





chapter *one*  
JULY 2

It was a hot summer day in Cousins. I was lying by the pool with a magazine on my face. My mother was playing solitaire on the front porch, Susannah was inside puttering around the kitchen. She'd probably come out soon with a glass of sun tea and a book I should read. Something romantic.

Conrad and Jeremiah and Steven had been surfing all morning. There'd been a storm the night before. Conrad and Jeremiah came back to the house first. I heard them before I saw them. They walked up the steps, cracking up over how Steven had lost his shorts after a particularly ferocious wave. Conrad strode over to me, lifted the sweaty magazine from my face, and grinned. He said, "You have words on your cheeks."

I squinted up at him. “What do they say?”

He squatted next to me and said, “I can’t tell. Let me see.” And then he peered at my face in his serious Conrad way. He leaned in, and he kissed me, and his lips were cold and salty from the ocean.

Then Jeremiah said, “You guys need to get a room,” but I knew he was joking. He winked at me as he came from behind, lifted Conrad up, and launched him into the pool.

Jeremiah jumped in too, and he yelled, “Come on, Belly!”

So of course I jumped too. The water felt fine. Better than fine. Just like always, Cousins was the only place I wanted to be.

“Hello? Did you hear anything I just said?”

I opened my eyes. Taylor was snapping her fingers in my face. “Sorry,” I said. “What were you saying?”

I wasn’t in Cousins. Conrad and I weren’t together, and Susannah was dead. Nothing would ever be the same again. It had been—*How many days had it been? How many days exactly?*—two months since Susannah had died and I still couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t let myself believe it. When a person you love dies, it doesn’t feel real. It’s like it’s happening to someone else. It’s someone else’s life. I’ve never been good with the abstract. What does it mean when someone is really and truly gone?

Sometimes I closed my eyes and in my head, I said over and over again, *It isn't true, it isn't true, this isn't real.* This wasn't my life. But it was my life; it was my life now. After.

I was in Marcy Yoo's backyard. The boys were messing around in the pool and us girls were lying on beach towels, all lined up in a row. I was friends with Marcy, but the rest, Katie and Evelyn and those girls, they were more Taylor's friends.

It was eighty-seven degrees already, and it was just after noon. It was going to be a hot one. I was on my stomach, and I could feel sweat pooling in the small of my back. I was starting to feel sun-sick. It was only the second day of July, and already, I was counting the days until summer was over.

"I *said*, what are you going to wear to Justin's party?" Taylor repeated. She'd lined our towels up close, so it was like we were on one big towel.

"I don't know," I said, turning my head so we were face-to-face.

She had tiny sweat beads on her nose. Taylor always sweated first on her nose. She said, "I'm going to wear that new sundress I bought with my mom at the outlet mall."

I closed my eyes again. I was wearing sunglasses, so she couldn't tell if my eyes were open or not anyway. "Which one?"

“You know, the one with the little polka dots that ties around the neck. I showed it to you, like, two days ago.” Taylor let out an impatient little sigh.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, but I still didn’t remember and I knew Taylor could tell.

I started to say something else, something nice about the dress, but suddenly I felt ice-cold aluminum sticking to the back of my neck. I shrieked and there was Cory Wheeler, crouched down next to me with a dripping Coke can in his hand, laughing his head off.

I sat up and glared at him, wiping off my neck. I was so sick of today. I just wanted to go home. “What the *crap*, Cory!”

He was still laughing, which made me madder.

I said, “God, you’re so immature.”

“But you looked really hot,” he protested. “I was trying to cool you off.”

I didn’t answer him, I just kept my hand on the back of my neck. My jaw felt really tight, and I could feel all the other girls staring at me. And then Cory’s smile sort of slipped away and he said, “Sorry. You want this Coke?”

I shook my head, and he shrugged and retreated back over to the pool. I looked over and saw Katie and Evelyn making *what’s-her-problem* faces, and I felt embarrassed. Being mean to Cory was like being mean to a German shepherd puppy. There was just no sense in it. Too late, I tried to catch Cory’s eye, but he didn’t look back at me.

In a low voice Taylor said, "It was just a joke, Belly."

I lay back down on my towel, this time faceup. I took a deep breath and let it out, slowly. The music from Marcy's iPod deck was giving me a headache. It was too loud. And I actually *was* thirsty. I should have taken that Coke from Cory.

Taylor leaned over and pushed up my sunglasses so she could see my eyes. She peered at me. "Are you mad?"

"No. It's just too hot out here." I wiped sweat off my forehead with the back of my arm.

"Don't be mad. Cory can't help being an idiot around you. He likes you."

"Cory doesn't like me," I said, looking away from her. But he sort of did like me, and I knew it. I just wished he didn't.

"Whatever, he's totally into you. I still think you should give him a chance. It'll take your mind off of you-know-who."

I turned my head away from her and she said, "How about I French braid your hair for the party tonight? I can do the front section and pin it to the side like I did last time."

"Okay."

"What are you going to wear?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, you have to look cute because everybody's gonna be there," Taylor said. "I'll come over early and we can get ready together."

Justin Ettelbrick had thrown a big blowout birthday party every July first since the eighth grade. By July, I was already at Cousins Beach, and home and school and school friends were a million miles away. I'd never once minded missing out, not even when Taylor told me about the cotton candy machine his parents had rented one year, or the fancy fireworks they shot off over the lake at midnight.

It was the first summer I would be at home for Justin's party and it was the first summer I wasn't going back to Cousins. And that, I minded. That, I mourned. I'd thought I'd be in Cousins every summer of my life. The summer house was the only place I wanted to be. It was the only place I ever wanted to be.

"You're still coming, right?" Taylor asked me.

"Yeah. I told you I was."

Her nose wrinkled. "I know, but—" Taylor's voice broke off. "Never mind."

I knew Taylor was waiting for things to go back to normal again, to be like before. But they could never be like before. I was never going to be like before.

I used to believe. I used to think that if I wanted it bad enough, wished hard enough, everything would work out the way it was supposed to. Destiny, like Susannah said. I wished for Conrad on every birthday, every shooting star, every lost eyelash, every penny in a fountain was dedicated to the one I loved. I thought it would always be that way.

Taylor wanted me to forget about Conrad, to just erase him from my mind and memory. She kept saying things like, “Everybody has to get over a first love, it’s a rite of passage.” But Conrad wasn’t just my first love. He wasn’t some rite of passage. He was so much more than that. He and Jeremiah and Susannah were my family. In my memory, the three of them would always be entwined, forever linked. There couldn’t be one without the others.

If I forgot Conrad, if I evicted him from my heart, pretended like he was never there, it would be like doing those things to Susannah. And that, I couldn’t do.





## chapter two

It used to be that the week school let out in June, we'd pack up the car and head straight to Cousins. My mother would go to Costco the day before and buy jugs of apple juice and economy-size boxes of granola bars, sunscreen, and whole grain cereal. When I begged for Lucky Charms or Cap'n Crunch, my mother would say, "Beck will have plenty of cereal that'll rot your teeth out, don't you worry." Of course she'd be right. Susannah—Beck to my mother—loved her kid cereal, just like me. We went through a lot of cereal at the summer house. It never even had a chance to go stale. There was one summer when the boys ate cereal for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. My brother, Steven, was Frosted Flakes, Jeremiah was Cap'n Crunch, and Conrad was Corn Pops. Jeremiah and Conrad were Beck's boys, and they loved their

cereal. Me, I ate whatever was left over with sugar on top.

I'd been going to Cousins my whole life. We'd never skipped a summer, not once. Almost seventeen years of me playing catch-up to the boys, of hoping and wishing that one day I would be old enough to be a part of their crew. The summer boys crew. I finally made it, and now it was too late. In the pool, on the last night of the last summer, we said we'd always come back. It's scary how easy promises were broken. Just like that.

When I got home last summer, I waited. August turned into September, school started, and still I waited. It wasn't like Conrad and I had made any declarations. It wasn't like he was my boyfriend. All we'd done was kiss. He was going to college, where there would be a million other girls. Girls without curfews, girls on his hall, all smarter and prettier than me, all mysterious and brand-new in a way that I could never be.

I thought about him constantly—what it all meant, what we were to each other now. Because we couldn't go back. I knew *I* couldn't. What happened between us—between me and Conrad, between me and Jeremiah—it changed everything. And so when August and September began and still the phone didn't ring, all I had to do was think back to the way he'd looked at me that last night, and I knew there was still hope. I knew that I hadn't imagined it all. I couldn't have.

According to my mother, Conrad was all moved into

his dorm room, he had an annoying roommate from New Jersey, and Susannah worried he wasn't getting enough to eat. My mother told me these things casually, offhandedly, so as not to injure my pride. I never pressed her for more information. The thing is, I knew he'd call. I *knew* it. All I had to do was wait.

The call came the second week of September, three weeks since the last time I'd seen him. I was eating strawberry ice cream in the living room, and Steven and I were fighting over the remote control. It was a Monday night, nine p.m., prime TV-watching time. The phone rang, and neither Steven nor I made a move to grab it. Whoever got up would lose the battle for the TV.

My mother picked it up in her office. She brought the phone into the living room and she said, "Belly, it's for you. It's Conrad." Then she winked.

Everything in me went abuzz. I could hear the ocean in my ears. The rush, the roar in my eardrums. It was like a high. It was golden. I had waited, and this was my reward! Being right, being patient, never felt so good.

Steven was the one to break me out of my reverie. Frowning, he said, "Why would Conrad be calling *you*?"

I ignored him and took the phone from my mother. I walked away from Steven, from the remote, from my melting dish of ice cream. None of it mattered.

I made Conrad wait until I was on the staircase before I said anything. I sat down on the steps and I said, "Hey."

I tried to keep the smile off my face; I knew he would hear it over the phone.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much.”

“So guess what,” he said. “My roommate snores even louder than you do.”

He called again the next night, and the night after. We talked for hours at a time. When the phone rang, and it was for me and not Steven, he’d been confused at first. “Why does Conrad keep calling you?” he’d demanded.

“Why do you think? He likes me. We like each other.”

Steven had nearly gagged. “He’s lost his mind,” he said, shaking his head.

“Is it so impossible that Conrad Fisher would like me?” I asked him, crossing my arms defiantly.

He didn’t even have to think about his answer. “Yes,” he said. “It is so impossible.”

And honestly, it was.

It was like a dream. Unreal. After all that pining and longing and wishing, years and years of it, whole summers’ worth, *he* was calling *me*. He liked talking to me. I made him laugh even when he didn’t want to. I understood what he was going through, because I was sort of going through it too. There were only a few people in the world who loved Susannah the way we did. I thought that would be enough.

We became something. Something that was never exactly

defined, but it was something. It was really something.

A few times, he drove the three and a half hours from school to my house. Once, he spent the night because it got so late my mother didn't want him to drive back. Conrad stayed in the guest room, and I lay in my bed awake for hours, thinking about how he was asleep just a few feet away, in *my* house of all places.

If Steven hadn't hung around us like some kind of disease, I know Conrad would have at least tried to kiss me. But with my brother around it was pretty much impossible. Conrad and I would be watching TV, and Steven would plop right down between us. He'd talk to Conrad about stuff I didn't know or care about, like football. One time, after dinner, I asked Conrad if he wanted to go get frozen custard at Brusters, and Steven chimed right in and said, "Sounds good to me." I glared at him, but he just grinned back at me. And then Conrad took my hand, right in front of Steven, and he said, "Let's all go." So we all went, my mother too. I couldn't believe I was going on dates with my mother and my brother in the backseat.

But really, it all just made that one amazing night in December all the sweeter. Conrad and I went back to Cousins, just the two of us. Perfect nights come so rarely, but that one was. Perfect, I mean. It was the kind of night worth waiting for.

I'm glad we had that night.

Because by May, it was all over.



### chapter *three*

I left Marcy's house early. I told Taylor it was so I could rest up for Justin's party that night. It was partly true. I did want to rest, but I didn't care about the party. As soon as I got home, I put on my big Cousins T-shirt, filled a water bottle with grape soda and crushed ice, and I watched TV until my head hurt.

It was peacefully, blissfully silent. Just the sounds of the TV and the air conditioning kicking off and on. I had the house to myself. Steven had a summer job at Best Buy. He was saving up for a fifty-inch flat screen he'd take to college with him in the fall. My mother was home, but she spent all day locked away in her office, catching up on work, she said.

I understood. If I were her, I'd want to be alone too.

Taylor came over around six, armed with her hot pink

Victoria's Secret makeup bag. She walked into the living room and saw me lying on the couch in my Cousins T-shirt and frowned. "Belly, you haven't even showered yet?"

"I took a shower this morning," I said, not getting up.

"Yeah, and you laid out in the sun all day." She grabbed my arms and I let her lift me into a sitting position. "Hurry up and get into the shower."

I followed her upstairs and she went to my bedroom while I went to the hall bathroom. I took the fastest shower of my life. Left to her own devices, Taylor was a big snoop and would poke around my room like it was hers.

When I came out Taylor was sitting on my floor in front of my mirror. Briskly, she blended bronzer onto her cheeks. "Want me to do your makeup too?"

"No thanks," I told her. "Close your eyes while I put on my clothes, okay?"

She rolled her eyes and then closed them. "Belly, you're such a prude."

"I don't care if I am," I said, putting on my underwear and my bra. Then I put my Cousins T-shirt on again. "Okay, you can look."

Taylor opened her eyes up superwide and she applied her mascara. "I could do your nails," she offered. "I have three new colors."

"Nah, there's no point." I held up my hands. My nails were bitten down to the quick.

Taylor grimaced. “Well, what are you wearing?”

“This,” I said, hiding my smile. I pointed down at my Cousins T-shirt. I’d worn it so many times it had tiny holes around the neck and it was soft as a blankie. I wished I could wear it to the party.

“Very funny,” she said, shimmying over to my closet on her knees. She stood up and started rifling around, pushing hangers over to the side, like she didn’t already know every article of clothing I owned by heart. Usually I didn’t mind, but today I felt sort of itchy and bothered by everything.

I told her, “Don’t worry about it. I’m just going to wear my cutoffs and a tank top.”

“Belly, people get dressed up for Justin’s parties. You’ve never been so you wouldn’t know, but you can’t just wear your old cutoffs.” Taylor pulled out my white sundress. The last time I’d worn it had been last summer, at that party with Cam. Susannah had told me the dress set me off like a picture frame.

I got up and took the dress from Taylor and put it back into my closet. “That’s stained,” I said. “I’ll find something else.”

Taylor sat back down in front of the mirror and said, “Well, then wear that black dress with the little flowers. It makes your boobs look amazing.”

“It’s uncomfortable; it’s too tight,” I told her.

“Pretty please?”



Sighing, I took it off the hanger and put it on. Sometimes it was easier to just give in with Taylor. We'd been friends, best friends, since we were little kids. We'd been best friends so long it was more like a habit, the kind of thing you didn't really have a say in anymore.

"See, that looks hot." She came over and zipped me up. "Now, let's talk about our plan of action."

"What plan of action?"

"I think you and Cory Wheeler should make out at the party."

"Taylor—"

She lifted her hand. "Just hear me out. Cory's super-nice *and* he's supercute. If he worked on his body and got a little definition, he could be, like, Abercrombie hot."

I snorted. "Please."

"Well, he's at least as cute as C-word." She never called him by his name anymore. Now he was just "you-know-who," or "C-word."

"Taylor, quit pushing me. I can't be over him just because you want me to."

"Can't you at least try?" she wheedled. "Cory could be your rebound. He wouldn't mind."

"If you bring up Cory one more time, I'm not going to the party," I told her, and I meant it. In fact, I kind of hoped she would bring him up again so I'd have an excuse not to go.

Her eyes widened. "Okay, okay. Sorry. My lips are sealed."

Then she grabbed her makeup bag and sat down on the edge of my bed, and I sat down at her feet. She pulled out a comb and sectioned off my hair. She braided quickly, with fast and sure fingers, and when she was done, she pinned the braid over the crown of my head, to the side. Neither of us spoke while she worked until she said, “I love your hair like this. You look sort of Native American, like a Cherokee princess or something.”

I started to laugh, but then I stopped myself. Taylor caught my eye in the mirror and said, “It’s okay to laugh, you know. It’s okay for you to have fun.”

“I know,” I said, but I didn’t.

Before we left I stopped by my mother’s office. She was sitting at her desk with folders and stacks of papers. Susannah had made my mother executor of her will, and there was a lot of paperwork involved with that, I guessed. My mother was on the phone with Susannah’s lawyer a lot, going over things. She wanted it to go perfect, Beck’s last wishes.

Susannah had left both Steven and me some college money. She’d also left me jewelry. A sapphire tennis bracelet I couldn’t picture myself ever wearing. A diamond necklace for my wedding day—she’d written that specifically. Opal earrings and an opal ring. Those were my favorite.

“Mom?”

She looked up at me. “Yes?”

“Have you had dinner?” I knew she hadn’t. She hadn’t left her office since I’d been home.

“I’m not hungry,” she said. “If there isn’t any food in the fridge, you can call for a pizza if you want.”

“I can fix you a sandwich,” I offered. I’d gone to the store earlier that week. Steven and I had been taking turns. I doubted she even knew it was Fourth of July weekend.

“No, that’s all right. I’ll come down and fix myself something later.”

“Okay.” I hesitated. “Taylor and I are going to a party. I won’t be home too late.”

Part of me hoped she’d tell me to stay home. Part of me wanted to offer to stay and keep her company, to see if she maybe wanted to see what was on Turner Classic Movies, pop some popcorn.

She’d already gone back to her paperwork. She was chewing on her ballpoint pen. “Sounds good,” she said. “Be careful.”

I closed the door behind me.

Taylor was waiting for me in the kitchen, texting on her phone. “Let’s hurry up and go already.”

“Hold on, I just have to do one last thing.” I went over to the fridge and pulled out stuff for a turkey sandwich. Mustard, cheese, white bread.

“Belly, there’s gonna be food at the party. Don’t eat that now.”

“It’s for my mom,” I said.

I made the sandwich, put it on a plate, covered it with plastic wrap, and left it on the counter where she’d see it.

Justin’s party was everything Taylor said it would be. Half our class was there, and Justin’s parents were nowhere in sight. Tiki lamps lined the yard, and his speakers were practically vibrating, the music was so loud. Girls were dancing already.

There was a big keg and a big red cooler. Justin was manning the grill, flipping steaks and bratwurst. He had a Kiss the Chef apron on.

“As if anybody would make out with him.” Taylor sniffed. Taylor had made a play for Justin at the beginning of the year, before she’d settled on her boyfriend, Davis. She and Justin had gone out a few times before he’d blown her off for a senior.

I’d forgotten to put on bug spray, and the mosquitoes were eating me for dinner. I kept bending down to scratch my legs, and I was glad to do it. Glad to have something to do. I was afraid of accidentally making eye contact with Cory. He was hanging out by the pool.

People were drinking beer out of red plastic cups. Taylor got us both wine coolers. Mine was Fuzzy Navel. It was syrupy and it tasted like chemicals. I took two sips before I threw it away.

Then Taylor spotted Davis over by the beer pong table

and she put her finger to her lips and grabbed my hand. We walked up behind him and Taylor slipped her arms around his back. “Gotcha!” she said.

He turned around and they kissed like they hadn’t just seen each other a few hours ago. I stood there for a minute, awkwardly holding on to my purse, looking everywhere but at them. His name was actually Ben Davis, but everyone called him Davis. Davis was really cute; he had dimples and green eyes like sea glass. And he was short, which at first Taylor said was a dealbreaker but now claimed not to mind so much. I hated riding to school with them because they held hands the entire time while I sat in the back like the kid. They broke up at least once a month, and they’d only been dating since April. During one breakup, he’d called her, crying, trying to get back together, and Taylor had put him on speaker. I’d felt guilty for listening but at the same time envious and sort of awestruck that he cared that much, enough to cry.

“Pete’s gonna go take a piss,” Davis said, hooking his arm around Taylor’s waist. “Will you stay and be my partner until he comes back?”

She looked over at me and shook her head. She stepped out of his grasp. “I can’t leave Belly.”

I shot her a look. “Taylor, you don’t need to babysit me. You should play.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure.”