

Lost Stars

or what Lou Reed
taught me about love



Lost Stars

or what Lou Reed
taught me about love

Lisa Selin Davis

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.hotkeybooks.com

Copyright © Lisa Selin Davis, 2016

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted
in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

‘I’ll Be Your Mirror’ Words and Music by Lou Reed © 1998,
Reproduced by permission of Oakfield Avenue Music Ltd/
EMI Music Publishing Ltd, London W1F 9LD

The right of Lisa Selin Davis to be identified as Author of this work
has been asserted by them in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the
products of the author’s imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781471406195
also available as an ebook

1

This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre Ltd,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk


To Amy, Julie, Katie, Kristin and Rachel
My protective shield






Prologue


That night, I walked up the wobbly footbridge-in-progress, rolling my bike next to me until I stood in front of the abandoned observatory, rain leaking from the yellow rain slicker into my slightly-too-small hiking boots. What a shame that this was my night to be solo beneath the stars: I could barely see them.



The observatory door was locked, but years ago Ginny had shown me how to prop open the window, stained glass framed with rotting wood. I squeezed inside, scraping my leg on the stone walls as I scaled them. My backpack landed with a thud on the hard stone floor.

It was ghost-like, damp and echoey, its round shape, its dark stones looming over the flat green fields of the park. Two benches stood against the walls, each clad in dark red velvet, worn now and threadbare in spots, but good enough for a bed. I took off the wet boots, rolled the rain slicker into a makeshift pillow, and lay down. I was so weirdly calm. Not scared to be alone in the park at night. Not scared to be homeless-ish. Not scared to be in the very spot where, two years earlier, I had had my last glimpse of Ginny.







I looked up to the domed skylight, remembering the night it had opened when I was eight, Orion's belt gleaming and all that hope blinking in the stars. I wanted to go home, but I knew I couldn't. I couldn't face all those things that had swallowed my hope.

I took out my notebook and traced my calculations, the careful pencil drawings, with my finger. That was one relief: it wouldn't be tonight. I wouldn't miss the comet, not yet. Maybe tomorrow, the beginning of the end of the summer, the beginning of the end, would be the night it arrived. Maybe, like the Paiute Indians used to think, the comet signified the collapse of this world and the start of the next.

No, I wasn't scared to be there. But once the tears came, there was no stopping them.



Chapter 1

'That's the last time,' my father yelled, pounding the arm of his flowered dusty rose armchair. 'I mean it – I'm not gonna take this crap anymore. This is no way to start the summer.'

'What are you gonna do about it?' I yelled back, stomping up the stairs and slamming my door. The room buzzed with the electricity of our screams, and my hands shook as I placed the record on the turntable: the Replacements singing 'Unsatisfied.' I let the sweet, sad sound of the guitar calm me down. The joint helped, too.

'Carrie, put that out.' His voice rode the line between pleading and pissed. 'I can smell it from down here.'

I flung open the door. 'I stole it from *you*,' I yelled down the stairs. 'You're such a hypocrite.'

'Caraway —'

'Don't call me that! It's Carrie!' I knew I was screaming so loud that the neighbors in the giant house next door could probably hear me, but that only made me scream louder, so loud my voice began to crack. 'Why did you guys have to name me after a loaf of rye bread?' I stomped down the stairs and threw one of my jelly shoes at him, and he ducked. Then he

stopped. He just stood there, stunned and irate, his whole face descended into blankness, as if he had sudden onset Alzheimer's and didn't know anymore who he was or who I was or how we had gotten there. Which was probably the case.

I was still heaving with all that anger, breathing hard. It welled up in me sometimes, a fiery asteroid of it. It just took over in my bones. But when he froze, I did too. We stared at each other for a minute and then it was as if he crumbled, his whole six-foot frame collapsing onto that armchair, the one that had become his makeshift home since our family fell apart. I could hardly hear him, he was whispering so low. So I had to step closer. And then closer.

'We didn't name you after rye bread,' he was saying. 'It's a spice.'

He looked up at me, and I thought for a second he was going to reach up and hug me, and a terrible pool of feeling, not one particular feeling but just a messy stew of everything, started flooding me, and I felt like I had to throw something or break something or cut something or smoke something, and I let out an enormous grunt, like a white dwarf star, collapsed and out of gas.

He put his head into his hands and started whispering again. He was saying, 'I just don't know what to do with you. I don't know how to help you. It's getting worse, and I don't know what to do.'

What he did was ground me. I had arrived home reeking of cigarettes and pot, nearly falling into the house at six p.m. when I was supposed to be at work ringing up fingerless gloves and

neon half shirts at Dot's Duds. I'd never shown up, and most likely Dot had called him. Most likely I'd been fired. Again. This was, as he'd said, no way to start the summer.

So he laid down the law: no going out with friends. No walking downtown to buy records. No going to Soo's, where I was supposed to be by nine o'clock. Worst of all: no going up to the roof to monitor the progress of the Vira comet, otherwise known as 11P/Alexandrov, which any day now would blast through the sky, this ball of ice and dust that grew a tail of gas when it neared the sun, as it would this summer for the first time since 1890. It only came around every ninety-seven years.

I was eleven when my parents first took me and my sisters up to the observatory to see Mars at opposition – when the planet is closest to Earth and all lit up by the sun, a beautiful, almost orchestral eruption of light. Even then, before the accident, something about the laws of the universe made so much more sense to me than shop class and school dances and the elusive species known as boys. The story of how Earth hangs there in the sky, tied to the sun but always turning away, day after day, as if trying to escape: that was a story I understood. Unlike my family, which even then seemed to have some green patina of dysfunction – translucent, but always there – that pure, rule-bound vision I saw through my telescope made all the sense in the world.

The telescope, unfortunately, had disappeared about three months ago, just before my mom took off and things went from worse to worst. Punishment for another one of the terrible things I'd done, I assumed, but I still had the roof. Until now.

‘You have to at least let me up there,’ I begged my father. ‘It’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Maybe twice if I live to be a hundred and thirteen. Or three times if I hit two ten.’

I thought I saw a smile creeping to the corners of his lips – the roof had been our spot, once upon a time, the telescope our shared obsession. But he just said, ‘Add it to the list of life’s disappointments.’

I stomped back upstairs and blasted X’s ‘Real Child of Hell,’ collapsing on my bed, pulling the star sheets that my mom had bought me years ago up over my head. My mom wouldn’t have punished me. My mom would have defended me, saying, *Paul, sweetie, lay off – she’s just a teenager. Let’s let her be. Let’s choose to trust her.* But maybe she’d learned not to say that kind of thing anymore.

Since there was no talking on the phone, I couldn’t even tell Soo of this next level of injustice (she was the only one to whom I revealed my secret nerd-dom) or that I couldn’t show up at her house that night. Impossible to sneak it, either, because we were a one-phone household, just our touchtone mounted to the wall in the kitchen, the beige plastic smudged from how often Rosie and I talked on it, and fought over it. My dad had had to replace it twice in the last year, after I ripped it from the wall in one of what he called my ‘fits.’

Now Rosie was standing outside my locked door, yelling, ‘Turn it down, please – I’m trying to study!’ Rosie was the only person I knew who went to summer school voluntarily.

‘You should stop studying and have some fun,’ I called, kind of meaning it. Every once in a while I liked Rosie. Now was not one of those times. ‘School’s out, for crying out loud.’

‘You should stop having so much fun and start studying,’ she yelled back.

I put the Pixies EP on the turntable and used all of my concentration to place the needle on the record and pretend I couldn’t hear her through the door.

‘I wish you would just leave, Carrie!’ Her footsteps disappeared down the hallway.

Why hadn’t I thought of that?

‘Great idea!’ I called out. If my father caught me, I’d just tell him Rosie had told me to go. At some point in our family history, Rosie would have to do *something* wrong. My sneaking suspicion was that Rosie was normal because they had given her a normal name. It was still a spice – Rosemary – but it passed as regular. Ginny, too. Most people hadn’t known that her real name was Ginger until they saw it on her gravestone, and even then, it wasn’t that strange. But call your kid Caraway and bad shit is bound to happen.

My window screen clicked as I slid it open and did a perfunctory check for parental patrol. My father wasn’t outside, and there was just enough cover from the pine trees next door to form a kind of protective canopy.

We lived on a narrow street of humble, and sometimes crumbling, little Victorian houses that hid behind a wide boulevard called Grand Street. Our town had once been a resort for fancy New Yorkers, but now it was mostly run-down except for the pockets of wealth, one of which happened to be right next to us. Grand was full of mansions, thus constantly reminding us of our station in life back here. Our little house – four tiny bedrooms, low ceilings, asbestos siding – was in the

shadow of Mrs. Richmond's place, a big white house with huge columns, separated from us by a high picket fence. I almost never saw Mrs. Richmond herself – she reportedly had a multitude of houses – but that was a good thing; it meant she never caught me when I snuck out.

I slithered out the window and onto the roof of the porch, then scaled down the porch column and onto the bricked-over dirt we called a yard. Pretty amazing for someone whose only exercise was adjusting telescope lenses (before they were taken away) and playing guitar.

In the clear, I took out my Camel Lights and puffed all the way to Soo's. It was June and the perfect temperature, that velvety kind of early evening air, that fading golden light. It all made a weird hard ball in the center of my chest and I wished I had my guitar. Or another joint. Or that it was already late at night and I was heading to a bus stop somewhere on the outskirts of town with my guitar slung over my shoulder and it would turn out that my life was actually a movie, some small town *Breakfast Club* kind of deal where there were happy endings all around. And boyfriends. My kingdom – or really, my crappy house – for a boyfriend.

When I got to Soo's, the partying was in full swing. Soo's dad owned a bar downtown – a skeezy but apparently very lucrative biker bar in which we were never allowed to set foot – and was never home at night. Her mom, well, she was usually too intoxicated herself to even come down to the basement to check on us. 'One of the world's few female Korean-American drunks,' Soo often noted.

Soo had a finished basement that she'd done up all 1970s: fake wood paneling, red pleather couch, a killer sound system, a mirror ball – the kind of stuff rich kids had, but which I, through the miracle of their generosity and our family tragedy, had access to. It was like having our own discotheque, even though nobody liked disco anymore. Or, well, almost nobody. Secretly I still loved 'I Will Survive,' my favorite song when I was six.

The boys were all there, including Tommy Patarami and Tiger Alvarez and Justin Banks, and they'd set up a couple of amps and mikes and a drum kit in the back of the room. The guys were standing in front of Soo's dad's enormous wall of records, picking out what to play. 'The Ghost in You' by the Psychedelic Furs was on. I did my goofy dance, sort of the-twist-meets-mosh – I was not that into the Psychedelic Furs – and Tommy yelled, 'What's up, Rye Bread?' and I laughed, even though I hated when he called me that. 'Not much, Pastrami,' I said, and someone else said, 'She got you, Patarami.' There was nothing better than making people laugh. Well, almost nothing better. I was pretty sure a couple of things were better.

'Carrie!' Soo and Greta left the scrum of half-intoxicated boys to greet me, handing me a beer and huddling around me like the world's prettiest football players. I could smell the sticky sweet scent of Soo's mousse, and I was semi-suffocating inside their group hug and pushing them away, but only lightly. Some part of me just wanted to stay in there forever. 'Our little Carrie is here!'

'Yay,' I said, my normal deadpan. 'Let the rejoicing begin.'

I was sixteen, going into eleventh grade, and they had all just graduated, as Ginny would have, too. These used to be her friends, and then, in her absence, they were mine; I had been subsumed by her world. The only thing I missed about my old life was astronomy club. At this point, I no longer had any extracurricular activities other than songwriting and amateur drug taking. And who would do that with me when they were gone at the end of summer, off to their new lives at college? It would be like losing my sister all over again.

'They're not going to play, are they?' I asked Soo, nodding at Justin, who was standing in front of his Flying V guitar, as we sank into the red pleather couch. I'd always thought that was a dumb-looking guitar. 'They suck, you know. And they have the worst band name in history.'

'Piece of Toast isn't that bad.'

'It's always a bad idea to name your band while tripping,' I said.

'Well, they might play,' Soo said. 'Depends on if my mom passes out or not. She's been complaining about the noise. Apparently alcohol does not dull your hearing.'

The boys didn't bother coming over. Tommy buried his face in a pile of records. I hadn't seen him since he'd shoved his fingers up me in an attempt at something vaguely sexual, which had happened on the football field when we got wasted the weekend before. It seemed he had decided to pretty much ignore me, which was fine, so I traced the rim of my beer can with my fingertip and tried to look bored so I wouldn't look unmoored, as if I were in danger of drifting off the couch and out of orbit, holding on to the upholstery buttons for dear life.

It wasn't like I liked Tommy anyway. We were just the only two perpetually single people in the group.

Soo tossed her hair back, her perfect pearl earrings sparkling. 'So what's with the fashionable lateness?' She took an expert sip of her beer. Mine was sweating on the table.

'I was waiting outside for the butler to present me,' I said. 'Wait – this isn't my coming-out party? The debutante's ball? Huh.'

Occasionally Soo was immune to my humor. 'I wasn't even sure if you were going to show.' She wasn't looking at me, a sign that she was hurt that I was so late, that I hadn't even called.

'I wasn't allowed to leave my room!' I said, and I was already so raw and tired that the flood started coming, my hands in parted prayer position, reaching into the air. Heading toward a fit. 'Not all of us have parents who don't have any rules!'

'Okay, Car – it's okay.' She grabbed my hands from the air and brought them back down, spreading my fingers out on the sticky fabric. She always knew how to calm the wave. 'What happened?'

I pressed my hands against the pleather until my heartbeat slowed. I gulped my beer. 'Eh, just the usual.' The beer was warm, but I drank it anyway because Greta and Soo and the rest of them were drinking it, and they were my real family, the collective Daddy Warbucks to my orphan Annie.

'You know, a little parental freak-out and some Spider-Man-style escape.'

I wanted to tell Soo about the fight with my dad, but sometimes it seemed like the past couple of years weren't real. That wasn't me screaming and throwing things. That wasn't me in the middle of the sidewalk, face-down, kicking my legs,

being dragged off in the ambulance. That was someone who lived inside me. My devilish alter ego. Mr. Hyde. It wasn't me. So I just told her, 'I used my Spidey sense.'

'You're such a dork,' she said, and she was smiling, but I wasn't sure she said it to be funny, because when they had rescued me from the funeral and what would have been a lifetime of depressing days after it, my dorkdom – though softened by my guitar playing and encyclopedic memorization of Public Enemy lyrics – was still firmly intact.

The truth was, I had never been cool, but Ginny had been the quintessential popular girl. Not the cheerleader kind. The beautiful-girl-with-the-short-dyed-black-hair-and-bright-green-eyes-and-cat's-eye-glasses kind, the introduce-your-kid-sister-to-Elvis-Costello-and-Velvet-Underground kind, the skip-school-but-still-get-good-grades kind, the run-with-the-fast-crowd kind. I had been scrambling to keep up with her even before she was gone.

'I'm just glad you're here.' Soo lifted up her beer. Oh. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I had kept up. 'Cheers.'

Before I had even clinked her can, Justin sidled up to us. The perfect eighteen-year-old human being, Justin was a jock and an art room druggie all at once, Johnny Depp-meets-Scott Baio looks with shaggy, chestnut-colored hair and green eyes. He crouched down next to Soo and picked up her hand and stroked it. I pretended to vomit. Justin got that look, like he didn't know if he should laugh.

'Oh, no – don't take it personally. I've just had too much to drink.' I raised my nearly full first beer. He still didn't laugh. 'I'm just messing with you,' I said, and lightly punched his arm.

‘Ow,’ he said. At least I’d thought it was lightly. ‘I’m getting another beer.’

Soo went with him, and Greta sat with me. In her fuchsia Cyndi Lauper dress, strapless with a fluffy crepe skirt on the bottom, her Converse high-tops and her long, feathered, perfectly curly strawberry blond hair – achieved naturally, no perm necessary – she looked like a movie star: Kim Basinger, but somehow even prettier. Greta. She was good at tennis and still a hippie chick and a cheerleader anyway. She was so good at holding her liquor. So statuesque. How could one person be so many good things? No wonder she always had a boyfriend. Everything about her was pretty. I was wearing one of my mom’s old T-shirts with the sleeves cut off and the bottom sliced into fringes, and cutoff Lee jeans.

‘Drink up, kid,’ she told me with that perfect smile. I’d do anything she said. So I drank, even though I much preferred my mom’s iced tea, the kind she made from the mint she grew every summer in pots on our porch. Beer no longer tasted like toe fungus (or what I thought toe fungus would taste like), but I would never actually like it. ‘So what’s up?’

‘Let’s see,’ I said. ‘I’m currently locked in my room, as you can see.’

‘Ah, the father,’ she said.

‘Yeah, it sucks when they pretend that they actually care about you so they can ground you.’

‘That’s what they say. Luckily my dad doesn’t even pretend.’

‘God, you *are* lucky,’ I said, smiling at her joke. I wondered if she knew how lucky she was. I’d never met her dad, but I

figured he must be wealthy and handsome and worldly and kind if he'd sired her.

Justin and Soo stood in the corner now, holding hands, cocooned in a private world. 'Mmm, young love,' Greta said, as if they were so naïve, as if she knew something they didn't. What did she know?

Greta had not gone a day without a boyfriend since she was twelve – break up one day, find a new one the next. But Soo hadn't dated much. She'd been more like me: on the sidelines, occasionally pulled into the action but never claimed. And now she was In Love.

What did she know? What did they all know?

In the evening after Ginny's funeral, Greta had retrieved me from the reception and taken me with her and Soo and their friends, driving in some older boy's car with the windows rolled down and the soft spring air on my face, stunned and numb and comfortable in the womblike enclosure of Ginny's friends, with Janis Joplin's 'Bye, Bye Baby' blaring through the speaker.

I'd never heard Janis Joplin before. Her voice was sort of like sandpaper and sort of like an organ played by the goddess Athena.

Ginny's friends smoked and drank – things I had not done until that night – and we ended up at a roller-skating rink called Diamonds, because roller skating had been Ginny's favorite activity, and there was lots of toasting her, drinking from Ginny's own flask – how did they get that? – the flask I was sure my parents never knew she had. The first time I drank that cheap

bourbon, I felt my gray matter turning black, felt the stars dim, a feeling I both craved and hated.

And then, suddenly, all fogged in my brain, I was laced up and floating in circles around the place with Greta and her then (and now again) boyfriend, Tiger. I was wearing something I'd taken from Ginny's closet, before my mother cleaned out her room: a pink and gray striped shirt with thin bands of silver between the stripes. Disco-ish, but I hadn't yet learned that we'd declared war on disco.

Greta had gone off to the parking lot with Justin and Tommy to drink some bourbon from the flask, and Tiger and I were still roller skating around the rink by ourselves, and then I felt his hand grab mine, his fingers curl around mine, a feeling it seemed I had waited my whole life to feel. We rolled and glided together across that shiny floor, strobe lights blinking, 'Eye of the Tiger' blaring through the speakers, which somehow made it feel like fate, even though that was one of the least romantic songs ever. Dark circles of sweat stained the armpits of my shirt, so I tried to keep my arms plastered to my sides, but that was hard to do and hold Tiger's hand at the same time, and then my palm was so sweaty that my hand slipped out of his and he drifted away and I didn't know how to get him back.

Later, in the bathroom, when I showed Greta the sweat stains, she said, 'Don't worry, honey,' and took off her white button-down shirt and helped me into it, and then she said, 'Hold on a sec,' and took out her Love's Baby Soft and sprayed it on my neck and then put some strawberry-scented gloss on my lips, which I immediately got on my front teeth because I had never worn my retainer and my overbite had come

right back after my parents spent all that money on braces, as they had reminded me constantly before something far worse happened. 'There,' she said. And she left the bathroom, looking oh-so-chic in her thin white tank top.

I stood there and looked at myself in the mirror for a few minutes, trying to like what I saw. But it just looked like me with a little lip gloss and Greta's shirt. I wasn't particularly fond of my teeth, the way one of them jutted out, or my hands with their stubby fingers. My head was too small and my brown eyes were too close together and my brown hair was frizzy instead of perfectly curly like Greta's and the space between my nose and my upper lip was too big and I was so, so, so, so, so short and everything about me was off. Worst of all, I was alive.

As I came out, there was Tiger, and he pressed me up against those icy concrete walls and kissed me and it was wrong and bad and it was amazing and I didn't understand. Why had he turned his attention toward me? Did he feel sorry for me because my sister had died? Did Greta know? Tiger was so cute: half Puerto Rican, half Irish, dark skin, dark eyes, a gold chain around his neck, a football jersey, totally out of my league. Or maybe totally out of my league until Ginny had let me step into hers. Ginny, with that little space between her two front teeth, always visible because of her huge smile, and that too-loud laugh, and her perpetually perfect wave of blue eye shadow and her fingerless lace Madonna gloves – she had walked off, or driven off, leaving a path for me. Was I supposed to be happy about the life she'd left me in her wake?

And then the kiss stopped and Tiger walked back out to the rink. And the evening ended. And we all piled in the back of

the car, me and Greta and Tiger, and the two of them made out, but he reached back and held my hand for a minute, gave it a squeeze. A consolation prize. Greta got love and sex. I got a hand squeeze. Ginny would never have anything again.

When I got out of the car, Greta handed me the flask.

Now I picked out records to play: Sam Cooke, Hüsker Dü, R.E.M., the Ramones, and, what the heck, Nina Simone's cover of the Bee Gees. She sang about how no one could know what it was like, to love someone the way she does. That feeling of one tune connecting to the other, making a story out of a series of songs, of being hit right in the chest when the music gets it right – it was the best. 'Good mix,' Tommy said, nodding his head, hand stroking his stubbly chin like he was appreciating Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (as if Tommy would know what that was). Apparently Tommy was talking to me again. 'Except that Hüsker Dü shit is totally screwed up.' The song was 'Don't Want to Know If You Are Lonely.'

'I'm known all over town for my screwed-up-ness,' I said. Which, sadly, was true. I could feel Tommy looking at me, now that he was drunk and swaying. 'And, Tommy, Hüsker Dü is rad.'

We all drank and drank and drank and then we smoked and smoked and smoked. For a long time, I put my head on the back of the couch and looked at the drop ceiling, all those little pockmarks like some kind of constellation that I couldn't quite figure out, a map I couldn't read. Every time I looked down from the ceiling, people were making out – Soo and Justin, Tiger and Greta. Tommy studied the record covers

in faux oblivion. Tommy. So not my type. Short hair, thick wrestler's body, not so smart, too into Rush. I liked them tall and skinny and long-haired and into Big Star. At least in theory I did.

Somebody passed me a joint, and I took a long hit and laid my head back again and listened to the song that was playing now, the Velvet Underground with Nico's smoky voice singing 'I'll Be Your Mirror': *Reflect what you are, in case you don't know*. The song ripped open a hole in my chest, and for a minute it was hard to breathe.

When I looked up, my vision blurring, Justin had his hand on Soo's face like they did it in old movies and they both had their eyes open and they kept stopping to look at each other and squeeze hands.

'Get a room, why don't you?' I called, my words all slurry and echoing in my own ears. Soo looked over at me, her eyes fierce. And then she left. She just left me there. Bye-bye baby to me. She probably went upstairs to her bedroom, and I knew what she was doing there, something I'd never done even though I'd thought about it once last year when that nineteen-year-old boy Anton Oboieski was on top of me and I knew everyone else was doing the same thing in the rooms all around me but then he opened his eyes for a second and narrowed them at me, as if realizing only then that I wasn't Ginny. When he closed his eyes again, I pressed against his chest and said, very softly, 'Sorry,' and grabbed my plaid shirt and leggings and crept out of the room, waiting with a warm, undrunk beer until the rest of them were finished. Since then, I'd let those boys do so many things to me but that one

thing – I was just saving that one thing. I was holding on to it in the hope that someday I'd want somebody and he'd want me, too. The same amount.

Now Tommy grabbed me and shoved his hand down my shirt, and I was enveloped by the whole thing, the music and the drugs and the meaningless touches. I just left my body and let it happen, let him grope and paw and lick and kiss. I let myself get erased.

It was almost five in the morning by the time I got home. Justin had come back to retrieve me, driving Soo's Le Car, and now the two of them were dropping me off as I groaned, prostrate on the back seat.

I forced myself to sit up when we got to my block. 'I gotta walk from here,' I said, even though I had vertigo. I pushed the door open and hung my head between my knees.

'You drink too much,' Justin said. I waited for Soo to object but she didn't. I liked the protective shield my friends provided more than I liked alcohol, but Justin didn't know that. And besides, it was they who had introduced me to all the illegal substances I now regularly consumed. Everything was their idea.

'Yeah, I do everything too much,' I said. 'This has been pointed out to me before.' The therapist had said to me, *I believe you have some kind of impulse disorder and essentially feel all of your emotions too strongly to regulate them.*

To which I had replied, *Have you ever heard of the term fuck off?*

I scooted out of the car and hobbled down the street, past Mrs. Moran's and the Chins' and Missy Tester's house. One

pin-point of light shot across the sky, the beginning of the meteor showers, the preview to Vira, and then it was really quiet in that perfect small-town way, crickets and rustling leaves, and I so did not want to be alone.

I crept up alongside the fence that separated our yard from the big house's grounds, toward the back door of our house. Amid the low sound of the crickets and the occasional thrum of a car driving down Grand Street, I heard something. Someone was playing guitar, somewhere over by Mrs. Richmond's. I recognized it – the lick from the Jam's 'English Rose.' Whoever it was played all those notes almost perfectly but really quietly, so you wouldn't hear it unless you came right up close. Which I did. I walked up to the fence and stood on a metal pail to get a look, because I wasn't sure if I was making it up or not, what with my head throbbing in that terrible coming-down-from-being-wasted way, and my stomach reeling from all that watery beer.

On the front step of the big house sat a boy – or, not a boy, but maybe a college kid – with a beat-up Guild on his lap, picking out the notes and occasionally stopping to look up at the cornflower blue early dawn sky. He was tall and thin and had long hair, and he had on a worn blue-and-yellow-striped rugby shirt and ripped jean shorts and combat boots with the laces undone, and he was beautiful. He was just beautiful. Then I somehow kicked the pail out from under me and it clanged and the boy looked up and I swore he saw me as the light went on in my father's bedroom. I scampered inside and forgot to shut the screen door slowly and it slammed. The whole house shuddered.

I slinked up to my room. My father was standing outside my door, arms crossed, hair all spiky and bags under his eyes from interrupted sleep.


Rosie called, 'You woke me up, you jerk,' from inside her room. Rosie could fall asleep almost anywhere instantly, and slept hard, so this was a rare and unwelcome event. She opened the door and threw her hands in the air. 'Get yourself some help.' Then she went back into her room and collapsed on her bed.

My father didn't say anything. He just watched as I went into my room and shut the door.

I took out my *Saturday Night Fever* record, wiped it clean with the red velvety lint brush that seemed like the most luxurious thing in my life sometimes, and I placed the stylus oh so gently on the record and plugged in my headphones, so big and fluffy, giant leather clouds over my ears. I put the needle on track five, 'If I Can't Have You.' I lay down on my Snoopy-in-space pillow and cried along with the beat, just cried and cried until I fell asleep.

Somehow I slept the entire day, squirming to life in my bed at four p.m. I woke up with my head throbbing, the sun bright in my window and making me squint. I breathed in and felt that tentacle-ish pain in my chest – I almost liked that sensation, the ache of having smoked far too many cigarettes the night before. It was a kind of trophy.

Outside my room, my father waited. Had he been there all night? All morning? All day? But no. He'd clearly been out somewhere, for he stood there very calmly, holding a



sea-foam-green hardhat and a brochure. I could make out the pictures: young people smiling happily in those same hardhats amid a backdrop of tall pines.

‘What in god’s name is that?’ I asked, rubbing my knotted, bed-headed hair and fake-yawning.

He handed it over to me, placed the hard plastic right in my hands and pressed them against it.

He said, ‘I figured out what to do with you.’

Chapter 2

It started in that strange, atmosphereless time two years ago, right after Ginny died, when my father took me on what he'd termed a 'special time trip.' We traveled by train up to his friend Pablo's country house in Vermont, hours of staring out the window as the trees grew thicker and the sky clearer and I thought about when we'd scattered my sister's ashes by the observatory. I kept seeing that moment over and over again: my sister as dust, gone back to nature. Occasionally on that train ride, my father would squeeze my shoulder with one hand and I'd feel my whole body soften. We barely said a word the whole time.

His friend was a nice shaggy hippie fella – a professor of biology at the local college in our town, who studied trees and did his research up there in that dense forest. I occupied myself by sitting in front of the fire in Pablo's living room and leafing through his *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Outer Space*. I got fixated on the idea of absolute zero, the lowest possible temperature: -459.67 degrees. Why, I wondered, wasn't there an infinitely low temperature? It made me feel better, as astronomy always did: there were constants in the universe, if you knew how to look for them.



Pablo took us into the dense forest and hand-drilled into a sapling and pulled out a straw-shaped cross-section of it to show us all the rings; each ring counted for a year of the tree's life. 'It's just a little bit older than your sister was,' he said. I think he meant to make me feel better, but nausea rose inside me at his words.

Before Ginny died, that was how it felt when I got upset: like I was about to throw up. Ginny used to be the one to talk me down, to stand at the door of my room and say, softly, 'Caraway, take a deep breath, come here, hold my hand,' then lead me into her room and put a record on – the Beatles, usually, because they were the ones we listened to the most as kids – and sit with me until the red drained from my face.

It had always been bad, but after Ginny was gone, it turned into something else, something crimson and throbbing and powerful and mean, something I couldn't control. Everything that happened after that trip, the trail of burned bridges, the fights, the tantrums in the middle of the street, my banishment not just from Pablo's house but from every babysitting gig I'd ever had, and the visits to the place my father assured me would be better for me in the end – it was bad. But it wasn't me.

He wouldn't call it boot camp. 'It's a work program,' my father said, as he took me to Kane's, the shoe store downtown, to get the boots I'd need for the job. Clearly this was a directive and I had no choice, but I didn't object because I wanted to be with my friends, and if this was what I had to do, okay, I would do it. Except for one really big problem: the shoes.

‘I have to wear shitkickers?’ I threw my hands up when I saw the ochre-colored leather work boots he’d picked out for me. ‘Dad!’ I knew the intensity of the whine rivaled a Valley Girl, but I wasn’t joking. What could be a stronger boy repellent than a hardhat and shitkickers? The *Flashdance* phase had come and gone; the national obsession with the dancer/welder had faded.

All he said was ‘yes.’ He used to talk to me all the time. Used to take me with him onto the roof and look through the telescope, adjusting the focus until I could see the bright lights of the nebula sparkling in the sky. Used to whistle all the time – an old standard called ‘How High the Moon.’ Even gave me an Ella Fitzgerald record with it on there for my collection once. Before. Now it seemed all the sound had leaked out of him; he was too deflated for words. ‘And you’ll need to wear long-sleeved shirts. There are some of your mother’s old flannel ones in her closet.’

‘Great.’

For the last couple of years, since Ginny died, my dad had been keeping track of everything I did, everywhere I went. Which was nuts because up until then I’d been so careful, so scared of everything. I’d never drunk or done drugs or kissed a boy or gotten detention. I’d had these mini fits, and whenever I had fights with friends, my old friends, I’d fall onto my bed and sob and sob, but it all seemed sort of normal – or at least a second or third cousin of normal. And then all of a sudden, I had my dad’s eyes on me. But not my mom’s eyes, because she’d started to check out pretty soon after that, retreating to her room for increasingly long periods of meditation, followed

by vociferous crying. She stopped enforcing the few rules she'd agreed to: no sleepovers on school nights, all homework done before we could watch MTV, no dessert until we'd eaten all the vegetables on our plates. It was as if she'd decided that nothing she did could protect us, so why try?

But my dad, he tightened the restrictions and the reins. I'd never needed a curfew before, but now he'd glue his eyes to his watch. He'd sniff my breath – I started keeping packs of Dynamints in my coat pocket. He'd beg me to call him if I was at a party, rather than get a ride home from anyone who might have been drinking. And I'd say, 'Dad, Dad – cut it out. I won't get in any car like that, okay?' But I did. Over and over, I did. And he'd ground me more and press harder and tell me not to see Soo or Greta. He'd tell me they were bad influences, that their parents were bad influences. He'd beg me, he'd yell at me, he'd take away my privileges, and finally, as a last resort I guess, my telescope. He'd never told me that he'd done it, but by then he'd pretty much stopped talking to me, anyway. He took it away when my mother left for her mountaintop rehabilitation, where she was going to silently meditate for three weeks, even though that was thirteen weeks and four days ago. Her clothes were still hanging like ghosts in the closet, but at least I could bear to see them, to touch them. Ginny's room, at the back of the house, remained closed.

In the beginning, we'd asked my father every day when Mom was coming home. 'Three weeks,' he'd said. Then, 'Eighteen days.' 'Two weeks.' 'Twelve more days.' 'Another ten days.' 'One week.' 'Three days from now.' 'She was supposed to be back yesterday.' She was supposed to be back a week, two weeks,

three weeks ago. And finally: 'I don't know.' And then we'd stopped asking. She never called, but a couple of times a week letters appeared, with seeds shaking inside them. I put them all right in the trash.

'You've grown,' Mr. Kane said now, smiling at me as if I were a normal kid while he measured my feet. Maybe he was the one person in town who didn't know all the sordid details of my past. I waited for him to say something about the shoes – why would a sixteen-year-old girl want shitkickers? – but he just made small talk with my dad, who became his old chatty self. My father loved strangers. It was much harder for him to talk to people he actually knew.

On Monday morning, my father did me the favor of getting my bike out of the shed and strapping the hardhat to the rear rack himself. 'You can keep the bungee cord,' he said.

'Wow, Christmas.'

He didn't laugh, just patted the bike to send me on my way. Rosie was standing at the screen door, watching the whole thing.

'What are *you* looking at?'

'You,' she said.

I heard it again. The music. From the other side of the fence. One of my favorite Elvis Costello songs, 'Alison', where he sings about how he knows this world is killing her.

I begrudgingly took the bike from my dad. 'You know where it is, right?'

'Yes, Dad, I know where it is. It's in the park. Where I had birthday parties number one through twelve.' Where Ginny's ashes had sifted into the wind.

‘You have to be there in twenty minutes. You should go.’

It was the most normal conversation I’d had with him in weeks, or maybe months. Maybe a year. The first day of junior high, I stood in this same yard with this same bike and had a similar conversation. Except Ginny was alive then and my mother was still around and my father wasn’t so mean and Rosie was a benign blur of a kid instead of the embodiment of perfection to which I would never live up. My mother had taken me to the mall to buy the bike, one of the rare moments of alone time with her – that’s what happens when you’re the middle child. Really, the only thing that remained of that day was my bike, my dear old bike: a twelve-speed Fuji Espre, sparkly gray-blue. Its beauty was marred, I thought, by that hardhat.

‘And I expect you to be home right after.’

‘I know.’

‘If you’re not here by five twenty, you’ll be grounded for the rest of the summer.’

I pushed the bike away from him, toward the street. ‘I know.’

As I hopped on and pedaled away, I could just make out the outline of the long-haired boy, sitting on the steps with his guitar.

And that’s how I came to be pedaling down Avenue of the Pines, the long road lined with white pine trees that formed the entrance to the state park. It always made me feel like I was embarking on an adventure, the narrow road that would open to some magical vista, the arrival in Shangri-La as the vast green fields came into view. But I always had to pass the

spot where the small white cross was still affixed to the tree. Or – maybe it still was. I didn't look.

When I pulled up to the park's offices, set in the wide flat parking lot where my mom had taught me to ride my bike, I stood for a minute by the bike rack, wondering how I could get out of this, first-day-of-school anxiety mixed with a muddy dread. But it was 9:07, and I was already late, and the only way to slink along to safety was to walk in. So I did. I followed the handwritten signs to a fluorescent-lit room with kids seated at too-small elementary-school-style desks.

A tall fellow with thick, sculpted arms and a name tag that read *Lynn* stood in the front of the classroom, smiling beatifically.

'How ya doin', ma'am?' I said to him, fake-tipping my hat, but he failed to appreciate my humor. He must have grown those muscles to make up for the feminine name.

I slid into my seat and surveyed some of my companions, many of them from my grade, kids I hadn't talked to for ages. I barely had classes with any of them, since I was a year ahead in math and English and science – history was my shortcoming – and at lunch and gym and any other intergrade activity, I was with my older friends. How had so many of them become ingrates and inmates and screwups and outcasts like me?

We scrawled our identities on HELLO MY NAME IS . . . name tags, but I vaguely remembered some of them: Kelsey and that scrawny boy named Jimmie and, crap, Tonya Sweeny. Great. I wrote *Caraway* on my name tag just to freak them out, to show that I was different. For once in my life, I was glad that I didn't belong.

Lynn handed out black and white composition books and a golf pencil with the park's logo on them. Also a black fanny pack (blech) and a small hammer, all of it branded by the park.

'Thank you so much for coming,' he said.

'Did we have the option not to?' I asked, looking around, assuming my compatriots in forced labor would commiserate. But nothing. Staring straight ahead, which seemed strange for kids who were purportedly troublemakers. They were a compliant set of miscreants. Lynn didn't smile either; I wondered if my father had called ahead to warn him of my history of misdeeds.

'We're pleased to welcome you to the inaugural Youth Summer Workforce Camp.'

'It's camp?' I said. 'Yay. Color wars!'

Only the skinny boy, Jimmie, laughed and then stifled it when Lynn looked at him. The flatter my jokes fell, the greater the itch to tell them.

'Not that kind of camp,' Lynn said, his voice laced with so much syrupy understanding that I had to fight to keep from rolling my eyes. 'We'll be teaching you some basic construction skills, as well as familiarizing you with the native flora and fauna of the park.' He said this as if he were offering us free rein at Sizzler, or an extra week of school vacation. 'Each week we'll work on conservation and improvement projects. And by the end of the summer, you'll be able to see the fruits of your labor.'

Tonya looked pleased. I wondered what she'd done to land in here.

Lynn told us that he was finishing his masters in psychology and took this job because he loved working with kids and

wanted to share the power of nature and how good it felt to do hard work and how much he loved the low grumble of hunger in his belly after he'd been out in a field, reaping or sowing or building or tearing something down. 'I'm really excited to work together,' he said, his John Lennon glasses reflecting the sun. I stopped listening, instead opening my notebook and doodling – I was very good at drawing flowers, and I could just spy the heads of pink roses unfurling above the windowsill. It reminded me of that song by the Jam. And of that boy. And his guitar.

'Caraway?' Lynn was standing in front of my chair. From the looks of it, he'd been saying my name. 'You with us?'

I slumped in my seat. 'Yeah, I'm with you,' I said. 'Do I have a choice?'

Lynn took it easy on us that first day. Just a hike around the park to show us the massive calcium deposit that had formed around a geyser – a streaky white-and-rust-colored mass that looked like a giant's half-rotten tooth – and the spots along the creek where the sweet orange flowers called jewelweed grew.

'Jewelweed has healing properties,' Lynn said, picking a few buds and passing them around. Each of the kids did their due diligence, studying the delicate orange petals, but I just passed it on to Tonya, who was sweating in her off-brand JCPenney version of an Izod shirt, with a fox instead of an alligator, dark smudges beneath her armpits. I tried my best to smile at her when I saw the way she was pressing her arms down against her sides, trying to hide the watery stains.

The only other person I knew who was obsessed with Mars, Tonya was the one I had taken with me to the NASA exhibit down at the New York State Museum in Albany when we were thirteen, to see the *Fourth Planet from the Sun* exhibit. I had sort of, kind of, wanted to talk to her about it when the Mars Ares rover disappeared into the ether earlier this year, erasing our chances of knowing the planet better.

Now Tonya was closely examining the petals of jewelweed.

‘This is awesome,’ she said. ‘Very interesting that it has this translucent stalk.’ She pressed it between her fingers. ‘There’s gold liquid inside.’

‘That’s the healing salve,’ Lynn said.

She touched one of the seedpods nestled inside the flower, and it popped out. ‘Amazing,’ she said. She looked at me for a minute, the first time we’d made eye contact in weeks or months or years, who knew? She probably assumed I would share her enthusiasm for the biological profile of jewelweed, but I stayed silent.

Lynn had taken us to the path along the creek that ran through the center of the park. Farther up the path, at the crest of the hill, the observatory loomed. Stone steps led up to it, but it had been closed, of course, thanks to the public revelation of the observatory as teenage party spot. Or because of budget cuts, which was what the park gave as the official reason. Between here and there, the walkway was muddy and worn away. It would have been hard to get to even if it were open. Even if I could have handled it.

‘What are we actually doing?’ I asked Lynn, who had crouched beside a rut in the dirt; the other kids circled around him.

‘We’re identifying the optimal spots to build the footbridge,’ he said, as if that should have been obvious to me.

‘Um,’ I said, ‘shouldn’t you leave that footbridge stuff to the professionals? I do not have an impressive history with woodworking projects.’

Lynn stood up and smiled at me so earnestly that it was like bright lights shining in my eyes. ‘Kids, listen up: don’t tell me that you can’t do something. Tell me that you want to learn to do something – that you don’t know yet, but you will. Got it?’

He took his own hammer out of the loop on his pants and held up a shiny nail. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘This is a hammer. This is a nail.’

‘And this is your brain on drugs,’ I said.

‘You may not know how to use them now,’ he continued, ignoring me, ‘but by the end of the summer, we’ll have built a bridge in the park. And’ – he emphasized this last part – ‘with each other.’ I fake-gagged, but I couldn’t get a laugh out of anyone.

By the end of the afternoon, my boots were caked with mud, I had dirt under my fingernails, and I was exhausted. My summer job at Dot’s Duds had mostly involved sitting on a chair, folding accessories (many of which ended up in my pocket), and stepping out to smoke cigarettes that I’d stolen from Dot. But, of course, I had told the therapist about that, too. I was essentially unemployable because of her, even though technically I’m pretty sure her big-mouth-ness was illegal, or at least unethical.

Before we left, Lynn had us sit in a circle beneath the very welcome shade of a beechnut tree and write in our notebooks

about our impressions of the program after day one. I had already lost my golf pencil, so I told Lynn, 'I'm gonna do mine in invisible ink.' But he gave me his own pen, black and green marbled, heavy and cool to the touch.

'This is one of my most prized possessions,' he said. 'Make sure you give it back. A good pen is hard to find.' Around me, my fellow inmates were furiously scribbling. I just wrote, 'I hate this job already,' and closed the notebook tight. I kept his pen.

My father wasn't home when I pulled my bike into our yard. As I went to lean it against the house, I heard the sound again, the music. Somehow I missed the side of the house and the bike came crashing down, right on my foot. I yelled.

'You okay?'

It was the boy. He was tall enough that he could see over the fence, and he was holding his guitar in his left hand. His hair was messy, hanging in front of one eye. He was too cute to look at.

I was somehow hoping that if I didn't move, he wouldn't see me, wouldn't see the hardhat and the work boots caked with mud and the dirt that had wedged beneath my fingernails and my mother's old flannel shirt and my godforsaken canvas painter's pants with my brand-new shiny hammer hanging from a loop.

I just said, 'Ummmm.'

And that was it. Then I turned and ran into the house and stood at the screen door, and I could almost discern his movements behind the fence. He stood there for a minute, then returned to the big house's porch and sat down with his guitar.

He sang a little bit off-key, just the tiniest bit flat, a hint of twang in his voice. I loved twang.

For some reason I was out of breath, as if I had one-time adolescent asthma. There were two things that helped me breathe: pot and singing. So I trudged up to my room, taking my filthy clothes off as I went, and got a joint and changed into a tank top and cutoffs and bare feet, and got my guitar – a beat-up old Gibson with a rich, bell-like sound that my mother had played in a band in college. I opened the window and climbed out onto the roof of the porch with my guitar. I didn't look toward Mrs. Richmond's giant fancy house. But I could hear. He was playing a song by Squeeze: 'Goodbye Girl.'

I went out to my corner of the roof with my guitar. The sun was setting, zodiacal light glinting off the horizon. And very softly, I played along with the simple song: D, then A, then D, then G. Maybe not loud enough for him to hear me. I didn't know.

And then my father was yelling, his voice surely carrying over the fence: 'Caraway, get off the roof! And you left your filthy clothes all over the floor. Come down here this instant and pick them up!' My father yelling, my real name, my filthy clothes. The music stopped. On his side too, the music stopped.