



The Year I Turned Sixteen: Rose, Daisy, Laurel, Lily

By Diane Schwemm

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Diane Schwemm is the author of *The Year I Turned Sixteen*, as well as the Silver Beach series.

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One

SOMETIMES I WISH I didn't live in a small town.

Hawk Harbor is the kind of place where everybody knows everybody else. There's one grocery store and one gas station and one bank. We have to share a high school with a bunch of other towns. We don't even have our own exit off the Maine Turnpike.

And needless to say, the nightlife is rather limited.

Now and then I find myself wondering what it would be like to live someplace crowded and exciting. Those are the days I can't wait to graduate and move to New York or L.A.

Then there are days like today, May 21, my sixteenth birthday, when I can't imagine living anywhere else. This afternoon on my way in from school I stopped on the porch of my family's Victorian house. Standing on tiptoe, I could see a distant sliver of the Atlantic, past the pines and the rocky shore. The water was speckled with sailboats and fishing trawlers that reminded me of my dad's old boat, the *Pelican*.

Summer is just around the corner, and that means pretty soon I'll be heading off to be a counselor at Wildwood, a camp in Vermont. I can't wait. I want to be a singer, and Wildwood is a performance camp—I won a scholarship there a few years ago, and I've been going every summer. There aren't many opportunities to get musical training in rural Maine, so Wildwood was a total stroke of luck. Plus it's my only opportunity all year to get a taste of independence.

Inside the house I could tell right away that my mother, Maggie Walker, had been chopping and roasting and sifting and baking all afternoon. She's an awesome cook and always goes all out for special occasions, but this morning I'd told her it was fine if we skipped the festivities. After all, no one's been in the mood for a party for three months. Why would anything be different today? But she just hugged me and said, "My oldest girl is turning sixteen. That only happens once in a lifetime."

Seeing the tears in her blue eyes, I felt I couldn't argue with that.

I dumped my backpack on the living room couch and followed my nose to the kitchen. "Happy birthday, Rose," my thirteen-year-old sister, Daisy, called out from the dining room.

"Happy birthday!" echoed ten-year-old Laurel and eight-year-old Lily.

"Hi, everybody," I responded. "Smells great, Mom!" I walked into the dining room and watched Daisy set the table with the good china, carefully placing every napkin and utensil just so. Her long blond ponytail was pulled through the back of her Boston Red Sox cap, which I suspect she sleeps in. (I know for a fact that

until she was eleven she slept with her autographed Nomar Garciaparra baseball mitt under her pillow.) I couldn't help noticing that in spite of her usual uniform of gym shorts and T-shirt, she's starting to get really pretty. Of course, she'd probably punch me if I said so. When the guys on her baseball team started telling her that last year, she switched to all-girls' softball.

I opened my mouth to tell Daisy how nice the table looked but was interrupted. "It's my turn to lick the beaters," Lily whined from the kitchen.

"Uh-oh," I said, and Daisy rolled her eyes in a here-we-go-again look.

We both peeked through the doorway into the kitchen, anticipating a good show. Sure enough, Mom had just made the chocolate frosting for my birthday cake and Laurel had, naturally, seized the beaters. She's going through a growth spurt or something and consumes about half her weight in food a day. She's currently about a foot taller than Lily. So there was Laurel, holding one beater high above Lily's head and licking the other while Lily danced up and down, fuming.

I couldn't help laughing. Lily likes to dress up, and the costume du jour consisted of the calico skirt I had worn in our high school production of *Oklahoma!* last year, a hot pink tube top that wasn't staying up very well, and clip-on pearl earrings. For some reason her blond pigtails were sticking straight out from the sides of her head. Laurel was a sight, too: cutoff jeans, scraped knees, and a grass-stained shirt. "Personally, I wouldn't want to eat anything she just touched, but that's me," I said to Daisy under my breath.

Laurel turned bright red. She doesn't like to fight, but she has a real stubborn streak—especially when she knows she's right. "It's not your turn," she informed Lily. "You got the beaters when Mom made carrot cake for the church potluck two weeks ago."

"No, I didn't!" screeched Lily—who does like to fight—as she stamped her small feet.

"Time-out," called Daisy. "Hand one over, Laurel."

"Why should I?" asked Laurel. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law, and Lily doesn't have the right to—ow!"

Laurel's speech was interrupted by the kick in the shin Lily gave her. With a yelp Laurel dropped both beaters on the kitchen floor and started hopping around in pain.

"Okay, that's enough," Mom declared, scooping up the beaters and dumping them into the soapy water in the sink. "If you can't agree, then nobody gets any beaters. Now, take it outside, you two. And don't come back in until you've made up."

Lily and Laurel disappeared, but I could still hear them bickering as I headed upstairs to my room. Oh, well, what can you do? *Sisters.*

Since I was going out later, I put on the blue sleeveless dress I'd just bought on sale at Harrington's Department Store. It had taken all the birthday money my grandparents in Florida had sent me, but it was worth it.

As my family gathered for dinner I noticed that my sisters looked relatively presentable, too. Of course Mom looked beautiful—she always does. She'd tossed aside her apron and brushed out her shoulder-length blond

hair. With her, that's all it takes. Lily had added a rhinestone necklace to her ensemble, and Daisy had taken off her baseball cap. Laurel was wearing a baggy but clean chambray shirt with a suspicious bulge in the pocket.

"Oh no, you don't," I told her. "Henry is not invited to my birthday dinner."

Laurel stood there acting wide-eyed and innocent, but Mom stared her down. Sheepishly Laurel stuck a hand in her shirt pocket, removing a small brown field mouse. Henry scampered up Laurel's arm to her shoulder as if he were about to make a nest in her hair.

"Out," I commanded, and Laurel disappeared.

"Why does she always carry that rodent around with her?" I asked.

Mom gave a gentle smile and said, "You know your sister doesn't make friends easily. Her animals are her friends."

"I wish she weren't so shy," I replied. "Why can't she be more normal?"

"I'm not shy," Lily put in.

"If she weren't shy, she wouldn't be Laurel," Daisy said, and my mother nodded.

Just then we heard Laurel washing her hands in the kitchen—thank goodness for antibacterial soap. When she returned, we all stood for a moment, admiring the table. There were candles and a vase of pink roses in the middle and a single white rose along with a small, gift-wrapped box next to my plate.

"Happy birthday, Rose," Mom said, smiling at me.

I smiled back, but as I pulled out my chair and sat down I knew the same sad feeling was settling over each of us. I miss Dad all the time, but there are moments when it hits me more that he's really gone. Dinner is the worst. Mom always sits at the foot of the table so she can zip into the kitchen; Daisy and Lily sit on one side, Laurel and I on the other. Which leaves the captain's chair at the head of the table empty.

I tried not to look at it.

Mom served the roast beef while Daisy passed the platter of potatoes and vegetables. Laurel buttered a roll, and Lily swished a straw around in her glass of chocolate milk. Everyone looked solemn. No one spoke.

"Hey, this is a party," I reminded them, trying to sound cheerful. I tasted the roast beef. "It's delicious," I said. "Thanks for going to so much trouble, Mom. I really didn't expect it."

"This is a special day. Nothing can change that," she replied, but this time when she smiled, I could tell it took an effort.

I did my best to keep the conversation hopping. It wasn't all that hard because Daisy and Lily both like to gab, and if you bring up the right topic, Laurel can, too.

“How was school, Toad?” I asked, using the nickname I gave her when she was six and spent the whole summer collecting slimy things in mason jars. “Did you finish your biology project?”

“We finished it today. Last week we fed the caterpillars all these leaves,” Laurel reported, “and then they made chrysalides. Well, today the butterflies started to come out! It was so amazing. Next week we’re doing tadpoles.”

“How appropriate,” I said. “Sounds perfect for you.” She smiled and stared down at her plate.

“Ask me about my day!” Lily urged me.

“Okay, how was your day, Lily?”

“I did my book report on *Pippi Longstocking* and got an Excellent!”

“That’s wonderful!” Mom told her. “Congratulations.” Lily beamed.

I laughed. “Now I get it. That’s what the pigtails are for, right?”

Lily nodded, pleased with herself. “I acted my report out for the class. All the girls in my class said they wished they’d thought of it. The only person whose report was half as good as mine was Amanda Waterston’s, and you could tell that her mother helped her make her shadow box.”

“It’s better to do all the work yourself,” I told her. “Good job.”

“Maybe I can go to Wildwood next year,” Lily said. “For acting! I’ll be old enough.”

“That would be great,” I replied warmly. “I’d love to take you with me, Lily. It’s so much fun, but I missed you guys last year.” We grinned at each other a moment, then I looked at Daisy. “Okay, Daisy, your turn.”

Daisy had already eaten a humongous slice of roast beef and was now halfway through her second serving of mashed potatoes. She paused just long enough to say, “Softball practice was canceled—Coach was sick. I wish that I had someone to play catch with when I can’t practice with the team.” Daisy’s been a star athlete since toddlerhood, but the rest of us just aren’t interested in sports.

“Have any of you girls met the new boy who’s moved into Windy Ridge?” Mom wanted to know. Windy Ridge is the big old house at the end of Lighthouse Road—it’s been vacant for almost a year. We all shook our heads. “Maybe he’s interested in sports, Daisy.”

“I don’t know. I’ve seen him around—he seems too young to me,” Daisy said. “He looks around Laurel’s age.”

“Maybe *you* could go introduce yourself, Laurel,” Mom said.

Laurel flushed slightly.

“But you don’t have to,” Mom added hastily. Laurel looked relieved.

When we finished eating, Daisy cleared the table, then brought in clean plates for dessert.

“Before we cut the cake, why don’t you open your gift, Rose?” Mom suggested.

That was the only invitation I needed. I’d been dying to tear into the wrapping paper but didn’t want to seem too eager. Reminding myself that I was sixteen, not six, I opened the box with painstaking slowness. “Hurry up, Rose!” Lily said, but I just glared at her. I wondered what the gift would be. We’ve never been rich, but I had always dreamed that there would be a brand-new car in the driveway with a bow on top of it for my sixteenth birthday. Even though I knew it wasn’t very likely, I couldn’t help hoping briefly that the small box held a set of car keys.

But when I saw what was lying on a puff of cotton inside, I gasped. “Mom, it’s beautiful!”

Everyone leaned in for a look. I held up the necklace so my sisters could admire it: a tiny gold rosebud suspended from a gold chain so delicate it was nearly invisible. “The rose was on your great-grandmother Walker’s charm bracelet,” my mother explained.

I fastened the clasp around my neck, then jumped up and ran to look at myself in the mirror over the sideboard. I loved what I saw. The necklace was pretty against my skin—just what the new dress needed. It might not be keys to my dream car, but I loved it.

Returning to the table, I wrapped my arms around my mother. “This is really a treasure. Thanks, Mom,” I whispered.

We both had tears in our eyes. Mom hid hers by rising to her feet and disappearing into the kitchen. “Cake time,” she called. “Dim the lights, Daisy, would you?”

As my mom carried the chocolate cake into the dining room Laurel ran into the living room to thump out an extremely off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday to You” on the piano. (I got all the musical talent in this family.) As everybody sang along Mom set the cake in front of me. Lily clapped, urging, “Make a wish!”

I drew in a breath, preparing to blow out the candles. I wish ? I wish Dad were still alive.

Oh, God, what kind of birthday wish is that? I thought, shocked at myself. No matter how much I wanted it, there was no point wishing for something that couldn’t possibly come true. I couldn’t wish away the unexpected nor’easter that had swamped my father’s fishing boat. I couldn’t wish Dad back again. If only I could.

Shaking my head, I tried to come up with something else. Luckily for impatient Lily, another wish, one relating to my new boyfriend, Parker Kemp, and the possibility that someday my initials might be R. W. K., came quickly to mind.

I smiled and blew out the candles on my birthday cake—all sixteen of them at once.

HALF AN HOUR later I’d put on some makeup and perfume and brushed out my long blond hair, ready to head out the door as soon as Parker rang the bell. I stopped on my way past the kitchen.

The dishwasher was humming, the counters were spotless; even the blue-and-white-checked dish towels were hanging neatly from their pegs by the window. That’s my mom—neat to a fault. But the drop-leaf table in the breakfast nook ?

“Mom, what are you doing?” I asked.

She was sitting with her shoulders hunched forward, gnawing on a pencil. The table was piled high with file folders, checkbooks, and shoe boxes full of paper scraps.

Mom poked at the buttons on a calculator with the eraser end of a pencil, then glanced up at me distractedly. “Our income tax return,” she answered. “I filed an extension last month, but I can’t put it off indefinitely.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Is it complicated?”

She sighed. “I loved your dad, but he was not a businessman. He left the finances in a mess. I can’t make heads or tails of any of it.”

“Well, don’t stay up too late,” I advised.

“Don’t forget you have a curfew,” she replied.

“I won’t. Night, Mom.”

Outside, I sat on the top porch step, hugging my knees and humming a Taylor Swift song. When a pair of headlights bumped down the gravel driveway, I stood up, my heart pounding with anticipation.

Whenever I go out with Parker, I feel like I’m entering a fairy tale. He whisks me into a different world.

He stepped out of his black Jeep Wrangler, leaving the engine running. Before helping me up into the passenger seat, he bent me back slightly against the side of the Jeep for a kiss. “Hey, birthday girl,” he murmured, his mouth smiling against mine. “Nice dress.”

It’s hard to explain the effect Parker has on me, I mean without resorting to clichés like he makes my knees weak and all that. He looks like a Ralph Lauren model—blond hair and blue eyes and the kind of smile that stops you in your tracks. He’s tall, too—six-foot-one—with a lean, muscular tennis player’s build. At the risk of sounding totally conceited, I have to say we look great together. Not that I’m obsessed with appearances or anything, but he’s the first Seagate Academy guy I’ve gone out with, and that’s kind of a status thing in Hawk Harbor.

“Do you know what day this is, besides my birthday?” I asked.

He scratched his head, pretending he didn’t. “No, what?”

“It’s our one-month anniversary,” I reminded him, pinching his ribs playfully.

His face broke into a grin. “Of course I remember. I’ll never forget the first time I saw you,” Parker said.

I smiled up at him a little wistfully. I’d been feeling really sad about Dad that day, so I’d gone for a walk along the shore. That’s where I feel closest to Dad because he spent so much time out on the ocean. I started walking at the public beach, too busy crying to pay attention to where I was going. I just kept climbing across rocks and jumping over tide pools and slogging through piles of seaweed as if I could somehow walk off my grief. Suddenly Parker had appeared before me.

“You looked so beautiful, but so sad,” Parker went on.

I’d been kind of blown away when Parker told me we were standing on his family’s private beach—that he lived in the mansion on the cliff above us. Maybe that was why, when I told him my father had died in a boating accident, I’d left out the fact that Dad had been a commercial fisherman. Of course, I’m sure that Parker could tell we weren’t the kind of family that would have a yacht, but he never asked what kind of boat it was. And I never enlightened him.

Now I sniffled, feeling sentimental. A month ago on the rainy beach Parker had put an arm around me and pulled me under his umbrella. We’d been inseparable ever since. “I’m the luckiest girl in the world,” I whispered softly.

“You’re the prettiest girl in the world,” said Parker, kissing me.

“So, where are we going?” I asked a minute later as Parker backed out of the driveway.

He gave me a sideways glance, smiling. “You’ll see.”

I settled back in my seat with a happy sigh. Parker has his own charge card, and he always takes me to pretty nice places. So I wasn’t surprised when he pulled up in front of the Harborside. But I was surprised when he led me through the restaurant to a private room in the back. A room packed with kids wearing party hats who threw confetti into the air and shouted, “Surprise!”

I blinked. “What on ? is this for ? ?”

“Yep, it’s for you,” Parker said. “Happy birthday!”

Sliding an arm around my waist, he steered me into the crowd. I couldn’t get over it. It wasn’t just that Parker had thrown me a surprise party. It was a surprise party with armfuls of red roses in crystal vases all over the place, and a waiter passing a tray of hors d’oeuvres, and a two-tiered cake garnished with real rosebuds on a silver pedestal. It was a far cry from my fifteenth birthday party, which had consisted of pizzas and pitchers of Pepsi with my now ex-boyfriend Sully and other friends at the Rusty Nail, a very casual hangout in town.

“You really shouldn’t have done this,” I said to Parker, feeling a little embarrassed.

He shrugged as if it were nothing. “Come on, I want you to meet everybody.”

We made a quick tour of the room. I mostly just smiled, trying to remember names—Chip van Alder, Cynthia Ferris, David Shuman, Valerie Mathias—and trying not to panic over the fact that I was the only girl in the room wearing a cotton dress. I took mental notes for future reference, not that I could afford to copy these girls’ outfits. Seagate Academy girls obviously didn’t shop the sale rack at Harrington’s.

“Here.” Parker pressed a glass of punch into my hand. “Be right back.”

For a minute I stood alone by the buffet table, sipping my punch. It seemed a little strange—here I was at my own birthday party with no one to talk to. I edged up to a conversation. “So if I can score some tickets, maybe we could road trip to Boston for the concert,” David was saying.

“What concert?” I asked brightly.

“We could crash at my cousin’s dorm,” Cynthia went on, as if she hadn’t heard me. She was looking from David to Chip. “If we stay over Saturday, we could go to some Harvard parties.”

“I don’t want to miss the crew regatta, though,” Chip told Cynthia. “What if we—”

They didn’t seem to need me, so I backed up a step or two. “I think I’ll have some cake,” I said to no one in particular. I looked around for Parker, but he was on the far side of the room, talking to Valerie. “Yes, it’s cake time,” I decided, turning to the buffet.

As I contemplated the cake someone behind me said, “It’s almost too beautiful to cut.”

I glanced over my shoulder at a tall guy with deep brown eyes. He had thick, dark hair and small wire-rimmed glasses. He looked like a future professor in spite of the fact that he was incredibly handsome.

“Yes,” I agreed, feeling a little ridiculous about the fact that this person was at my party and I had no idea who he was. I turned back to the cake. Oh, well, I thought. Let them eat—

“Cake,” the guy said.

“What?” I asked.

“Let them eat cake,” he repeated. “I’m sure the chef would hate to think that he went to all the trouble of making it taste good for nothing.”

“You have a point,” I said. Smiling, I grabbed the silver knife on the table and sliced into the cake. I offered him the first piece. “By the way, I’m Rose,” I said.

“Sorry. I should have introduced myself sooner.” He actually blushed. “Stephen Mathias,” he said as we shook hands.

“Mathias. Then you must be Valerie’s”—I inspected him more closely. Valerie is the same age as Parker and me, sixteen, and a sophomore. This guy looked a little older—“big brother?”

“Right,” he said. “I’m a junior.”

I don’t usually have trouble talking to people, but this guy was a little intimidating. He was staring at me kind of intensely, as if he was trying to figure something out, which was making me worry that maybe I had a blob of frosting on my face or something. I glanced around for Parker, hoping he’d rescue me. Suddenly Stephen remarked, “You don’t go to Seagate, do you?” Now it was my turn to flush slightly. “I mean,” he added quickly, “I’d remember seeing you around.”

“No, I go to South Regional,” I admitted, naming my public high school. It was pretty obvious that I didn’t fit in with this crowd, and I hated the fact that it bothered me so much.

“Well.” He rocked back on his heels. “This is quite a party.”

I nodded. “Unbelievable.”

“It was a surprise, huh?” he asked. I couldn’t read the look on his face.

I nodded again.

“So, where are your friends?”

“I wouldn’t have expected Parker to invite people he’s never met,” I said a little defensively.

“You two haven’t been dating that long, then?”

“Well, a month, but—” I stopped, frowning. A whole month and Parker still hadn’t met my best friends. Why not?

At that moment someone who smelled like expensive men’s cologne came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Don’t eat too much cake,” Parker murmured, his lips on my earlobe.

I put my plate down fast and turned to face him. “Ready for your present?” he asked.

“You mean this party isn’t my present?”

“Of course not.”

He pressed a robin’s egg blue box into my hand. “For me?”

Parker laughed. “Who else? Open it.”

Stephen had drifted away, but Cynthia and a few other girls crowded around to watch. I heard Valerie say, “That’s a Tiffany box.” Self-conscious, I opened it. When I saw what was inside, I almost fainted. I lifted out the heavy silver necklace.

“Parker,” I whispered, “it’s lovely.”

Removing the necklace my mother had given me earlier in the evening, Parker fastened the clasp of the Tiffany one around my neck. “Now, that does you justice,” he said, bending forward to kiss me. “You’re so beautiful. I love you, Rose.”

It was the first time he’d said that. My eyes widened in surprise, but I closed them as our lips touched. Parker Kemp loved me!

Our kiss went on and on. Parker’s friends clapped and whistled, but we still didn’t draw apart.

Fifteen had been a terrible year—I’d lost my father. The year I turned sixteen was bound to be better. One thing’s for sure, I thought, dizzy with happiness. It’s off to a great start.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night something woke me up. For a few seconds I lay with my eyes closed, trying to get back into the dream I’d been having. It was about Parker, of course. Then I heard the sound again. “Daddy!” someone cried. “Daddy, come here!”

Lily, I thought groggily. My youngest sister has a seriously overactive imagination—she has nightmares all

the time, and Dad's the only one who can calm her down. I lay in the dark, waiting for the sound of his footsteps plodding down the hall. Lily kept crying, "Daddy, I'm scared!"

A minute passed, then two, and I was starting to wonder what was taking Dad so long.

And then I remembered.

Hopping out of bed, I hurried to Lily's room. She was sitting up in bed, a pillow clutched to her chest and tears sliding down her face. I sat down on the mattress and put an arm around her, wondering what to say. "It's okay," I murmured.

"Where's Daddy? I want Daddy," Lily sobbed.

I wished I didn't have to tell her the truth. "Dad's not here," I reminded her at last, "and Mom's still asleep. She was really tired tonight."

Lily sagged against me, her head on my shoulder. Her tears wouldn't stop. "I had this awful dream, Rose," she whispered, sniffing. "I was wading in Kettle Cove looking for clams and this big shark swam up and I?"

As Lily went on, I could feel her still shaking with fear. What had Dad done in this situation? I wondered, feeling helpless. I wasn't used to playing this role.

"There, there," I murmured.

Lily kept crying. I was totally at a loss. Help me, Dad, I thought.

Dad always believed in being as rational as possible. I took a deep breath. "It'll be okay. There aren't any sharks in Kettle Cove."

Lily looked up at me. "There aren't?" she asked with another sniff.

"Definitely not," I declared. "They like the beaches down on Cape Cod. In fact, they prefer?" and I went off on some long, rambling explanation that was half remembered from an old science textbook and half invention.

Believe it or not, it worked. I held Lily until her eyelids drooped sleepily. Then I tucked her back in.

As I was closing the door Lily woke up again. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Back to my room," I said.

She thought about this for a minute.

"I'll be right down the hall," I added.

"Okay," she said. "Thanks, Rose."

Oh, Dad, I thought, what was it you used to say? "Anytime," I whispered.

One

CATCH THIS ONE, Daze!” My older sister, Rose, pulled back her arm and tossed the Frisbee as far as she could. The bright orange disk sailed in my direction ? sort of. Sprinting across the sand, I splashed into the water and jumped into the air, snagging the Frisbee before it could slice into the waves. Back on the beach Rose and her boyfriend, Stephen Mathias, clapped and whistled. “Nice catch!” Stephen yelled. I grinned at them and took a deep bow.

Just then my mother called out, “Food’s ready.” I lobbed the Frisbee to Stephen and jogged over to join my family. It was a warm August evening, and we were having a clambake at Kettle Cove, a little beach on the edge of town, to celebrate my sixteenth birthday. Balloons were tied to the picnic table, and lobsters, steamers, and ears of sweet corn had been roasting over a fire in a pit in the sand. Living in Maine is the best.

We started with paper plates piled high with steamers. I watched Rose take a ton of them. She has long blond hair and blue eyes, and she looked incredibly pretty in a lace-trimmed tank top and gauzy flowered skirt. No one looks glamorous eating steamers, though. “Yum,” she said, dipping a clam in melted butter and then popping it into her mouth.

My mom, Maggie Walker, tossed the salad while her friend Hal Leverett, our neighbor, filled plastic glasses with lemonade. Mom has short blond hair that she pushes behind her ears—she’s forty now, and she’s still the most beautiful woman I know.

We were all gobbling steamers—Mom too. Stephen watched my family eat, his arms folded across his chest, his own plate empty. “I still haven’t gotten over the way you natives put away clams,” he admitted, his brown eyes twinkling. “By the *pound*. And I bet you’ll devour a couple of lobsters apiece when you’re finished.”

Rose laughed. “It’s a Maine thing. You wouldn’t understand.”

Stephen turned to my twelve-year-old sister, Laurel, whose gold-streaked brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She had a lobster bib on over her usual grass-stained overalls. “How do *you* do it, Toad?” Stephen asked, using the nickname Rose gave Laurel a few years ago. “Clams and lobsters are your friends.”

Laurel considered this question thoughtfully as she wiped some butter off her lips with a paper napkin. She’s the animal lover in the family, but when it comes to clambakes, she’s as carnivorous as the rest of us. “It’s a food chain thing,” she explained to Stephen, “and we’re at the top.”

“Right,” I said. “Eating shellfish is our destiny.”

Mom passed out claw crackers for the lobsters. “They eat seafood in Boston, too,” she pointed out to Stephen, whose family moved up to Maine when he started high school at nearby Seagate Academy.

“In restaurants, mostly,” replied Stephen. “I never met a lobster in person before it ended up in a pot.”

Rose rested her head on Stephen’s shoulder, her blondness a contrast to his dark brown hair. “Aren’t we uncivilized?” she said happily.

My youngest sister, ten-year-old Lily, was buttering a hot ear of corn. “This is the best, Mom,” she said. “I’m going to eat until I burst.”

“Everything’s great,” I agreed. “Thanks, Mom.”

“A clambake cooks itself,” she said, brushing aside our praise with typical modesty.

“Hey, we almost forgot to toast the birthday girl.” Rose raised her glass. “I can’t believe you’re sixteen, Daisy. That means I’m *really* old!”

Rose graduated from South Regional High School last June—she’s eighteen. “Right, you’re ancient,” I kidded.

“No, but seriously,” said Rose. “It seems like just yesterday *I* was turning sixteen.” A shadow crossed her face, dimming her hundred-watt smile for a second. Rose’s sixteenth birthday hadn’t been such a happy occasion. Our father had died in a boating accident just a few months before the birthday. We were all silent for a moment, thinking the same thoughts, I guess. Then Rose’s face brightened again. “Remember back when Daisy liked baseball better than boys?”

Everybody laughed. I rolled my eyes. Just a few days ago my first boyfriend, Jay McGuigan, and I had broken up. I’d gone down to Boston for a Red Sox doubleheader with Tommy Bradford, this guy in my class whose dad coaches at the high school, and it was absolutely *not* a date, but Jay got absurdly jealous and we had a huge fight and that was that. “Last week I liked boys better,” I told Rose with a grin. “This week I’m back to baseball.”

“Let’s all tell one thing we like about Daisy,” Lily piped up suddenly, waving a lobster claw for attention.

“Oh, please,” I groaned.

“That’s a nice idea,” Mom said, smiling at Lily. “You want to start?”

Lily nodded, her short blond hair bouncing. By the way, I should note here that my youngest sister was wearing a satin, twenties-era flapper dress topped off with a feather boa. To a beach party. That’s Lily in a nutshell. “What *I* like about Daisy,” Lily informed the group, “is that she hardly ever gets mad at me even when I really bug her.”

“Except that time you lost my autographed David Ortiz baseball mitt,” I reminded her.

“I said *hardly* ever,” Lily said.

“I like Daisy because she’s always in a sunny mood,” Rose contributed. “Of course, that’s also what I *don’t* like about her because whenever I’m trying to enjoy a good sulk, Daisy always talks me out of it. How about you, Mom?”

Mom shook her head, smiling. “How can I pick just one thing?”

“You have to,” Lily pressed.

“Okay. I like the way Daisy picks up around the house without being asked.”

“Mo-o-om!” Lily complained. “That’s a boring thing to like.”

“Well, it’s true,” Mom replied, winking at me.

“My turn,” said Stephen. “I like how even when she was a kid, Daisy could beat me at hoops. She taught me humility.”

“How about you, Laurel?” Rose prompted.

Laurel gazed at me with shining eyes. “I like how Daisy is good at everything she tries. How she gets all A’s at school and is the star of the soccer team, and how she’s so pretty but she isn’t at all vain. I want to be just like her,” she finished softly.

“Kiss up,” muttered Lily.

Laurel scowled at Lily. I reached across the picnic table and punched Laurel lightly on the arm. “Thanks, Toad,” I said.

Just then Mr. Leverett cleared his throat. “Well, I—,” he began.

Before he could continue, I jumped to my feet. “Anyone for more lemonade?” I asked.

As I circled the table refilling glasses my mom threw me a questioning glance, but I ignored it. Maybe I’d been rude, cutting Hal off. But what’s he doing here, anyway? I asked myself.

All at once my throat tightened with unexpected tears. I’d spent the picnic trying not to think about my father, but now I couldn’t help it. If Dad were still alive, Mom wouldn’t be bringing Hal to family parties, I thought. I didn’t care if he *was* just a friend—if any man was going to be at my birthday party, I wanted it to be Dad.

I’m not the gooey sentimental type, but I know when I’m about to burst into tears. “Be right back,” I muttered, depositing the lemonade jug on the table with a thud. Turning away from the others, I strode off across the sand.

I hadn’t gone ten yards when I heard a voice behind me. “Daze, wait for me.”

I stopped. Rose jogged after me, her skirt fluttering and her expression worried. “Are you okay?” she asked. I shrugged wordlessly, my hands stuck deep in the pockets of my shorts. “Thinking about Dad?” Rose guessed.

I hate falling apart—I almost never cry—but my voice cracked with emotion. “He should be here today.”

“I know,” Rose agreed.

Side by side, we walked along the water’s edge. For a few minutes neither of us spoke. I knew we were both remembering the day two and a half years ago when we learned that Dad’s fishing boat had been lost in a sudden storm at sea.

“I think you miss Dad the most,” Rose ventured at last. “I mean, I miss him, too, but you and he were the closest. You were his favorite.”

“Dad didn’t play favorites,” I said, but in a way I knew what she said was true. Dad had loved us all, but I was the one who’d liked going out on the boat with him. Back on land, I’d help him mend his nets and then we’d play catch on the lawn for hours until Dad was satisfied that I could throw as far and straight as a big leaguer. I look like him, too—I have his eyes and his height and his smile.

And his upbeat attitude ? usually. Now I struggled to get back in a positive frame of mind. “Dad would be proud of how well we’re doing on our own,” I said as Rose and I hit the end of the beach and turned around.

“We’ve gotten our lives together,” Rose agreed. She laughed dryly. “Not that it wasn’t an uphill fight. Remember how mad I was two summers ago when Mom made me get a job? And when we had to use food stamps for a while—that freaked me out.”

But things had changed. These days Rose was acting in summer stock theater—musicals mostly, because she loves to sing. In the fall she would start classes at the local community college and continue working part-time at Cecilia’s, a boutique in downtown Hawk Harbor. That was the first job Rose got, back when she was sixteen. Mom had started a catering business about a year after Dad died and she was doing well, but money was still a little tight, so we’d all found ways to pitch in this summer vacation. I baby-sat and did yard work. Laurel ran a dog wash with her friend Jack Harrison in Jack’s backyard. “We’re a lot more independent than we used to be,” I concluded.

“You were always that way, though,” Rose said. “You didn’t whine, like me and Laurel and Lily.” She laughed again. “It used to drive me crazy!”

I shrugged. “I just felt like I had to do whatever it took to hold our family together.”

We were back at the picnic table. “Just in time, Daisy Claire Walker,” Mom called. “We can’t cut the cake without you!”

Mom had baked a triple-layer carrot cake piled high with cream cheese frosting—my favorite. As she lit the candles everyone began singing “Happy Birthday to You.” Rose snapped her fingers and threw in a bluesy harmony—she has a great voice.

“Make a wish, Daisy,” Lily shouted when the song was over.

I closed my eyes. What should I wish for? A million dollars? A new car? An unbeaten season this fall with the South Regional High varsity girls’ soccer team?

I want us all to be safe, I wished silently. Just the way we are right now. No more changes.

I opened my eyes again, and as my sisters cheered I blew out all sixteen candles on my cake.

HAWK HARBOR IS a small town on the coast of southern Maine. I was born here and so were all my sisters—our parents grew up here, too. When I was younger, we lived in a big Victorian house on Lighthouse Road that had been in the family for generations, but after Dad died, we had to sell it. Now we rent a two-floor apartment in an old brick building on Main Street above Wissinger’s Bakery.

A week after my birthday I spent the afternoon baby-sitting: Then I stopped at our old neighbors, the Schenkels, to mow their lawn and clip their hedges. By the end of the day I was pretty tired, so I pedaled home more slowly than usual. Going through the center of

town, I waved to Mr. Appleby, who was out in front of his hardware store, putting sale tags on a display of plastic lawn furniture—his daughter, Cath, is one of Rose’s best friends. Half a block farther along I hopped the bike onto the sidewalk so I could shout hello through the open door of Cecilia’s to my sister, who was behind the cash register.

Reaching the bakery, I squeezed the hand brakes. Before pushing my bike into the storage room in the back of the building, though, I stood for a minute, looking toward the sea. Old fishing boats and sleek yachts motored in and out of the busy harbor, summing up my town: part blue-collar New England town, part upscale summer resort.

Mom was in the kitchen when I went in, slicing vegetables. “Something smells good,” I said as I rummaged in the fridge for a snack.

Mom nodded in the direction of the industrial-size oven she’d installed when she quit her old job to cater full-time. “Appetizers for the Nickersons’ anniversary party tomorrow night.”

I pulled up a stool and another cutting board so I could help her chop. As I took a seat Mom looked at my necklace. “That looks nice,” she said.

I put my hand to my throat. I was wearing my sixteenth-birthday present, a gold chain and an antique charm from my great-grandmother’s bracelet. The charm was shaped like a seashell—Rose got one that’s a rosebud for her sixteenth birthday. “A little fancy with a T-shirt and cutoffs, huh?”

She smiled. “I think it’s the first jewelry I’ve ever seen you wear.”

“I like it.”

“So, how are Vera and Gil?”

I filled her in on the neighborhood gossip I’d heard from Mrs. Schenkel and told Mom that the weeds were really high in front of our old house. “Whoever bought it isn’t living there.”

“Probably someone planning to fix it up for a summer house,” Mom speculated.

“An inn,” a voice called from the living room. “The owners want to open an inn.”

Hal’s here again, I thought. For some reason my mood turned instantly grouchy. Lately he’d become a fixture at our dinner table. Couldn’t he ever cook for himself?

“An inn,” Mom mused. “Well, it’s a big enough house, I suppose. And they could renovate the barn.?”

“So, Mom,” I said, changing the subject, “I started looking for a part-time job today.”

She stopped slicing mushrooms. “What?”

“Now that I’m sixteen, I want to make more money than I can from baby-sitting,” I explained. “That way I could help with some of our expenses.”

Mom shook her head. “You don’t need to do that. And with school starting soon, you won’t have time.”

“But Rose got a job when she turned sixteen.”

“Our situation was different then. You shouldn’t be worrying about money, Daisy.”

“I’m not worried. I just want to start saving for college, like Rose.”

Mom resumed slicing, the knife blade knocking rhythmically on the wooden cutting board. “Aren’t you already stretched too thin, honey? With soccer practice every day and games on weekends. You said you were thinking about running for student council, too. I’d hate to see your grades drop. You’re headed for class valedictorian when you graduate.”

“Just a few hours a week, Mom,” I said. “I promise I’ll quit if it gets to be too much.”

Hal chose that moment to come into the kitchen. He had a legal pad under his arm and a pencil tucked behind his ear. He’s tall and wears glasses—he’s an accountant, in his late forties, who got divorced a few years ago, right before we moved in next door to him. “Couldn’t help overhearing,” he began in a friendly manner. “You know, my office could use some phone and filing help. It might be just what you’re looking for, Daisy. If you want to come in and fill out an application, I could put in a good—”

“Thanks, anyway, but that’s not really the kind of job I had in mind.” I hopped down from the stool, avoiding my mom’s gaze. “I’ll be in my room,” I said over my shoulder as I left the kitchen. “Call me if you need me, okay?”

As I went upstairs I wasn’t sure why I’d responded the way I had to Hal’s offer. Answering phones would be fine, and Hal is a nice enough guy. He’s always been a good neighbor—he really comes through for us whenever there’s a clogged drain or a disgusting bug to kill. My sisters and I are always psyched when his cute college-age sons, Kevin and Connor, visit; they’re really nice. It just wasn’t his business, I decided. I was talking to Mom, not him.

I wouldn’t have held a grudge about it, but Hal just had to butt into every single conversation at dinner, too. I was still gritting my teeth at nine o’clock when Rose got home from her date with Stephen.

She and I share a bedroom, as do Lily and Laurel. Our room has tall, old-fashioned windows that make it seem bigger than it is. With two of everything in it—twin beds, dressers, night tables, and desks—it’s pretty cramped. We’ve each given it our own sense of style, though. Rose has put up posters of her favorite singers and actors, and she’s into incense and tapestries and flowering plants. My shelves are crowded with sports trophies, my baseball card collection, and odds and ends I saved when we moved out of our old house: some of Dad’s fishing tackle, a plaque the chamber of commerce gave him one year, his toolbox.

I was sitting on my bed reading *Sports Illustrated* when Rose flopped down on her bed with a sigh. “I’m going to wither and die when Stephen leaves for Harvard,” she moaned, flinging a hand to her forehead.

Rose can be pretty theatrical. “Are you doing Juliet?” I guessed. “Or Ophelia?”

“Seriously, Daze.” She sat up. “It stinks.”

Rose is always open with her feelings, and she’d been fretting for weeks over her upcoming separation from Stephen. He’d graduated from Seagate a year earlier, but since then he’d been in Hawk Harbor, working as a volunteer for county social services. He wants to be a lawyer someday, the kind who represents poor people

for free. “He’ll come home for vacations,” I said.

“But it won’t be the same,” Rose despaired. “I mean, we’ve been like *this*”—she held up her hand with the index and middle fingers crossed—“for two whole *years*.” Rose quickly changed the subject. “So, Hal was over for dinner again, huh?”

“Yeah.” I frowned. “What’s *with* that, anyway? He’s, like, *omnipresent* these days. I mean, our *other* neighbors don’t come over every night.”

“I sense romance blossoming,” Rose said knowingly.

I blinked. “Mom? A romance with *Hal*? Are you kidding?”

“Why not?” she asked. “He and Mom have gotten to be pretty tight these past couple of years. Going out to lunch, lending each other books, that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, but—”

“He has a great sense of humor for an accountant, don’t you think? Nobody makes Mom laugh that hard. I think they make a cute couple.”

“A *couple*?” I stared at my sister in disbelief. “You mean like ?”

“Like who knows?” said Rose. “Maybe Mom’s ready for a boyfriend. Maybe she’ll even get married again someday.”

I shook my head emphatically. “Mom does *not* need a boyfriend.”

“Why not?”

“It’s only been two and a half years since—”

“*Only* two and a half years?” Rose broke in. “What, you don’t think that’s long enough to grieve? Mom should join a convent or something? She deserves to have a life of her own that’s not just work and kids.”

I fell back on, “Yeah, but ?”

“But *what*?” Rose said. “Don’t you want Mom to be happy?”

Of course I wanted my mother to be happy—that wasn’t the point. Turning my head away from Rose, I looked at the framed picture on my night table. My father smiled up at me from under the bill of a Boston Red Sox cap, his face tanned from spending his days on the water, his light blue eyes crinkled against the sun. I remembered that day as if it were yesterday. We’d all gone down to Boston, and he’d taken me to the game while Mom, Rose, Lily, and Laurel hit the aquarium and museum. Just him and me. We’d eaten three Fenway franks apiece. The Red Sox won in extra innings.

In the picture Dad looked so alive, and that was how I wanted to remember him. Am I the only person who’s still loyal to you, Dad? I wondered. “But nothing,” I said quietly.

One

YOU REALLY DON'T have to give me a party, Mom," I told my mother, Maggie Walker, the day before my sixteenth birthday. I meant it, too. Birthday parties aren't exactly my favorite things.

"Should I just throw away the cake, then?" she teased.

We were in the kitchen. Mom had just baked a triple-layer lemon cake with raspberry filling, and now she was using a tiny spatula to etch a basket-weave pattern in the white butter cream frosting.

It looked delicious, and I was sure, knowing Mom—she's a caterer—it would taste even better than it looked. "Of course I want the cake!" I said, smiling. I pushed the long, gold-brown hair out of my eyes, then stuck my hands deep into the side pockets of my faded denim overalls. "I just don't like people making a fuss over me."

"It'll just be us," Mom assured me, "and Hal. And I invited Jack. That's okay with you, right?"

"Sure." Hal Leverett is our neighbor. He's divorced, and Mom is a widow, and they've been dating for a couple of years now. As for Jack Harrison, he's been my closest friend since we were ten. Jack and Hal are both like family.

Mom finished frosting the cake. She offered me the beaters from the electric mixer. "Do you want these, Laurel?"

Of course I did. I grinned and leaned back against the counter and licked the frosting off one of the beaters. The kitchen window was open, letting in a warm Indian summer breeze. "Remember how I used to practically beat Lily up to get the beaters after you baked a cake?" I asked Mom.

Mom laughed. "Poor Lily."

"Poor Lily—yeah, right." Lily is my younger sister. She's thirteen now, and I've been waiting for her to outgrow her "brat" stage for the past thirteen years.

The phone rang; I had to put down the beater to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hi. It's me," said my nineteen-year-old sister, Daisy.

A warm feeling settled over me. "Daze! What's up?" My mom smiled at me, and I smiled back as I pointed to the phone excitedly. "It's Daisy," I mouthed, and Mom nodded.

"Just wanted to wish you a happy day before your birthday, Toad."

"Daisy! Haven't I outgrown that ridiculous nickname yet?"

"Have you outgrown your roomful of animals yet?" she shot back.

I laughed. Back when my dad died, we had to move out of our huge house and into a two-floor apartment on Main Street in Hawk Harbor, the small town on the coast of southern Maine where I've lived all my life. At first the landlord told us no pets. Since then Mr. Wissinger, who also owns the bakery downstairs, has

relaxed his policy a little, so I've adopted as many animals as I could squeeze into my bedroom.

"Anyway," she went on, "I'll be home tomorrow afternoon." She's a freshman at Dartmouth. "I have a soccer game in the morning, but if I leave Hanover by noon, I should be in Hawk Harbor around three-thirty."

"How are you getting here?" I asked. "Bus?"

"I'm borrowing Annie's car," Daisy replied. "What a great roommate."

"I can't wait to see you!"

"I'll drive as fast as I can. Don't start the party without me."

"Are you kidding? Of course we won't. Bye, Daze."

Hal walked in as I hung up the phone. He doesn't bother knocking anymore—he and Mom are always running back and forth between each other's places.

At first it was weird, Mom having a boyfriend. Daisy especially freaked out about it, maybe because she was the one who'd been closest to Dad. Now we're all pretty used to it, and Hal's about the nicest man on earth.

He greeted Mom with a kiss on the cheek, then set a paper bag on the counter. "Party decorations," he explained. "Streamers, balloons, hats, noisemakers."

I rolled my eyes. "Noisemakers?"

Hal took a party hat out of the bag and stuck it on his head. He's an accountant, with brown-gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses and he's at least fifty, but when he smiles, he looks like a kid. "Come on, Laurel. Live it up!"

"Why don't we start decorating?" Mom said to Hal as she wiped her hands clean on a dish towel. "We're going out tonight and we won't have time in the morning because I'm catering that bridal shower brunch."

I thought about making one more plea for a low-key celebration but decided not to. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate them going to so much trouble. It's just that I don't like being the center of attention. When I was thirteen, Jack threw a surprise party for me and invited practically everyone in our class. Even though I knew he had the best intentions in the world, I hated every minute of it.

Now I trailed my mother and Hal into the living room. I tried to reach for a roll of crepe paper, but my mother told me to sit down and relax. So I propped my scuffed sneakers up on the equally scuffed coffee table. We have a lot of really old furniture that Mom says is too beat-up to qualify as antique.

Mom draped crepe paper streamers around the room while Hal blew up balloons that said Sweet 16. "It'll be good to have your big sisters home, won't it?" Hal observed.

I nodded. Daisy was coming home for my birthday, and so was Rose—she's twenty-one, the oldest in the family, and a senior at Boston University.

“Is Rose bringing Stephen?” Hal asked, pausing in between balloons to catch his breath.

“She sure is,” Mom answered. Rose’s boyfriend, Stephen, goes to Harvard. They’ve been dating forever. They met in Hawk Harbor when they were about my age, they broke up once or twice, but they always got back together. “Those two don’t do anything without each other.”

“Quiet around here, isn’t it,” Hal said to Mom, “now that two of your four girls are away at college.”

Mom sighed. “I’m still trying to get used to it.” She tossed me a smile. “Not that Lily doesn’t make enough noise for four girls sometimes!”

“At least we had an extra year with Daisy,” I said. I gave a little sigh; I couldn’t help it.

Daisy graduated from high school a year ago, but she put off starting college until this fall so she could work full-time and help out the family. Our father died six years back—his fishing boat was lost in a storm at sea—and Mom’s gotten a catering business off the ground now, but money is still tight sometimes. We all pitch in however we can.

Mom gazed at me, her expression thoughtful. “You and Daisy got to be good friends this past year, didn’t you?”

I nodded. I missed Rose, but she had already been away at college for three years. I was used to seeing her only on holidays. Daisy had just left, and I still wasn’t used to the fact that she was gone. I missed her. A lot.

Hal stopped blowing up balloons. He thumped his chest with one hand. “The old man’s lungs aren’t what they used to be,” he said, chuckling. “Think I’ll take a break.”

“Let’s start dinner, then,” Mom suggested.

They went back into the kitchen, and I walked upstairs to my room to feed my pets. I was still thinking about Daisy. She and Rose are both amazing people. Rose is a very good singer and actress. Daisy’s a star, too. She was captain of three different sports teams in high school, and she’s on a scholarship at Dartmouth. Plus she’s an A student, plus she’s beautiful, plus funny, plus kind, plus plus plus.

My lab partner, Ellen Adams, who’s the middle of five kids, has asked if it bugs me having a big sister like Daisy who’s such an achiever. It doesn’t. I don’t feel like I have to follow in her footsteps. I couldn’t even if I wanted to!

After Alfalfa, my rabbit, was taken care of, I fed my iguana, my turtles, and my tropical fish. As I was pouring birdseed into Lewis and Clark’s bowl—they’re parakeets—the door to my room banged open. “Where’s my iPod?” Lily demanded.

As I mentioned before, my younger sister is a brat with a capital *B*. Sometimes I can’t believe we share the same DNA. “I don’t know,” I replied, “and did you ever hear of knocking?”

“You borrowed it yesterday and I haven’t seen it since,” she shot back in an accusing tone, hands on her hips.

I gave her a cold stare. She had on a white ruffled shirt with a black bow tie and vest—Lily’s into putting

together funky outfits. Today she looked like a waiter, but I didn't say so. She's always antagonizing me, but I try not to pick fights unless she forces me to. "I left it in your room," I told her.

"Then why can't I find it?"

I shrugged. "It's kind of a pigsty in there."

"My room's a pigsty?" Lily wrinkled her nose and took a sniff. "It smells like cow manure in here. Or is that your hair, which you probably haven't washed in a month?"

I'd washed my hair that morning, but I decided not to dignify her question with a reply. For about the millionth time, I silently thanked heaven that Lily and I weren't sharing a room anymore, like we had to before Daisy and Rose moved out. "Close the door behind you," I suggested.

Lily didn't just close the door—she slammed it. Turning to the parakeets, I sighed. "Sorry, guys. It's not true about the cow manure. You smell fine."

When everyone was fed, I lifted Alfalfa from his cage. Walking over to my bedroom window, I looked out at the boats in the harbor.

I've got a great view, which makes up for the fact that the room is small. That was the only good thing about Daisy's going off to college: inheriting her bedroom. I can decorate it however I want without having to argue with Lily, whose clothes used to take up our whole closet. There's space for all my animals, and I salvaged an old rocking chair that Mom wanted to give to charity—it's the chair she rocked us in when we were babies.

I sat there now with the bunny on my lap. I *did* like having my own room; still, I'd rather have had Daisy back. It was lonely sometimes. Lily and I were the only sisters left. And we'll never be friends, I thought.

IT'S COLD," JACK said.

"No, it's not," I replied.

"Feels like a frost." He turned up the collar of his denim jacket.

I took a deep breath of woody October air. "I think it's nice. Perfect, in fact."

"My battery's dying." Jack's flashlight flickered and went out. A second later I heard him stumble on a tree root. "Ouch!"

I had to laugh. Moonlit expeditions with Jack are always like this. He moans and groans, pretending I'm dragging him out against his will, but then ends up having as much fun as I do.

Tonight we were hiking up a path not far from his house. When we got to the top, we were in Meredith's Meadow, one of the highest spots in town. Jack spread an old quilt on the dewy grass while I pulled out my binoculars. "There's Jupiter," I said, pointing the binoculars skyward. "Just above the horizon. See?"

Jack took the binoculars and looked through them. “Doesn’t it have a bunch of moons?”

“Yeah, but we’d need a telescope to see them.”

We lay back on the blanket, the binoculars and an open bag of potato chips between us. Looking up at the sky, we took turns naming the constellations. Perseus and Andromeda, Aries the ram, Cepheus and Cassiopeia.

“Even with the moon almost full, there are still so many stars,” Jack said after a minute.

“That’s what’s good about living in the country instead of the city. No lights from buildings and stuff to dim the stars.”

“There are other solar systems besides ours, right? Do you think somewhere out there a couple of kids are lying in a field looking through binoculars at us?”

I laughed. “Maybe.”

I sat up and wrapped my arms around my knees. Jack was munching potato chips. Without speaking, he stuck the bag out and I took a handful.

Jack and I have known each other almost forever, since the summer before sixth grade, when he moved to Maine with his parents. He was sort of a prissy little kid back then—his clothes were always spotless and pressed. Meanwhile, I was usually covered with grass stains and mosquito bites. For some reason, though, we hit it off. Maybe because we were both a little lonely. My father had just died and Jack didn’t know anyone else in town yet, and since he’s an only child he didn’t have brothers or sisters to play with.

We’re still best buddies even though we’ve changed over the years. Now I turned to look at him in the moonlight. He has thick, straight brown hair and green eyes. According to the majority of the female population at South Regional High School, he’s gotten pretty cute. He’s popular, too. Sometimes I think that if we hadn’t been friends forever, Jack would never want to hang out with someone like me.

Jack noticed me staring at him. “Your hair’s frizzing out.”

I lifted a hand. My long hair was going wild—the damp sea air does that to me. “Yeah, I forgot a ponytail holder.”

“I bet that’s what Meredith looked like,” Jack speculated.

Meredith’s Meadow is named for a colonial girl who supposedly came up here to look at the ocean and wait for her seafaring lover to return. I laughed. “If I look like Meredith, then no wonder that guy never came back!”

Jack just looked at me.

I gazed back up at the sky.

We sat quietly for a couple more minutes. I was thinking about how maybe I wasn’t that different from eighteenth-

century Meredith. We both loved this high, wild meadow. Both of us knew how to wait for people we loved to return.

“What’s that smell? Flowers or something?” Jack asked.

I breathed in deeply. The meadow had a faded, autumnal sweetness. I didn’t need to turn on my flashlight to identify the plants and grasses that surrounded us. “Meadowsweet and oxeye daisy,” I told Jack. “Calico aster, burdock, nodding thistle. And smell the licorice? We must have put our blanket down on the last of the sweet goldenrod.”

“Everything’s dying, huh?”

“Yeah, but that’s when the fields are the prettiest, I think. The bunchgrass is turning red now—we should come back in daylight.”

“That would be great.”

We packed up our stuff and headed back down the dark trail. At the road we said good-bye. “See you tomorrow at your birthday party,” Jack said.

“Don’t bring a gift, okay? I don’t need anything.”

Jack’s smile was bright in the moonlight. “Are you kidding? I already got you a present. I know you’re going to love it.”

“Really?” I was curious in spite of myself. “What is it?”

“Nice try, Walker. Catch you later.”

“Bye.”

We walked off in opposite directions. All the way home I wondered what Jack was going to give me for my birthday. I’ve always hated getting presents. Everyone gathers around and stares as you open them—it’s so embarrassing. That’s the problem with birthday parties in general. But still, even though I don’t usually like parties, I had to admit that I was starting to get a little excited about this one.

One

THE DAY I turned sixteen was the most wonderful of my life! My devoted older sisters Rose and Laurel showered me with jewelry, gift certificates to the mall, and the complete works of Shakespeare in leather-bound volumes. As if that were not enough, my mom, the beautiful, recently remarried widow Maggie Walker, doubled my allowance and announced that from then on I wouldn’t have chores or a curfew because I’d be going to boarding school in Paris.”

“The end,” I said out loud, scrawling the words at the bottom of the page. Then I slapped my notebook shut and tossed it on my desk. I had to laugh. “Yeah, right. I wish.”

There couldn’t be a worse time of year for my birthday: in between Christmas and New Year’s, where it gets completely lost in the holiday shuffle. I get totally ripped off in the present department, or at least that’s the

way it *seems*, because people are always giving me “joint” Christmas and birthday gifts. But sixteen, I figured, is special. It had to be a big deal this year.

Throwing my bathrobe on over my nightgown—it was late morning, the day after Christmas, and I’d slept in—I ran downstairs to see what everyone else was up to. Mom and Hal were in the kitchen, drinking coffee and looking at some papers spread out on the table. “Catering business stuff ?” I asked.

Mom nodded at me, then turned back to my stepfather. “Hal, I’ve been thinking about overhead. Maybe we can cut it back if we ?”

She leaned over to point something out to him. As her blond hair swung close to his face, he took the opportunity to kiss her cheek. Mom laughed, blushing. “Oh, Hal,” she said, but she sounded pleased.

Rolling my eyes, I headed for the family room. Mom and Hal had just gotten back from their honeymoon a few weeks before Christmas, and you’d think they were twenty the way they were always gazing adoringly at each other and kissing in public. Mom looks great for her age, but she *is* in her forties, and Hal’s at least fifty, and they’ve both been married before and have grown-up kids.

“The lovebirds?” Rose guessed when she saw my expression.

Rose and her husband, Stephen, and my other big sister, Laurel, were sitting on the couch with their coffee, watching the morning news. The room was still littered with scraps of wrapping paper and satin ribbon.

“Aren’t they a little old for that?” I asked. “I mean, it’s not like they just met. Mom’s known Hal forever. They never *used to* act this way.”

“Getting married is romantic,” Stephen said, slipping an arm around Rose’s waist and pulling her close.

“Not you guys, too,” I groaned as they smooched. “You’ve been married for a whole year and a half. Can’t you show a little self-control?”

“I think Mom and Hal are cute,” Laurel remarked as she pushed her unruly brown hair behind her ears. She clicked the remote control, switching to the public television channel and some boring nature show. Typical.

“Yeah, well, you don’t have to live with them,” I pointed out a little wistfully. I was the only sister still at home. Laurel’s a freshman at the University of Maine—she’s prevet. Rose is a singer and actress; she and Stephen settled in Boston after graduating from college. I’d had a third sister, Daisy—she was in between Rose and Laurel—but she was killed in a car crash when she was nineteen. “It’s no fun at the dinner table lately, believe me. When they’re not drooling over each other, they’re talking about Mom’s new store. I might as well be invisible.”

Actually, this wasn’t really true. Hal is a great guy and pays me a lot of attention. It was nice—having a father again, I mean.

“The store’s a big deal, though,” Rose said. She was now leaning against Stephen’s propped-up knees so he could comb her long blond hair with his fingers. “Mom and Hal are investing a lot in it, and there’s a ton of work to do beforehand.”

My mom is a caterer. She started doing that to make a living after my father died eight years ago—his

fishing boat was lost at sea in a sudden storm. At first it was tough for her to make ends meet, but now she's really successful—so successful, in fact, that she's going to open a gourmet food shop in town this summer. Hal's an accountant, and he's going to help manage the finances.

"I know it's a big deal," I said, nudging Laurel aside so I could sit, too. The show was about coral reefs, and there was a pretty hunky guy scuba diving with the tropical fish. "It's just a constant topic, you know? There are other important things happening these days."

"Like what?" Rose asked.

"*You* know," I said.

Rose wrinkled her forehead and turned to Stephen. "What do you think Lily's talking about?"

He shrugged. "Got me."

"I'm stumped," Laurel put in.

"I know. The after-Christmas sales at the mall," Rose guessed.

"You idiots!" I exclaimed. "Tomorrow's my birthday!"

"Your *birthday!*" Rose slapped the heel of her hand against her forehead. I caught her winking at Laurel. "I totally forgot. How old will you be? Fifteen?"

I knew she was pulling my leg, but I still got worked up. "*Sixteen,*" I corrected indignantly.

"And it's tomorrow?" Laurel shook her head. "That doesn't leave much time to shop. Is it okay if I make the Christmas present I gave you, like, a joint present?"

"Absolutely not!" I declared. "Haven't you guys planned a party?"

"Ask Mom," Rose answered. "Stephen and I are planning to stick around for your birthday, but we need to leave late tomorrow afternoon. Remember I told you my agent, Carol, got me the audition with the touring company of a Broadway musical? I need to rehearse. Speaking of which?" She got to her feet and stretched her arms over her head. "Shower time."

Laurel stood up as well. "I have to leave tomorrow, too," she told me. "Do you think you could have your party in the morning?"

I scowled. "I'm not giving myself a party—you guys are supposed to do it!" Honestly. Didn't anyone care?

Rose finally took pity on me. "Don't worry, Lil. Mom's putting together a brunch, and we'll all be there with bells on."

"Brunch is perfect," Laurel said, heading for the door. "I'll call Carlos and tell him I'll be back in the afternoon."

"Your boyfriend's more important than my birthday?" I shouted after her, but she didn't answer. Which is

just as well because obviously she would've said, "Yes." Duh, I thought. Carlos is a senior at U. Maine, and he's gorgeous. He and Laurel met years ago working at the local wild animal shelter, but they just started dating, and I couldn't exactly blame Laurel for wanting to hurry back to campus!

I trailed into the kitchen. Hal had disappeared, but Mom was still there. "Does brunch sound okay?" she asked, glancing up from her paperwork. "With just the family?"

"I *was* kind of hoping for a real party," I admitted. "Twenty or thirty people, semiformal attire, champagne punch?"

I wasn't kidding, but Mom laughed, anyway. "Oh, Lily," she said. "Your sisters' sixteenth-birthday celebrations were pretty low-key. That's our tradition."

"Well, I *guess* it's okay if it's just us," I said with a disappointed sniff. "Will there be a cake at least? with butter cream frosting?"

"Butter cream frosting," Mom assured me.

"Three layers?"

"Three layers."

I was satisfied. "All right. No joint presents, though," I told her.

Mom laughed again. "Heaven forbid!"

I ate breakfast and then went up to my room, which Laurel shares with me if Rose and Stephen are visiting. I changed into a high-waisted rayon dress and pinned my long, wavy blond hair up with the antique silver-and-garnet comb Rose and Stephen gave me for Christmas. I've always liked dressing up in funky, unusual clothes—lately I've been feeling kind of turn-of-the-century.

I went over to the window and looked out in time to see Laurel walking her dog, Snickers. People were going in and out of our building—we live on Main Street above Wissinger's Bakery, one of the busiest stores in our little southern Maine town, even in the winter, when it's just us locals. When I was really young, my family had a big beautiful old house on Lighthouse Road. It had been in the family for generations, but after Dad died, we had to sell it and move into town. Our apartment is nice, though, with three bedrooms on two floors. It feels like home to me now. Hal used to rent the apartment next door, but he moved in with us when he and Mom got married.

I stayed at the window, my eyes taking in the view. The Hawk Harbor marina was empty of all but fishing boats—the summer people's yachts were in dry dock—and beyond the marina the ocean was steel gray and choppy. I could see to the end of Rocky Point, where the country club is, and down the pine-covered coast a ways. In summer Hawk Harbor gets really crowded and busy. A lot of tourists vacation here, and fancy restaurants and boutiques have popped up all over the place—Mom's future store is a good example. Off-season, though, more than half the stores close and Hawk Harbor reverts back to being a small town. I like it that way. I love living in an old-fashioned place that's full of history and tradition.

I went over to my bookshelves, thinking I'd start reading one of the novels I'd gotten for Christmas. On the

way I looked at two framed photographs on my desk.

I don't know anybody my age who's lost so many close relatives. One picture was of my father, Jim Walker, who died when I was eight, and another was of my older sister Daisy, who died when I was thirteen. If she were still alive, Daisy'd be a junior at Dartmouth. She died right after Laurel's sixteenth birthday, and that autumn and winter were possibly the worst time of my life. Of all our lives.

Daisy was so special, I remembered, lifting the picture to study it more closely. In the photo she was holding a softball bat—her arms tanned and strong. Her blond hair was summer bleached, and her eyes sparkled with good humor. And Dad, I thought. I bit my lip. I hated to admit it, even to myself, but if it weren't for that picture on my desk, I might have forgotten what Dad looked like. It made me sad, but I couldn't help it. He'd been gone for half my life.

I was still holding the picture of Daisy, and now I studied it again. I have a whole album of photos of her, which I look through all the time, but for some reason this one means the most to me. It's just so *Daisy*. I don't like thinking about how her story ended—the rainy night, the car sliding off the slick road—so instead I cherish this single moment, Daisy and her softball bat, her beauty and strength preserved forever. She was so together—smart, athletic, popular, caring, independent, *genuine*. She'd been the backbone of our family after Dad was gone. She took care of me. She could fix anything. Anything at all.

In a weird way I felt closer to Daisy than ever now that Rose and Laurel didn't live at home anymore and I was the only sister left. "I still miss you all the time," I whispered.

I kissed Daisy's picture, then carefully placed it back on the desk. I tried really hard not to think about the fact that my favorite sister hadn't lived to see me turn sixteen.

MOM'S THE BEST caterer in the state of Maine. Brunch the next morning was delicious and elegant: eggs Benedict, a basket of fresh-baked muffins, fruit salad, a cake on a pedestal, candles, good china.

At the end of the meal Rose said, "I bet Lily's ready for her presents. That's always *my* favorite part, anyway."

I blinked innocently. "There are presents for *moi*?"

"Yes, let's do presents before we cut the cake," Mom said.

Hal carried a pile of gift-wrapped boxes over to the table. There was a book from Laurel, a scarf from Rose and Stephen, and a DVD from Hal. "Um, not to seem greedy," I said to Mom, "but I was expecting something ? else."

"Of course," she answered, smiling as she handed me a small velvet box. "I knew you were waiting for this."

I opened the box eagerly. On their sixteenth birthdays all my sisters had gotten gold charms from our great-grandmother's bracelet. What would mine be? I wondered.

"Oh, it's beautiful," I exclaimed when I saw the little gold book on a slender chain.

"You can open it up," Mom explained. "It's a locket."

I opened the locket. “I’ll have to find a tiny, tiny picture to put in here. Thanks, Mom.”

“Cake time!” Laurel said, hopping out of her chair. “I’ll light the candles.”

Everybody sang “Happy Birthday” and I blew out the candles. My wish, of course, was that someday I’d get to go to Paris. I felt as if I had everything else I could want.

As soon as brunch was over, Laurel, Rose, and Stephen had to rush around, packing stuff and tossing it into their cars. Mom handed them care packages of food, and then there was a flurry of hugs and kisses and they were gone.

Back to their real lives, I thought as I stood at the living room window, watching Rose and Stephen buzz off in the old Saab Stephen’s been driving since high school.

I grew up in a big, lively family. Sometimes Rose, Laurel, and I get on each other’s nerves, and sometimes I complain about being the youngest, but I like having my sisters around. Now my sixteenth birthday was over almost before it had begun.

I was an only child again.

ON NEW YEAR’S Eve day Noelle Armitage came over to listen to music and read beauty magazines with me. Noelle and I were neighbors when my family lived on Lighthouse Road, and we’ve been friends off and on forever. I’ll admit that in sixth grade, I thought she wasn’t cool and I started hanging out with some other girls. But in junior high we got close again. We both read a lot and love fashion. Noelle has excellent taste in clothes.

“What’s with this?” Noelle asked, tossing a magazine my way. We were sitting on the floor of my room, our backs against the bed, a bag of pretzel sticks open between us. “Lavender lip gloss?”

“Easter egg colors are in. Look. *These* models have *yellow* lips.”

“Maybe I should rethink my makeup for tonight. I was just going to wear *red* lipstick.”

“Red’s always acceptable,” I assured her. “It’s classic. And on New Year’s Eve you want to look classic.”

Stretching her arms over her head, Noelle let out a happy sigh. “Seth Modine.”

I nodded. That was all there was to say. “Seth Modine,” I agreed, somewhat grumpily.

Noelle had been invited to Seth Modine’s New Year’s Eve party and I hadn’t. She didn’t rub it in, and it wasn’t like I was *devastated*, but it did bug me a little. Seth’s part of the It crowd at South Regional High, and the fact that I wasn’t on his guest list meant I wasn’t. Not that I care about that sort of thing. Well, maybe I do—a little.

“Why did he invite you, anyway?” I asked Noelle. “I didn’t even know you guys were friends.”

“I think his bud, that Timothy guy, likes me. We’re all in the same history class.”

“Timothy Pratt? He’s cute.”

“He’s okay.” Noelle’s pretty cute herself, with wide blue eyes and dead-straight, chin-length, pale blond hair.

Jumping up, she went over to my closet. “So, what can I borrow?”

I helped Noelle pick out a short, sexy black dress that I got as a hand-me-down from Rose. “What are *you* going to do tonight?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I watched Noelle try on my shoes. I wasn’t dating anyone special. “Mickey’s going to a party at Daniel Levin’s and she said I could go with her, but I can’t get too excited about it.”

Mickey is McKenna Clinton, another close girlfriend of mine. She’s fun, but some of her other friends, like Daniel, are kind of quiet. “A party at Daniel’s.” Noelle laughed. “Isn’t that an oxymoron or something?”

“Can you imagine Daniel busting a move on the dance floor?” I agreed.

Noelle shook her head and stuck out her right foot, modeling a black-beaded high heel. “Can I borrow these, too?”

“Sure,” I said. “Someone might as well look hot tonight since I’ll probably be sitting home, watching TV.”

And that’s what I ended up doing. Mom and Hal invited me to go with them to the annual New Year’s Eve party at the Harrisons’, but I couldn’t picture myself there dateless. It was okay when I was a kid, but not now that I’m sixteen. I dressed up, anyway—I put on my Emily Dickinson gown and some fake pearl earrings, made microwave popcorn, and watched old Katharine Hepburn–Spencer Tracy movies on the family room TV.

Usually I’m as happy on my own as I am when I’m surrounded by people, but tonight, as the hands of the clock moved toward midnight and I had no one to kiss and wish Happy New Year, I felt kind of sad. The apartment, which had seemed so cramped when my family first moved in years ago, felt big and empty. The only people home, I thought, are me, myself, and I.

I didn’t want to be lonely, not on New Year’s Eve, so I turned on the secondhand laptop computer Hal gave me for my birthday last year and opened up a file called Journal.

“Me again,” I typed. *“It’s 11:55 on December 31st and I’m not at Seth Modine’s party wearing high heels and lavender lip gloss. ‘Why, Lily Rebecca Walker,’ you declare in astonishment. ‘How could he have overlooked you when he made up his guest list?’ Good question. I guess he just hasn’t noticed me yet.”*

I stopped typing. My gaze wandered from the computer screen to the dark window. If Seth hasn’t noticed me, I thought, then that makes him the only one. I’d always made it a point to be hard to miss. Whenever I change my style or my attitude or my friends, Mom says I’m going through a “phase.” Once Rose called me a chameleon, but Laurel pointed out that I was the opposite—I don’t change color to blend in with my environment, but to stand out from it. What a perfect Laurel comment—she always has to turn everything into an opportunity for nature education.

Now I tilted my head thoughtfully to one side. Maybe there are different ways of getting noticed, I mused. So, what do I have to do to get noticed the right way?

I went back to my journal. *“My big sisters make it seem easy,”* I wrote. *“Rose knows exactly who she is and*

what she wants to do in life, and so does Laurel, and so did Daisy. I wonder if now that I'm sixteen, I'll figure out who I am, too."

Just then the clock on the mantel struck twelve. "Happy New Year," I whispered to myself.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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