

Part Seven



MIRANDA

I forgot that I might see
So many beautiful things
I forgot that I might need
To find out what life could bring
—Andain, “Beautiful Things”

Camp Lies

MY PARENTS GOT divorced the summer before ninth grade. My father was with someone else right away. In fact, though my mother never said so, I think this was the reason they got divorced.

After the divorce, I hardly ever saw my father. And my mother acted stranger than ever. It's not that she was unstable or anything: just distant. Remote. My mother is the kind of person who has a happy face for the rest of the world but not a lot left over for me. She's never talked to me much—not about her feelings, her life. I don't know much about what she was like when she was my age. Don't know much about the things she liked or didn't like. The few times she mentioned her own parents, who I've never met, it was mostly about how she wanted to get as far away from them as she could once she'd grown up. She never told me why. I asked a few times, but she would pretend she hadn't heard me.

I didn't want to go to camp that summer. I had wanted to stay with her, to help her through the divorce. But she insisted I

go away. I figured she wanted the alone time, so I gave it to her.

Camp was awful. I hated it. I thought it would be better being a junior counselor, but it wasn't. No one I knew from the previous year had come back, so I didn't know anyone—not a single person. I'm not even sure why, but I started playing this little make-believe game with the girls in the camp. They'd ask me stuff about myself, and I'd make things up: my parents are in Europe, I told them. I live in a huge townhouse on the nicest street in North River Heights. I have a dog named Daisy.

Then one day I blurted out that I had a little brother who was deformed. I have absolutely no idea why I said this: it just seemed like an interesting thing to say. And, of course, the reaction I got from the little girls in the bungalow was dramatic. Really? So sorry! That must be tough! Et cetera. Et cetera. I regretted saying this the moment it escaped from my lips, of course: I felt like such a fake. If Via ever found out, I thought, she'd think I was such a weirdo. And I felt like a weirdo. But, I have to admit, there was a part of me that felt a little entitled to this lie. I've known Auggie since I was six years old. I've watched him grow up. I've played with him. I've watched all six episodes of *Star Wars* for his sake, so I could talk to him about the aliens and bounty hunters and all that. I'm the one that gave him the astronaut helmet he wouldn't take off for two years. I mean, I've kind of earned the right to think of him as my brother.

And the strangest thing is that these lies I told, these fictions, did wonders for my popularity. The other junior counselors heard it from the campers, and they were all over it. Never in my life have I ever been considered one of the "popular" girls in anything, but that summer in camp, for whatever reason, I was the girl everybody wanted to hang out with. Even the girls in bungalow 32 were totally into me. These were the girls at the top of the food chain. They said they liked my hair (though they changed it). They said they liked the way I did my makeup (though they changed that, too). They showed me how to turn my T-shirts into halter tops. We smoked. We snuck out late at night and took the path through the woods to the boys' camp. We hung out with boys.

When I got home from camp, I called Ella right away to make plans with her. I don't know why I didn't call Via. I guess I just didn't feel like talking about stuff with her. She would have asked me about my parents, about camp. Ella never really asked me about things. She was an easier friend to have in that way. She wasn't serious like Via. She was fun. She thought it was cool when I dyed my hair pink. She wanted to hear all about those trips through the woods late at night.

School

I HARDLY SAW Via at school this year, and when I did it was awkward. It felt like she was judging me. I knew she didn't like my new look. I knew she didn't like my group of friends. I didn't much like hers. We never actually argued: we just drifted away. Ella and I badmouthed her to each other: She's such a prude, she's so this, she's so that. We knew we were being mean, but it was easier to ice her out if we pretended she had done something to us. The truth is she hadn't changed at all: we had. We'd become these other people, and she was still the person she'd always been. That annoyed me so much and I didn't know why.

Once in a while I'd look to see where she was sitting in the lunchroom, or check the elective lists to see what she'd signed up for. But except for a few nods in the hallway and an occasional "hello," we never really spoke to each other.

I noticed Justin about halfway through the school year. I hadn't noticed him at all before then, other than that he was this skinny cutish dude with thick glasses and longish hair who carried a violin everywhere. Then one day I saw him in front of the

school with his arm around Via. "So Via has a boyfriend!" I said to Ella, kind of mocking. I don't know why it surprised me that she'd have a boyfriend. Out of the three of us, she was totally the prettiest: blue, blue eyes and long wavy dark hair. But she'd just never acted like she was at all interested in boys. She acted like she was too smart for that kind of stuff.

I had a boyfriend, too: a guy named Zack. When I told him I was choosing the theater elective, he shook his head and said: "Careful you don't turn into a drama geek." Not the most sympathetic dude in the world, but very cute. Very high up on the totem pole. A varsity jock.

I wasn't planning on taking theater at first. Then I saw Via's name on the sign-up sheet and just wrote my name down on the list. I don't even know why. We managed to avoid one another throughout most of the semester, like we didn't even know each other. Then one day I got to theater class a little early, and Davenport asked me to run off additional copies of the play he was planning on having us do for the spring production: *The Elephant Man*. I'd heard about it but I didn't really know what it was about, so I started skimming through the pages while I was waiting for the xerox machine. It was about a man who lived more than a hundred years ago named John Merrick who was terribly deformed.

"We can't do this play, Mr. D," I told him when I got back to class, and I told him why: my little brother has a birth defect and has a deformed face and this play would hit too close to home. He seemed annoyed and a little unsympathetic, but I kind of said that my parents would have a real issue with the school doing this play. So anyway, he ended up switching to *Our Town*.

I think I went for the role of Emily Gibbs because I knew Via was going to go for it, too. It never occurred to me that I'd beat her for the role.

What I Miss Most

ONE OF THE things I miss the most about Via's friendship is her family. I loved her mom and dad. They were always so welcoming and nice to me. I knew they loved their kids more than anything. I always felt safe around them: safer than anywhere else in the world. How pathetic that I felt safer in someone else's house than in my own, right? And, of course, I loved Auggie. I was never afraid of him: even when I was little. I had friends that couldn't believe I'd ever go over to Via's house. "His face creeps me out," they'd say. "You're stupid," I'd tell them. Auggie's face isn't so bad once you get used to it.

I called Via's house once just to say hello to Auggie. Maybe part of me was hoping Via would answer, I don't know.

"Hey, Major Tom!" I said, using my nickname for him.

"Miranda!" He sounded so happy to hear my voice it actually kind of took me by surprise. "I'm going to a regular school now!" he told me excitedly.

"Really? Wow!" I said, totally shocked. I guess I never thought he'd go to a regular school. His parents have always

been so protective of him. I guess I thought he'd always be that little kid in the astronaut helmet I gave him. Talking to him, I could tell he had no idea that Via and I weren't close anymore. "It's different in high school," I explained to him. "You end up hanging out with loads of different people."

"I have some friends in my new school," he told me. "A kid named Jack and a girl named Summer."

"That's awesome, Auggie," I said. "Well, I was just calling to tell you I miss you and hope you're having a good year. Feel free to call me whenever you want, okay, Auggie? You know I love you always."

"I love you, too, Miranda!"

"Say hi to Via for me. Tell her I miss her."

"I will. Bye!"

"Bye!"

Extraordinary, but No One There to See

NEITHER MY MOTHER nor my father could come see the play on opening night: my mother because she had this thing at work, and my dad because his new wife was going to have her baby any second now, and he had to be on call.

Zack couldn't come to opening night, either: he had a volleyball game against Collegiate he couldn't miss. In fact, he had wanted me to miss the opening night so I could come cheer him on. My "friends" all went to the game, of course, because all their boyfriends were playing. Even Ella didn't come. Given a choice, she chose the crowd.

So on opening night no one that was remotely close to me was even there. And the thing is, I realized in my third or fourth rehearsal that I was good at this acting thing. I felt the part. I understood the words I spoke. I could read the lines as if they were coming from my brain and my heart. And on opening night, I can honestly say I knew I was going to be more than

good: I was going to be great. I was going to be extraordinary, but there would be no one there to see.

We were all backstage, nervously running through our lines in our heads. I peeked through the curtain at the people taking their seats in the auditorium. That's when I saw Auggie walking down the aisle with Isabel and Nate. They took three seats in the fifth row, near the middle. Auggie was wearing a bow tie, looking around excitedly. He had grown up a bit since I'd last seen him, almost a year ago. His hair was shorter, and he was wearing some kind of hearing aid now. His face hadn't changed a bit.

Davenport was running through some last-minute changes with the set decorator. I saw Justin pacing off stage left, mumbling his lines nervously.

"Mr. Davenport," I said, surprising myself as I spoke. "I'm sorry, but I can't go on tonight."

Davenport turned around slowly.

"What?" he said.

"I'm sorry."

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm just ...," I muttered, looking down, "I don't feel well. I'm sorry. I feel like I'm going to throw up." This was a lie.

"It's just last-minute jitters. ..."

"No! I can't do it! I'm telling you."

Davenport looked furious. "Miranda, this is outrageous."

"I'm sorry!"

Davenport took a deep breath, like he was trying to restrain himself. To be truthful, I thought he looked like he was going to explode. His forehead turned bright pink. "Miranda, this is absolutely unacceptable! Now go take a few deep breaths and—"

"I'm *not* going on!" I said loudly, and the tears came to my eyes fairly easily.

"Fine!" he screamed, not looking at me. Then he turned to a kid named David, who was a set decorator. "Go find Olivia in the lighting booth! Tell her she's filling in for Miranda tonight!"

"What?" said David, who wasn't too swift.

"Go!" shouted Davenport in his face. "Now!" The other kids had caught on to what was happening and gathered around.

"What's going on?" said Justin.

"Last-minute change of plans," said Davenport. "Miranda doesn't feel well."

"I feel sick," I said, trying to sound sick.

"So why are you still here?" Davenport said to me angrily. "Stop talking, take off your costume, and give it to Olivia! Okay? Come on, everybody! Let's go! Go! Go!"

I ran backstage to the dressing room as quickly as I could and started peeling off my costume. Two seconds later there was a knock and Via half opened the door.

"*What* is going on?" she said.

“Hurry up, put it on,” I answered, handing her the dress.

“You’re sick?”

“Yeah! Hurry up!”

Via, looking stunned, took off her T-shirt and jeans and pulled the long dress over her head. I pulled it down for her, and then zipped up the back. Luckily, Emily Webb didn’t go on until ten minutes into the play, so the girl handling hair and makeup had time to put Via’s hair up in a twist and do a quick makeup job. I’d never seen Via with a lot of makeup on: she looked like a model.

“I’m not even sure I’ll remember my lines,” Via said, looking at herself in the mirror. “*Your* lines.”

“You’ll do great,” I said.

She looked at me in the mirror. “Why are you doing this, Miranda?”

“Olivia!” It was Davenport, hush-shouting from the door. “You’re on in two minutes. It’s now or never!”

Via followed him out the door, so I never got the chance to answer her question. I don’t know what I would have said, anyway. I wasn’t sure what the answer was.

The Performance

I WATCHED THE rest of the play from the wings just offstage, next to Davenport. Justin was amazing, and Via, in that heartbreaking last scene, was awesome. There was one line she flubbed a bit, but Justin covered for her, and no one in the audience even noticed. I heard Davenport muttering under his breath: “Good, good, good.” He was more nervous than all of the students put together: the actors, the set decorators, the lighting team, the guy handling the curtains. Davenport was a wreck, frankly.

The only time I felt any regret, if you could even call it that, was at the end of the play when everyone went out for their curtain calls. Via and Justin were the last of the actors walking out onstage, and the audience rose to their feet when they took their bows. That, I admit, was a little bittersweet for me. But just a few minutes later I saw Nate and Isabel and Auggie make their way backstage, and they all seemed so happy. Everyone was congratulating the actors, patting them on the back. It was that crazy backstage theater mayhem where sweaty actors stand euphoric while people come worship them for a few seconds. In

that crush of people, I noticed Auggie looking kind of lost. I cut through the crowd as fast as I could and came up behind him.

“Hey!” I said. “Major Tom!”

After the Show

I CAN'T SAY why I was so happy to see August again after so long, or how good it felt when he hugged me.

“I can’t believe how big you’ve gotten,” I said to him.

“I thought you were going to be in the play!” he said.

“I wasn’t up to it,” I said. “But Via was great, don’t you think?”

He nodded. Two seconds later Isabel found us.

“Miranda!” she said happily, giving me a kiss on the cheek. And then to August: “Don’t ever disappear like that again.”

“You’re the one who disappeared,” Auggie answered back.

“How are you feeling?” Isabel said to me. “Via told us you got sick. ...”

“Much better,” I answered.

“Is your mom here?” said Isabel.

“No, she had work stuff, so it’s actually not a big deal for me,” I said truthfully. “We have two more shows anyway, though I don’t think I’ll be as good an Emily as Via was tonight.”

Nate came over and we had basically the same exact conversation. Then Isabel said: “Look, we’re going to have a late-night dinner to celebrate the show. Are you feeling up to joining us? We’d love to have you!”

“Oh, no ...,” I started to say.

“Pleeease?” said Auggie.

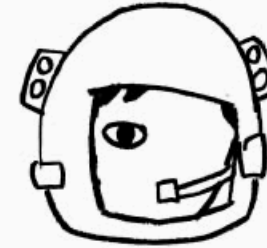
“I should go home,” I said.

“We insist,” said Nate.

By now Via and Justin had come over with Justin’s mom, and Via put her arm around me.

“You’re definitely coming,” she said, smiling her old smile at me. They started leading me out of the crowd, and I have to admit, for the first time in a very, very long time, I felt absolutely happy.

Part Eight



AUGUST

You're gonna reach the sky

Fly . . . Beautiful child

—Eurythmics, “Beautiful Child”