that's where everyone went, and they just forgot me.

Back when we were little my parents did that to Jack once; they forgot him at a picnic table in Hopkins Glen State Park. We turned the car around, my dad on the phone to 911 and my mom crying. When we got back to the park Jack was exactly where we'd left him, except surrounded by people and eating a piece of chocolate cake with buttercream frosting from someone's birthday party that they'd been celebrating at a nearby table.

Both my parents' cars are in the garage.

*Maybe they walked,* I tell myself.

My car waits out front. When I turn it on, the radio is nothing but static.

## 9.

# now

The parking lot at Lithia High School is empty. Every door is locked. I tried them all. Front doors, back doors, gym doors, doors I've never noticed before. I peer in through the windows: vacant rooms. I circle back to the front of the building again, to the marquee out on the main lawn.

This is where we always met for our cross-country training runs. In the summer mornings, after school when classes started up again.

Technically, the cross-country teams have Fridays off in the summers. But the runners who really want to be good, they come anyway.

We do this long run called the Fall Creek Run on Fridays. Eight miles. It's a monster. You start here at the high school, and then you run up a huge hill, through the gorge. Then out past the farms, up another hill, circle back and come down past the Howell University horse pastures, and then down Fall Creek Road. About a mile before we get back to the high school, we cut through the wildflower preserve to the pond above the spillway on Fall Creek.

And that's where we jump.

Someone on the girls' team started the tradition years ago. Then the guys joined in. College kids do it, too, but not early in

the morning like us. One of them died at the jump a few years ago. You can see the white cross his friends made for him when you're coming along the path. He was drunk.

Other people have died there, but not everyone gets a cross.

We're like the opposite of drunk when we jump. We've been running for miles by the time we're leaping from the cliffs into the water just above the spillway. Once you make the jump on one of the Fall Creek Fridays, you're part of the team. It's our rite of passage.

It feels so good. The water is so cold. Then we get back out and run the last mile back to school. Right back here.

Lithia High doesn't have enough money for one of those electric marquees like other schools have. We've got an ancient sign with plastic letters that the student government officers have to change by hand whenever it's time for a new announcement or event. On the coldest, worst days, when we were out there freezing, trying to get those damn letters up on the board without dropping them, we cursed the cheapness of the school district, the fact that we'd ever signed up for this in the first place, the whole thing.

The last time I noticed, the marquee said HAVE A GOOD SUMM3R, the way it had for weeks. There was only one *E*, so the student body officers always ended up having to use 3s instead.

But now, those words are gone.

Instead, a date.

8/31.

My heart is tick-tocking harder than ever.

*Who did this?*



**NOW**

My hands begin to shake.

*Who put this up?*

How long has it been here?

Did it happen before

*or after*

everyone disappeared?

## 10.

### WAYS TO BE OKAY

- *Run.*
- *Read.*
- *Watch a show that makes you laugh.*
- *Make something.*
- *Help someone.*
- *Create a playlist.*
- *Hot chocolate.*
- *Warm baths.*
- *Pet your cat. Or your dog.*
- *Walk barefoot in the grass.*
- *Go for a long drive on a long road and listen to music. A really good song, an angry one or a sad one or a good beat one, one that matches the rhythm of what you're feeling inside and brings it outside, so you can hear and scream and sing. Songs like that are like a handhold on a slick wall, something you can hold on to with all your might for as long as it lasts.*
- *Wrap up in a blanket and lie on the floor and tell yourself, "I don't have to do anything. I don't have to go anywhere. I don't have to be anyone. I am just a person in a blanket on the floor."*

## 11.

# now

Maybe it's only people in Lithia who've vanished. There's plenty of gas in the Subaru, so I head through downtown and toward Route 13, which snakes around the lake.

I'll try Nicholsburg, the next town over.

I drive over a bridge.

A thing you should know about our town is that it is cut through, divided.

With rivers, gorges.

Rich people, poor people.

College kids, townies.

I come down the dip on the highway that leads to Tanner Falls, right outside the Lithia town limits. There is *always* someone at the falls, even in the winter. People snowshoe and cross-country ski the trail; they take photographs of the water all year long. Frozen. Thawed. Spring flow, summer swimming. And it's a perfect evening right now, prime time for people to gather. I can practically *see* a dad with a baby in a carrier, a woman with a dog, a group of teenagers in cutoff shorts and swimsuits, a family with a picnic, everyone packing up or staying to feel the last of the light. They'll be there. For sure.

So what if there are no other cars on the road, either coming or going? It means I can floor it and get there faster.

I come down to the lowest part of the hill, to where it's

about to swell back up. I don't even care who I see first, whether I know them or not, I am going to throw my arms around them and hold the hell on.

But.

The car is no longer moving, even though I'm pressing—*hard*—on the gas.

There's no wall, invisible or visible, nothing I've hit, but I can't go forward, or see past the rise in the road.

I can *hear* the waterfall, the low sing of it audible now that almost every other sound is gone.

I pull the car over. I put it in park and get out.

I try to walk up the road instead of drive.

Same thing.

I can't move forward.

It is very, *very* weird to walk and walk and not gain any ground at all. I feel like I'm walking in place, the same terrain cycling beneath me like I'm on a treadmill.

Maybe it's just the road. The road has a problem. I can still get through. I can still find my way to the falls and to people, to a spot outside of my town.

I make my way into the forest, past the tangle of bushes that lines the road and into the deep green shade of the trees. Somewhere in this forest is the border between Lithia and the rest of the world. On the road, it's clear where that boundary is, but in the woods, not so much. Leaves cover the ground, thick, and I have to push through the bushes and branches.

Maybe there's a secret path. Maybe I can trick whatever it is that's done this, and it won't see me if I'm not on the road.

All I have to do is try hard enough, and I'll find my way out.

## 12.

**Therapist:** *Did you make your list? The one of ways to be okay?*

**July:** *Yes, I did.*

**Therapist:** *Would you like to share it with me? You don't have to.*

**July:** *Okay. [reads list out loud, except the last item]*

**Therapist:** *That's a great list. Did it feel helpful?*

**July:** *Sure.*

**July:**

**Therapist:**

**Therapist:** *Okay. Let's keep going. Did you happen to try the mock interview exercise I recommended?*

**July:** *I'm sorry. The what?*

**Therapist:** *The exercise where you imagine you're sitting with everyone you'd like to talk to, and you're asking them all the questions you want to ask? And letting them answer?*

July: *Oh. Right. Yes, I tried it.*

Therapist: *What did you think?*

July: *It was nice.*

Therapist: *Can you help me understand what you mean by  
“nice”?*

July: *I don't know.*

Therapist:

July:

Therapist: *Okay. Let me try another question. Were you able  
to picture those conversations in a way that was helpful for  
you?*

July: *I mean, that's the problem, right? That's what makes  
it impossible to trust the conversations. The interviews.  
Because it's all there.*

Therapist: *Where?*

July: *In my head.*

## 13.

# now

I'm pushing through the forest, and at last I break into a clearing. Not even a clearing, really, but a small space without any undergrowth. Just a spot of long grass starred with a few flowers and something . . . else. I point my phone's light down so I can see better in the dusk.

A . . . notebook?

It's open. I reach down to touch it and pull my hand back as if it's been bitten by a snake.

It's my *journal*.

*How did it get here?*

I threw it into the water.

No one saw me do it.

And we aren't anywhere near where I threw it. We're clear on the other side of town.

I reach out again and pick up the journal.

It's swollen, ruined, all of the pages illegible. Waterlogged, then dried out, now damp again from the grass.

It's fallen open to a certain spot. A sprig of leaves has been stuck inside like a bookmark.

And over what I had once written, what I can no longer read, someone

has scrawled  
their handwriting almost illegible:

*GET*

*THEM*

*BACK.*



## once

When we came running into the parking lot at the entrance to the trail, Sam was standing by his car, a beat-up old black Jeep. He was even better-looking than I'd remembered him from Verity, and he had that good-guy look that I like—kind eyes, great smile. Plus: dark hair, broad shoulders, dimple.

I couldn't believe he was here.

Two days before, he'd taken my order at Verity Ice Cream. He'd asked for my number when I'd finished up and we'd been texting ever since. On a whim, I'd told him about the run.

"Wow," Syd said under her breath. Sam noticed her, because guys always did, but his eyes slid right over to meet mine. Ella stopped a few feet behind us, shy.

Good things usually happened to Syd. But this time it wasn't for her. Sam was for *me*.

"So what exactly are we doing?" Sam asked, taking a step in my direction. "Jumping off a cliff?"

"Yup," I said. He wore shorts and a T-shirt and flip-flops. His eyes were bright blue and his hair was a just-woke-up tangle of dark brown.

I saw him look, take me in. My T-shirt, stuck to my chest, my legs, my ponytail, the way the sun hit my hair, the sweat on my skin.

“Is this legal?” he asked.

“It’s public property,” I said as we threaded our way down the trail, Syd leading out, Ella looking over her shoulder with a thrilled expression, Sam and me behind.

“That’s not an answer,” he said.

“No, it’s not,” I agreed. “Follow me.”

Lacy tangles of white flowers brushed our legs, and I ran my hand along the tops of the yellow and purple ones that bordered the path. The grass on the trail smelled sweet and full. We had to go single file, so I went ahead of Sam.

I felt strong and alive and knew I would always be both.

We came to the cliff and stood there, looking down at the pool above the spillway. Alex and Colton and some of the other guys had beaten us there and were already jumping, one after another after another. People had taken off their T-shirts and abandoned them in clusters at the top, draped over branches. The people who’d already jumped were swimming to the edge of the spillway and leaning over it, talking, the water going past them, down Fall Creek, and all the way to Cayuga Lake.

“It’s higher up than I thought,” Ella said, sounding nervous. She was young, just a freshman. I’d been giving her a ride to practice since the first week, when I’d noticed her walking all the way down to the high school from her house.

Sam stayed next to me on the slate-colored rock, the two of us looking down.

The water was deep emerald green, the color of a wine bottle, a tangle of jungle leaves, a piece of velvet slumped in a display window with old books scattered across it. Later today, when the heat came up, there would be bodies all over the rocks and

the small sandy beach below—suntanned college and graduate students who had stuck around for the summer, and townies like us.

It wasn't crowded now, but at first I wanted them all gone, even the girls from the team, even my friends, even Syd and Alex.

*I wanted them all gone.*

But then I realized that people were seeing Sam, and me, and in a way it was even better than if we'd been alone.

Sam pulled off his flip-flops. I knew he was getting ready to jump, so I did it first. I heard Alex cheering when I went over.

The water tasted cold, like old stone and moss. Even in the summer, it was still so chilly it took my breath away. My body slipped through, went under, and I opened my eyes against the deep green. I stayed down as long as I dared.

When I came back up, Sam had already jumped in and come to the surface. He was looking for me. I swam away from the group, around the corner of the rock cliff, where the others couldn't see us, and when I looked back, I saw that he had caught sight of me and was following, long smooth strokes against the water.

My feet hit the bottom near the shore, and I stood up. So did Sam. My hair was in my eyes and I pushed it away. His body was slick and wet and I thought about my T-shirt, sitting in the sun at the top of the cliff, and how it would feel to put it back on after being so cold. My sports bra would soak right through it, but the cotton would be warm on my skin. I thought these things so I wouldn't think about Sam, but when he took a step closer, that became impossible.

Neither of us were smiling.

It felt like we were balancing on the knife's edge of something bigger than we were, something we couldn't control.

"Let me give you some advice about Lithia," I said. "This town is beautiful. But be careful where you jump."

## 15.

# now

I'm back at my house. I open the door, praying.

*Please. This time let it be different.*

*Please.*

"Hello?"

*Nothing*, no one says back.

*Okay. Okay.*

Maybe this is a dream.

*It's not, I know it's not.*

Maybe I'm dead.

*I'm not, I know I'm not.*

The framed family photo on the wall is from last fall. The new bed we bought for our cat, Yolo, because he'd torn up his old one, is sitting in front of the fireplace.

We all thought it was super funny when we named our cat Yolo.

Because it stands for "you only live once" and cats have nine lives. Get it?

They don't actually have to worry about YOLO.

I keep walking around the house. The bedspread in my parents' room is the one they got this spring. Jack's summer league team picture is up on his bulletin board.

## THE ONLY GIRL IN TOWN

I have the long thin scar on my forearm where a stick dragged across me sharp and neat when I was hiking earlier this summer, in June.

I still have all the marks from the last year. On the outside of me, and inside. I feel them. It's still today.

I don't think I'm dreaming

or dead

or trapped in the past.

Just

alone.

## once

We stood with our hands behind our heads, fingers threaded together, trying to catch our breath. The sun slanted green-gold through the trees around the high school, and the air was muggy and cooler than usual from the rain the night before. The green bushes that lined the parking lot dripped with water, and I could smell the earth, lush and ripe.

“Nice run,” Coach Warren said.

“Thanks,” Syd said. I was still catching my breath.

“I’ve got some good news for you two,” Coach said. “The other girls voted you as team captains for the year.”

“Aw,” Syd said. “That’s so sweet.” She seemed pleased, and not surprised.

I was, though. “Wow,” I said. “That’s awesome.”

But who else did I think it would be?

17.

## now

I lock all the doors.

*What is going on?*

The date on the marquee.

The words in my journal.

How did it get there?

And when?

*And who wrote in it?*

I race up the stairs to my parents' bedroom, lock that door, too. I drag the comforter and a pillow off their bed and go into their bathroom. I lock *that* door and then crawl into the space underneath the built-in vanity. The tile is hard and cold and gray. I close my eyes.



## once

*This is my earliest concrete memory.*

*We are driving late at night. It is me and my mom and dad and Jack who is three years old. I am five.*

*It is late and I am so tired. I am crying.*

*The night's dark.*

*Something is scaring me.*

*I don't know what it is.*

*It's bigger than a monster, wider than an ocean.*

*It's everywhere.*

*Outside me.*

*Inside me.*

*I'm crying and Jack's asleep but he won't be for long if I keep this up. "July, honey, it's okay," my mom says. "Please stop crying. Sweetie. You're going to wake up your brother."*

*She tries to tell me the story of my birth, which I've always liked. How I was due on the Fourth of July but I came so early, in May instead. How they were worried about me but I was a fighter. How they decided to keep the name they'd picked for me—July—even though I came in May. Because I was a firecracker from the start. I lit up the sky.*

*But I can't stop crying.*

*I'm too scared.*

*Mom has Dad pull the car over. She climbs in the back, in between our two booster seats.*

*"It's okay," she says. "It's okay."*

*She picks up my sippy cup and says my name into it. "JULY." She's trying to get through to me, to have me hear her in a different way, and it almost works. I stop for a second. But the fear is still there, and I start to cry again.*

*My mom keeps saying my name, very gently. She doesn't lose her temper, she doesn't put the cup down. She starts singing my name into it. Then she turns my name into a song.*

*I listen.*

*Ju-ly, Ju-ly Fielding.*

*Ju-ly, Ju-ly Fielding.*

*Ju-ly, Ju-ly Fielding, Ju-ly, Fielding,  
is a pretty name.*

*Ju-ly, Ju-ly Fielding.*

*Ju-ly, Ju-ly Fielding.*

*Ju-ly, Ju-ly Fielding, Ju-ly, Fielding,  
you will be okay.*

## 19.

# now

I wake, sitting bolt upright, and slam my head against the bottom of the vanity.

What am I doing under my parents' vanity?

*Crap. Right.*

I'm the last person left in town, and I'm sleeping under a vanity because I got scared by a date on a marquee and a message in my old journal. I've gone to ground like an animal.

A thought nudges at my mind. *Where are all the animals?* I didn't hear the buzz of insects last night. There are no birds chirping the way they always do in the morning.

Have they gone, too?

Is anyone back yet?

I grab my phone and lie down again.

Nothing. No texts. But the date on the display has changed. One day forward.

So, time is moving. We're going to get closer to the 8/31 date. It's going to be 8/31 again.

*The numbers on the marquee don't mean that, I tell myself. Not necessarily. Remember, it could just be the time everything stopped.*

One of my mom's eyeliner pencils is on the floor under the sink with me. She must have dropped it. The shade is one she

used to wear a couple of years ago—brown, not black. Without getting up, without lifting my head, I pick up the pencil and make a mark on the underside of the vanity like a prisoner would. A notch.

I have that sick feeling you get when you wake up and you know something bad has happened. And you have to remember what it is.

But I've already remembered that I'm alone. That everyone else is gone. What more could there be?

I crawl out and stand, yanking up the blind and looking through the bathroom window at the tangle of mint and thyme in the herb garden along the fence, at the trees in the yard. Empty. I push open the window. Nothing. Still no sound.

I have to find someone.

*My therapist handed me a Post-it. Fluorescent pink. I've always hated neon colors. My mom bought me a hot-pink T-shirt when I was little, and I would never wear it, not even once. I told her, "I don't like that color! It's screaming at my eyes!"*

*"Write down the names of the most important people to you," my therapist said. She handed me a black Sharpie pen, fine point. That, I liked. It was so smooth across the paper.*

*"Do you need to see the names?" I asked her when I finished. I wondered if she'd say, "Who on earth do you know that is named Yolo?" and then I would say, "It's my cat," and if she would try to tell me that a cat was not a person.*

*But she said no. Instead, she asked, "What does this list tell you?"*

*I knew she wanted me to say something like, these are the people I love who love me back and they're the only people whose opinions matter. So that's what I said, and she liked it.*

*"Does it help?" she asked me.*

*I knew she wanted me to say yes it does so I said that.*

*"Good," she said. "You can put it with your list of ways to be okay."*

*Yes, yes, I nodded, showing her I understood and would for*

*sure and definitely do that. I would put both the ways to be okay list and the people who love me list on my mirror so I could see them every day. Absolutely. Of course.*

*I did not tell her that the lists never really worked.*

*Or that maybe I had never been okay.*

## 21.

### now

I know where Alex's family keeps their spare key. It's in a fake rock in the backyard flower bed. I push away the heavy-leaved peony plants, their blossoms gone since June. My fingers are dappled with still-clinging dew, though the sun on my back is already hot. Their dog, Bo, would absolutely be barking his way toward me right now if things were normal, but all I hear is the snick-snack of me sliding open the secret compartment in the rock to get the key.

It's not breaking into someone's house if everyone in town has disappeared and you have to find out what happened. Like, if ever there were extenuating circumstances, that's what's happening here.

Near the back steps, there is a tangle of Queen Anne's lace that Alex's mom likes to keep wild because she uses it in floral arrangements. She's a nurse and very clean, so everything else, inside and outside of the house, is shipshape and tidy. I put the key in the lock and push it open and head straight for their kitchen.

It's the same as my house. No plates on the table. Chairs tucked in. A framed photo of Alex, his parents, and his sister visiting family in India sits neatly on the sideboard where it's always been. Cookbooks line the kitchen shelves, not a one out of place.

“Hey?” I call out. “Alex?”

I hear a creak upstairs and my heart thumps with fear and excitement. I should have come straight here last night, when everything first happened. I shouldn’t have let the marquee freak me out. I pound up the stairs two at a time, rounding the corner to Alex’s room.

Alex Dhawan and I became best friends in seventh grade. We both played saxophone in middle school band. We bonded over how bad we were. We were so bad the band teacher asked us not to return the next year. We weren’t even mad. We understood.

It feels like snooping to actually look inside the drawers of Alex’s desk or his dresser. There’s a stack of notebooks on the corner of his desk, the black-and-white composition kind. I don’t open one, but I know what I’d see if I did—lines and lines of his oddly beautiful handwriting in fine-point black Sharpie, his favorite kind of pen. I don’t see his phone anywhere. I do see the set of mini-golf clubs I gave him as kind of a joke one year. We always went mini-golfing on the Fourth of July at National Wonders, this awesomely crappy place at the edge of town. The people who built it were obsessed with national parks. So each hole represents a different park. And if you get a hole in one at Yellowstone, you get a free pass for the next time.

*Creak.*

The sound, again.

I look around Alex’s room for something I could use to defend myself. I pick up one of the clubs, though it wouldn’t be



much defense against an intruder. And at this point I might actually welcome an intruder. Another living, breathing human being.

I hear the sound a third time.

A creak, a pop.

I recognize it now.

It's only the floorboards, expanding in the heat.

## once

*When I was eight, the toilet in the bathroom next to my bedroom started making a weird whiny sound at night.*

*It was the most lonesome sound in the world.*

*Like a sad, aching, cosmic wail. Not made by anything alive. It sounded like it was made by something older than alive.*

*It made me think of stars and how big the universe was.*

*It made me think of how small I was.*

*In my mind, I called it the cold lonely sound.*

*“What happens when we die?” I asked my mom one night when she came to tuck me in.*

*She sat down on the bed. “Oh, honey,” she said. “Do you want me to tell you what some people believe? Or do you want me to tell you what I think is the truth?”*

*“The truth,” I said.*

*“Well,” she said. “We’re very, very lucky to be born at all. Do you know how strange and beautiful it is to be living?”*

*I did. I felt that. I had always felt that.*

*“The odds against all the ancestors over all the years meeting up and having the children they did, and the odds against the exact cells coming together to make you . . .”*

*“I know,” I said. That part was awesome and scared me, too.*

*“Right,” she said. “You’re asking about dying. Not being born.”*

*I waited. I had a stuffed fox that had once been hers, from a movie when she was small. I was holding on to it tight.*

*“I think we’re part of nature,” my mom said gently. “We’re born, and we live, and then we die. And our bodies return to the earth. Things grow from it again. So we’re always a part of the universe.”*

*She kissed my forehead.*

*I held on tight to that fox, even though it was not alive, even though it had never been alive, and I did not sleep.*

## 23.

# now

“You didn’t stay drowned,” I tell my journal. I threw it in the lake at the end of last summer. “But *this* should do the trick.”

I light it on fire in my driveway with the matches my mom keeps next to the stove.

I let it lick, lick, lick.

Eat, eat, eat.

Burn, burn, burn.

Until all the pages are shriveled up black and gone.

This time, for good.

It’s almost night again. I have been alone for twenty-four hours. I have knocked on the doors of almost everyone I know, like some kind of crazed salesman or missionary who has pest control or religion to share. But no one answered. When I peered into windows, no one looked back.

And now I’m home again. Burning.

Something comes over me. A feeling. Like I’m floating flat on my back in a dark cold lake, staring at the sky, and I know there’s a swim of things going on underneath that could take me down.

*Despair.*

I burned the journal.

*So what?*

Now what?

I leave the ashes on the driveway and walk over to the front steps to sit down. It's humid, the air weighing on me like a hand, pressing against every inch of my skin. Along the road, one of the streetlights flickers on, then out. I watch for a minute, but it stays dark. Maybe I imagined it.

I used to sit here with Yolo in my lap, his sleek black fur and purr a warm silk.

*I wish I had my cat back.*

My words hang in the lonely, unbreathing night.

24.

**now**

And

Something leaps and lands, soft but solid, on the porch next  
to me.

*Yolo.*

He's back.

25.

## now

*My cat is back.*

Yolo climbs onto my lap and purrs and kneads, as if he's been waiting for this for ages, too.

He's always acted like that. Like he'd been *sooooo* neglected, even if I'd hung out with him moments before.

I'm laughing and crying. I'm hugging him so hard he gives me a *meh* of annoyance.

He was always too lazy to do the full meow, just the *meh*, and that's how I am one hundred percent sure that it is him. He sticks his claws into my knee and lifts his chin so I can get the soft spot under it, the spot where he has a secret gray patch that's usually hidden.

*Yolo is back.*

"Such a good boy," I say, "such a good boy you are," and he *mehs* at me again and I'm so delighted. And then I realize:

oh my gosh.

oh my gosh I think I wished Yolo back.

## 26.

# now

Wait.

What.

Is that what this is?

Is *this* how I get them back?

Yolo is *mehing* at me, walking away, and I jump up to follow—I am not letting him out of my sight, I will stalk him as tenaciously as he used to stalk the neighbor’s Chihuahua. Yolo pauses at the back door, waiting for me to let him in, and when I do, he goes straight to the pantry where we keep the cat food and waits for me to pour him out a bowl. “*Meh*,” he says again when I’ve finished, and it makes me laugh again.

Could it be this easy?

Do I just have to wish?

Wishes aren’t science. They make zero sense. But neither does a whole town vanishing around you.

I open my mouth to say every name I can as fast as I can, but a *meh* from Yolo stops me. He’s watching me.

“You’re right,” I tell him. “I should think this through.”

What if I’ve only got three? Like a fairy tale?

But even though I’m a girl talking to her cat like a princess



in a castle, this is no fairy tale. I'm trapped and I can't get out, but I'm not asleep, and no prince is at the gates thinking he can save me.

I have to be careful.

## once

Sam texted *I'm stuck at work all night come see me*

and I texted back

*I can't*

*I'm babysitting the Miller kids overnight for the first time*

and Sam wrote back

*Bring them*

*Kids like ice cream*

I looked at the kids, who were sitting in a circle in the family room, three towheads waiting for me to keep playing duck, duck, goose with them.

"Let's take a break," I said. "How about we go get ice cream?"

"But it's almost bedtime," Annie said, looking thrilled. She was the youngest, five years old.

"We'll be fast," I promised.

They rocketed to their feet and ran off in search of flip-flops or sandals. I gathered up the pillows and blankets they'd scattered from a fort we'd made earlier.

The Millers' house was one of those perfect family houses. The kind with hardwood floors and rain jackets hanging on pegs; snickerdoodle or chocolate chip cookies in a Tupperware on the counter; white lights hanging over a weathered back

patio full of plants in pots; soccer balls dotting the backyard. The family room had a fireplace and shelves filled with books; kids' paintings hung on the fridge and were tacked to bulletin boards. There was a fresh laundry smell, rosebushes and flagstones in the yard. It was a beautiful home but one that was worn at the edges. You wanted to live there, not tiptoe through it and tell your friends about it later. The Millers had moved in that winter, and the house already felt like they had been there forever.

"Where are we going to get the ice cream?" Annie asked, as they piled into the car.

"Verity," I said, sliding into the driver's seat. The Millers had one of those SUVs with two rows of seats in the back. It was very new and very shiny, and it always made me nervous to drive it.

"We're never been to Verity!" Kate said from what they called the back-back-seat. She was the oldest, nine.

"Seriously?" I asked. Verity Ice Cream is a Lithia institution. It's been around since the 1930s.

"We haven't lived here very long," Drew, the middle kid, reminded me. His dad, Jake, had gotten a job as a professor at Howell University. Hannah, the mom, worked at a non-profit.

"I'll have to show you all the good Lithia summer stuff," I said. "Ice cream. Peach pancakes at Zippy's Diner. Sandwiches at Home Run Deli. Hiking in Hopkins Glen. S'mores. Lakeside Park. Catching fireflies. Berry picking. Swimming."

"We go to the swimming pool all the time," Kate said. "At the country club."

"Well, I've never been to the country club," I said.

“Really?”

“Really.” My parents did okay—my mom was a dental hygienist and my dad was a graphic designer—but joining the country club was not a thought that would have ever crossed either of their minds. “And there are lots of secret swimming places besides the regular pools. Ponds, and spots in the state parks.”

“Really?” Annie had gone breathless. “*Secret* swimming pools?”

“Can you take us there?” Drew asked.

“I’ll have to check with your parents first.”

Finding some of the secret swimming spots had been something I’d done with Alex the summer after ninth grade. He and I always invented a project for the summer. One year, we’d learned the butterfly stroke in swimming.

This year, we were trying every flavor on the menu at Verity Ice Cream together.

I started driving down the road that snaked from the Heights—the Millers’ old, beautiful neighborhood—to downtown. “But you’re going to love this ice cream. I promise. They have a ton of flavors.”

The summer evening crowd was out in full force. We had to wait in line, and I read the flavors of ice cream listed on the giant blackboard over and over to each of the kids while they decided. Sam was there, wearing his work uniform, a white button-up short-sleeved shirt and a red baseball cap with the Verity logo on it. I kept having to look away because I wanted him to come out from behind the counter and put his mouth on mine and I was worried that that was showing on my face.

When it was finally our turn, we ended up with another employee helping us because Sam was already busy. I was either going to crack up laughing from the faked formality of the whole thing or implode with lust the next time I caught his eye. I got Cinnamon Crunch because it was a flavor I'd already had with Alex so I wouldn't be breaking our pact. Kate got Mint Chocolate Chip, and the younger two both got Bubble Gum Blast. I knew I'd have to keep an eye on where all that gum ended up.

We sat at one of the picnic tables outside, sharing it with a young mom and her baby in a stroller. She was feeding him vanilla ice cream from a tiny sample spoon, and every time she gave him a bite, he kicked his legs in delight.

I went over to get extra water cups for the kids to save their bubble gum chunks in for later. It was disgusting, but it was also what Jack and I had done as kids. No way would we ever have let all that gum go to waste. As I was walking toward the door, a car drove by and someone wolf-whistled me, and I flipped them off before I remembered that the kids might be watching.

When I came back, the younger two had chipmunk cheeks full of gum that they'd been saving up while they waited for me. They spat them into their cups and wiped their mouths with red-and-white napkins printed with the Verity slogan: *Truly Delicious*.

A loose knot of teenagers sat at a table next to us, flirting and laughing and telling jokes. The kids watched them in fascination.

"We are up *so late*," Annie whispered, almost to herself, in total delight.

Sam came outside to bring someone at another table a banana split. The whipped cream was already starting to slide off the top because he'd put on too much. I stood up to get another cup of water for Annie. After Sam delivered the ice cream, he walked over to where I was standing at the spigot. Without either of us saying anything, we ducked around the corner. He pulled me in and kissed me fast, so quick it left me breathless. He tasted like ice cream, blackberry.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said back.

I closed my eyes. His lips were so good. Both of our hands were on each other's backs, just under the hems of each other's shirts, our fingers grazing each other's skin. Every part of me was singing and I knew this was the best anyone could ever feel.

"I'd better get back," I whispered. We both held on for a second longer before I pulled away and walked toward the kids.

I knew he was watching me go.

## 28.

# now

*Okay. Think.*

“I’m going to be smart about this,” I tell Yolo.

Everyone knows what happens when people in stories get wishes. They end up wasting them. It happens literally every time.

And I’m no different. If I do only have three, I’ve already kind of wasted one, wishing on Yolo.

Yolo full-out *meows* at me, and he sounds pissed, like he read my mind.

“No offense,” I say. “You’re the first animal I’d wish back. For sure. And you’d be ahead of most people.”

That thought thuds my heart. *But not all people.* There are some I want back so badly I feel like I’m clawing my way through every hour every minute every second without them.

*Be careful. Think. Don’t get emotional. Yet.*

Plus, what if I get greedy? What if I wish for the whole town back, and it’s too much for, like, the wishing system? What if there are limits? What if there aren’t?

*Okay.* To start, I should wish for something bigger than Yolo. A single person. See if that works.

If it does, then I’ll wish for the town. And if *that* works, then

I'll see if I have another wish. Maybe it's not limited to three.  
Maybe the possibilities are endless.

I mean, if an entire town can disappear, anything can happen.  
Right?