

There are two sides to every story ...
usually you only live one.

ME

and

ME

ALICE KUIPERS

IT'S A PERFECT DAY for Lark's dream date with Alec from school. Blue skies, clear water, a canoe on the lake. Alec has even brought flowers for Lark's birthday. Everything is just right ... until they hear screams from the edge of the water.

Annabelle, a little girl Lark used to babysit, is struggling in the reeds. When Lark and Alec dive in to help her, Alec hits his head on a rock. Now Annabelle and Alec are both in trouble, and Lark can only save one.

With that split-second decision, Lark's world is torn in two, leaving her to cope with the consequences of both choices. She lives two lives, two selves.

But which is the right life, and which is the real Lark?

A mind-bending novel, *Me and Me* is about what it feels like to be torn in pieces, and how to make two halves whole again.

Me and Me

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Alice Kuipers



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To my sister, Anneke.
Far away but always near.

Prologue

Prologue

My birthday: morning

“I like surprises,” I say, as I strap myself in.

Alec turns his dark gaze to me. “Good. You ready?” He seems folded into his blue pickup, huge in the front cab.

“I think I’m ready. I, uh, I noticed the canoe.” And the orange roses between our seats, filling the space with their heady scent.

Alec jars the truck into drive. I glance at his silver thumb ring and notice the way the cuffs of his rolled-up sleeves are slightly dirty, as if he’s been hauling stuff or doing yardwork. I love his outdoorsy look, his clothes from those stores where they have tents set up in the back room. Makes him look like he’s ready to chop down trees or build a fire. I can feel every movement of his foot on the pedals, the way his hands hold the wheel. I want his hands on me like that.

“Those are for you.” He juts his chin toward the roses and smiles over at me.

“Thanks.” I lift them to my nose. They smell of summer and of the past. A reel of the cemetery plays in my head.

Lucy:

Where are u?

Lark:

???

Lucy:

Breakfast, right?

B4 I work?

I was going to practice tarot reading
on u for ur birthday ...

She sends a photo of herself at D'Lish, where we both work. Her strawberry-blond hair is done in loose braids. She's pulling a pouty, sad face.

Lark:

Sorry!!! Going on a date.

Lucy:

Now? Who with???

Lark:

Last-minute decision.

Alec messaged last night.

He brought a canoe. Forgive me ;-)

Me and Me

Lucy:

Alec Sandcross? Nice!

I know how you feel about birthdays but 17 is a BIG DEAL

Lark:

Stop!

Lucy sends a Snap of herself sticking out her tongue.

Lark:

Tonight instead? Meet me and the band.

They have something planned.

Lucy:

I'm already coming after work.

Txt me later.

As Alec drives, he bites his bottom lip, which is pierced in the center with a silver stud. Cute habit. I've seen him do it in class when he's figuring something out. He's thoughtful in class like that, intense almost. But not broody. He's spontaneous, but not crazy. Relaxed, yet passionate about the things he loves. Last week in English he started talking about a book on climbing he was into: *Touching the Void*. I bet everyone is going to read it now. I pick at the meant-to-be-there rip in my pastel-green jeans. My leather boots come close to the knee. My pale shirt has tiny pink flowers peeping out from beneath my long black hair, which is loose.

He pulls onto the highway, and soon the city falls away. "I think you're going to enjoy today."

The prairies stretch out like a vast ocean before us. I drum my hands on my knees to the radio — Seafret — and then I'm thinking in lyrics: *Wanna give your heart to me. The fire in the woods, one tree ...* I note the words on my cell. I glance at Alec. I wonder if he's aware I mentally left the vehicle and traveled into a song. I wonder if he's thinking about me like I'm thinking about him. I wonder if he's noticed what I'm wearing.

“So, you canoed before?” He checks his rearview mirror and overtakes a car in front of us.

The song tugs at me. “I've got a lyric idea. Sorry. Can I just finish this?”

“Oh ... sure.” Alec falls quiet, hand on the wheel as he stares ahead.

The words are flowing. Sometimes it happens like that, and a whole song appears where seconds before there was nothing. Whenever this happens on a date, boys think it's a challenge.

They want my full attention. But Alec just drives. Time flashes by. It's as if I've dived into deep water and I'm exploring a coral world, blue and beautiful. There's a psychologist we learned about recently who talks about *flow*. I get it when I'm in the zone like this. I only emerge when Alec pulls the truck into the lot at Pike Lake.

Songs almost never appear all at once. This one came out fully formed, so I'm feeling a little pumped.

“All done?” he says, turning off the ignition.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“It's cool. But now that you're done, let's go.” He grins, unfolds himself from the truck and shuts his door.

I jump out, too. The lot fronts the beach, a thin strip of sand that runs along the tree line for three hundred yards or

so. Beyond the beach is the silk-calm lake. I breathe in deeply, meditating on the clear view. The fresh breeze gives me goose bumps.

The place is almost deserted. Through a line of pine trees, I spot a couple and a small, blond child. I realize that it's the Fields family. He's *the* Martin Fields of Fields Studios, which is why I took a babysitting job with them six months ago. Except he was always at work so I hardly saw him. Whatever. I fell in love with his little girl and worked for them for about two months, before they decided to hire a full-time nanny instead.

"Annabelle?" I yell.

She turns and whoops but then pauses, as if suddenly shy. Suzanne — her mom — pushes her wild, curly hair from her face and waves hello. She walks over. Annabelle follows.

"Hi, Lark." Annabelle tips up her chin. "I'm nearly five now."

"Wow! You grew up. Soon you'll be older than me!" I count to five.

She giggles, and her blue eyes meet mine.

"Want to help me load the cooler?" Alec calls from the back of the truck.

Suzanne nods toward their two canoes, which are already at the edge of the lake. "We're hitting the water, too."

"Come find us out there."

"Mom?" Annabelle asks.

"Of course. Though I'm not sure we should disturb your privacy."

I smile. "No, come and find us on the water. Seriously. Sorry, Alec, I'm coming." A gust of cool wind ripples the water. I wave to Annabelle. Across the beach, Martin is still talking on his cell.

Back at the truck, I heft the cooler with Alec, the weight straining my muscles. “What are we eating?”

“By the end of the day,” he says, “you’ll be awestruck by my gourmet cooking skills. Now, help me get the canoe off the top.”

We carry the canoe down to the water. Then suddenly I’m diving back into the song I was writing. One of the opening lines would work better if I added a word near the end to change the rhythm: *Wanna give your heart to me, the fire in the woods, cut down, cut down, just one tree ...* We slide the canoe into the water. It *thunks* against the sandy ground, and cold water slops over my pant leg.

“I’ve ... I’ll just be a moment, promise.” I take my cell out of my back pocket.

“Okay. If you want. But I’m going to show you something amazing.” Alec waggles his eyebrows.

“Is this ‘something amazing’ out on the lake or something you can do?”

“I am indeed talented —” he winks to show he’s kidding “— but no ... no, you write your song.”

I tuck my phone away. “This better be good,” I say, smiling.

A gull swoops overhead, a long way from the ocean. I pull off my shoes and socks. The icy water makes me gasp. The canoe wobbles as I climb in to join him and slip on my life jacket. The bottom of the canoe is hot from being in the sun on the roof of the car. The temperature contrast on my feet unfurls something in my chest. I ease fully into the moment.

“I wish I could sing,” Alec says. “It must be awesome to be able to express yourself like that.”

I love that he’s curious about me. “Everyone can sing,” I say.

“Not true.”

“Okay.” I sit on the front bench and turn back to Alec. “Not *exactly* true. But what I mean is that everyone can do *something* well. My mom taught me that.” There she is. My mom. Even when I forget all about her, she’s still watching over me. She left me a video. In it she tells me she’s *always there*. Once I wrote a song with that as the hook.

Alec passes me a paddle, and I dip it into the water. The sound of the splash makes me think of ice cream, of summer, of holidays on the lake when I was a kid. In mutual but not uncomfortable quiet, we head along the shore of the lake. When I glance back at Alec, he smiles languidly. My heart does a pancake flip. Alec points out a beaver gliding by in the shallows.

A little while later, he interrupts the silence: “My dad used to take me on the water. He thought fishing was good for — I don’t know — turning me into a man. ’Cept, I hated it, which drove him insane. I couldn’t stand being cooped up in a small space — I wanted to swim, kept jumping in. Disturbing the fish. He used to yell at me, which was ... well, not exactly relaxing.”

He steers the canoe toward a small inlet, where the reeds hide us. His voice floats forward to me.

“We don’t go on the water together anymore. And it’s weird, but without him around, I don’t mind the small space. Maybe that’s because you’re here.”

We both stop paddling and let the canoe drift. My paddle drips freezing water over my knees. I swivel so I can see him. He leans his head to one side and smiles. His paddle is still in the water, and he occasionally re-angles it, making a deep ripple.

I point at the piercing in his lip. “Did it hurt?”

“I was, like, thirteen. I got into trouble. Big trouble. Call it rebellion.”

“You seem like a good student. Into nature and stuff, not drugs and parties.”

“Not that sort of rebellious.” He places his paddle across the canoe and rests both arms on it. “So, have you canoed much before?”

“We canoed and camped every weekend during the summer when I was little. Dad doesn’t look like it now.” Alec stays quiet while I speak. “He has a heart thing, so he can’t really exercise now. It means he’s put on some weight, and he isn’t so outdoorsy anymore, although he loves yardwork.”

“What sort of a heart thing?”

“They don’t really know. If he runs or gets his pulse up, I guess, his heart kinda skips.”

My heart is skipping now. I don’t want to talk about this. But I say, “It sucks. Some sort of scarring, maybe. I always think it’s a broken heart ’cause of my mom.” I lean back into paddling. My arms feel the pull of the water, and I fill my body with the sensation. Alec seems to get that the topic isn’t my favorite, because he doesn’t push; everyone at school knows what happened to my mom. Instead, as he paddles, he shifts to a new subject.

“How long have you played guitar?”

“Since before I can remember. Dad got me a ukulele when I was tiny — not the guitar I wanted so badly — because a ukulele is smaller, easier to start with. But tell me about you. I mean, stuff I don’t know from class.”

“What do you know from class?”

I lift my oar and turn back to him. Boy, he’s cute when he looks at me like that. I say, “Um, you’ve been living in Edenville as long as me. Like, forever. You live with your parents. You

work at Eb's Outdoors. You aren't good at math. You are super-good at history."

"I am, too, good at math."

"Whatever." Smiling, I tilt my face up to the sun. It means I'm not looking when Alec stands. The canoe lurching makes me grab the sides. "What are you doing?"

"Feel like a swim?"

"Sure. But I don't have a swimsuit."

"Neither do I." His eyes are alight.

"Ah. The amazing thing you promised," I say, deadpan. "Alec Sandcross gets naked and goes for a swim."

"No, that's not it."

He pulls off his shirt. My eyes travel over his tanned, muscular arms and six-pack.

"There maybe isn't anything amazing ..."

I splash water at him. "You lied to stop me writing. I thought that might be the deal."

The canoe tips but rights itself as I wobble to my feet.

"Okay then, the amazing thing ... is that you're going to take your clothes off, too," he says.

I unzip my life jacket. I hesitate and check around. The Fields family can't be seen, and the water is glassy quiet. Alec smiles his lazy smile. Then I do it. I pull off my shirt. Thank God I'm wearing a decent bra.

We're faltering and goofing off, and then suddenly we're giggling as he crouches and tugs off his jeans and I do the same — tricky in a canoe. We're stripped down to our underwear. The sun is amazing-warm against my skin. He steps closer along the canoe, causing it to tip again. I bet he's gonna come up to me and kiss me.

Instead he turns to the water. “Come on.”

A shout stops us. “Help! Oh, my God, someone help me!”

It’s Suzanne. I thought we were far from everyone, but I catch sight of her flailing in the water just through the reeds.

And I glimpse a red life jacket.

Annabelle!

She’s floating facedown on the other side of the canoe from Suzanne. Alec and I glance at each other. Alec dives, and I jump. The water is as cold as death. I lift my face to orient myself, pushing hair out of my eyes, and then, focused, I knife through the water.

Now Annabelle is about ten yards away from me. Suzanne is still flailing in the reeds.

“Help her!”

Just then Alec cries out. I glance back. He’s about ten yards behind me, *blood* pouring from his temple. His eyes are glassy.

“I banged my ... I ...”

He’s sinking. “Alec!”

“I can’t get to her!” Suzanne fights the reeds that have entangled her.

I turn back. I’m halfway between Annabelle and Alec. I have to save them. Alec is going under. Annabelle is facedown. I can’t breathe. Pain radiates through my chest. I tread water, frantically looking one way and then the other.

I do not know who to choose.

Suzanne screams, “Lark! DO SOMETHING!”

But I *can’t*.

*I'm shattered glass
Shatter me, me, me
A moment in pieces
Take a shard of me
Look deeply inside for remnants
Of how we used to be
Part the water, slide in a ripple
Find yourself in time
Find me.
Parallel you, parallel me.*

Chapter One

Chapter One

Day 1: early

My stomach hurts, and my eyes ache. I haven't slept. I sit on the front step, holding my coffee cup tightly. Tangled branches overhang our yard. It's not even nine in the morning, but the heat is rising already. I'm listening to St. Vincent while I watch Dad pick tomatoes. Even from here, their leaves smell rich and dense, almost spicy. Because he's a mechanic, he has grease on his shirt from work, but it hasn't stopped him wearing it again.

Alec's truck arrives. I remove one earbud and watch him get out. He's wearing his usual outdoorsy clothes, and he's holding three red roses. Roses again. I think of the orange ones that I left in his truck yesterday. I wonder if he threw them out after what happened. Alec steps through our gate, seeming giant in our nineteenth-century English garden-style yard, his shoes crunching on the gravel path, and he holds out the bouquet to me. My eyes travel over him. The neat stitches are stark against

the skin of his temple. His shirt is pale green, and his hoodie is emblazoned with the slogan HIT THE WOODS. His sleeves are pushed back, revealing his strong, tanned arms. The air stills, and a bird calls a warning overhead. *I chose him, I chose him, I chose him.* I left a little girl facedown in the water. The bird calls again, and it sounds to me like a judgment. I swallow my nausea, seeking Alec's gaze to reassure me I made the right choice. I catch his eye. Something between us quickens, intensifies, becomes solid.

"You look ..." He pauses, as if he's finding the right word, his tongue resting on the right of his bottom lip, close to his piercing. "Lovely."

"I look tired." I smile wanly. I take the roses. "Thanks."

"I didn't sleep either." He turns to my dad, who has emerged from the bushes. "Mr. Hardy? A pleasure to meet you." He even reaches out to shake Dad's hand. "I mean, I know we saw each other yesterday."

He means at the hospital, where Dad had to come and get me. Where Alec had to be checked over. Where little Annabelle is in a coma.

Suzanne asked us not to visit her. "Family only, please," she said. Not unkindly, but with a quiet firmness.

Alec continues. "But that feels like months ago ..."

"Call me 'Vince.' 'Mr. Hardy' makes me feel old."

"Will do. Thank you, Vince." Alec turns to me. "I just wanted to check you were okay."

I tremble. I can still hear that desperate cry: *Lark! DO SOMETHING!*

Day 3: period three

Alec's thumb circles my palm, and shivers spread through me. I could write about this feeling, put it in a song. I think about the last time I wrote a song and push away the lyrics that are trying to come. Instead I peek at his hand, his silver thumb ring, his bitten nails. He's wearing one of those checkered shirts that make him look like he's on his way to hike up a mountain. His jeans have that rugged look, too — not skinny or trendy. The “man outside” look works for me. Yep. Works for me. The piercing in the middle of his bottom lip doesn't quite fit the look, but I like it, too. I look everywhere but at the stitches on his temple. They only remind me of what I did. His clothes contrast totally with what I'm wearing: a black shirt, short black skirt and knee-high low-heeled boots.

It's the first day back at school after the summer break, and it's already the period before lunch. The day has gone by without me really being a part of it. Mr. Hidlebaugh, tall, bald and enthusiastic, stands at the front of the class emphatically talking about *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. His hands make huge gestures, and then he writes *Who is anyone really?* on the smartboard.

But I hardly pay attention. The world has tilted on its axis. My mind clutters with images of Annabelle in the water. She was dusky blue. My heart pounds. I have to get out of here. Suzanne's shriek echoes in my head. Alec's thumb tracks another slow circle, and I take a breath. Cool it. I hear my cell, but no message appears. I silence it.

“The boy is asking who the footprints belong to,” Hidlebaugh cries. He raises his right arm and brings it down in a chopping motion. “Who? I ask you.”

We're sitting at desks in a U shape. Alec is on one side of me, Lucy the other. I lean my shoulder against hers. She smells of the horrible clove cigarettes she always smokes, and of incense. The incense gets in her strawberry-blond hair at her mom's store. Her mom, Dolphin — her actual name — was my mom's best friend. Lucy pushes her shoulder against mine.

Finally, finally, the bell rings. We only have a half day the first day, so school is over.

Alec is still holding my hand as we file out into the crowded hallway of Edenville High. Lucy asks if we want to go for lunch.

I glance at Alec, who is staring into space, not really listening. "You know what, Luce?" I say. "Why don't I call you later."

She flashes me a smile. "Sure."

We've known each other since we were babies, so I know she means *Go for it, Lark. Have fun with the new guy.*

"See ya later, lovebirds."

Alec slips his hand from mine and rests it around my waist. My whole body feels his heat.

We walk across the parking lot away from the school. The day is so soft, so luminously agreeable, that my skin becomes part of the weather. My mood suddenly brightens, and my thoughts float across my mind as lightly as the shining white clouds above. Alec tightens his grip around my waist, pulling me slightly toward him. I stumble. He catches hold of me, and we end up facing each other.

"You trying to make me fall?" I say. It's corny, but I don't care.

"Mebbe."

I glance at his mouth, the piercing there. If he kissed me, would I feel the metal in his lip? Electricity sparks between us.

“You hungry?” he says.

“Sure. What do you want?” I ask, then blush at my accidental innuendo. “I mean ... to eat. How about a burger?”

“Burger! Lark — the Chicken Shack is the way to go. I’ll convert you.”

“To greasy, triple-fried wings? I don’t think so.”

“I’m pretty persuasive. But first, sing me something.” He tugs my hand and steps back from me.

“Sing?” I glance around the parking lot. “You don’t mean here.”

“Why not?”

“I — I haven’t really got anything new right now.”

“An old song, then.”

“I don’t have my guitar.”

“Guitar? Do you need it with you to sing?”

“Honestly? No.” I watch other kids get into their cars or wander to the usual lunch places. “Anyway, I don’t use that guitar anymore.”

“Why?”

“Uh, next question, please ...”

“Interesting.” He taps his chin like he’s pretending to be working something out. “Ms. Lark has a secret. I’ll get it out of her. But not before I’ve heard her sing.”

“I won’t! You can’t make me!” I say, dramatically stepping back.

He narrows his eyes. “So-o-o-o, what type of guitar is it? This one you don’t use?”

“You won’t get my secrets from me.” I smile at him coyly.

“But I will answer you that. The one I actually use belonged to Iona, but I also have a Takamine guitar. A Tak — that’s what it’s called in the business. It’s an electric acoustic.” I remember the feel of it. “It has a pickup built into it for amplification.”

“What’s that?”

“A pickup? It’s a small electronic device, set right into the body of the guitar, that picks up the sound.”

“But you don’t use it. And you don’t have Iona’s guitar here. So ... there’s just you, me and your voice.” He produces a pair of sunglasses from his shirt pocket. “You can pretend I’m not looking. Sing!”

“It’s not that I’m worried about you looking.” I’m not sure how such an innocent statement comes out sounding so dirty. “Okay.” I hold up my hands. “Okay. I’ll do it.” I glance once more around the emptying parking lot and start to sing:

*“We were this close to the water
My hair in my eyes
And the sun
High above us
When you told me it was done
Since then I’ve been running
Oh, you make me run
To get back to the moment
When you told me I’m the one.”*

A couple of kids stop walking and clap. I shut up. What am I doing? I just sang in the parking lot. “So yeah. It’s been on my mind. I wrote it long before ... before. But it changes the whole meaning.”

Alec takes two steps to be next to me again and pulls me close. He lifts his sunglasses, and the electricity between us surges again. He drops his mouth to mine. His kiss is quick and gentle, and his lips taste of sunshine and honey. My whole body turns molten. He pulls his mouth away to look at me, and in his dark eyes I see a glint of light. My mouth follows his, and we kiss again. He slides his hand into my hair, and hot sparks shoot down my neck and spine.

I hear Lucy yell, “Classy, Lark.” I give her the finger while we keep kissing.

Alec surfaces first and tugs me toward the Chicken Shack, where we order a huge tub of wings. They smell greasy and delicious, and they are. We sit on bar stools in the window, time passing like there is no such thing as time at all. We listen to a singer I’ve just discovered — Tei Shi. One earbud each. We talk about music, about hiking, about a band I want to go and see, about climbing, about everything and nothing. He looks at me while I wipe chicken grease off my mouth. Sure, not the most romantic moment in history, but as his eyes meet mine, I have the feeling that I know Alec. I shudder in a good way. He feels familiar, like we’ve met before, like we’re connected, like ... like he’s my soul mate. Who knew I even believed in soul mates? But suddenly it seems blazingly obvious that of course we each have a soul mate, and there, with fried chicken on my lips, I find the person who might be mine.

Alec has to run an errand, so he can’t drop me home. After we kiss goodbye, I float onto the bus, drift into my seat, yawn and check my cell. Alec has sent a photo of the climbing wall downtown.

Alec:

Wanna join me there Saturday?

Lark:

Am working —
how about Sunday?

Alec:

Blow off work.

Lark:

Can't!

Alec:

Sunday then.
See you tomorrow.

Lark:

After band practice.
We always practice on Sunday.

Alec:

You playing hard to get? xxx

My heart quickens at the xxx sign-off. What is with me? Even superhot-and-heavy Jared didn't turn me to jelly like this. I daydream against the seat, watching as we cross over the main bridge but averting my eyes from the swift river below. It burns in my mind, and as I close my eyes, I see the lake, the water, Annabelle. I get out at the bus stop a few blocks from my house,

deciding to walk in the sunshine to clear the images. Quickly the warmth of the day improves my mood, and I arrive home, humming the song I sang to Alec, to find my dad tending his flower garden. We live in a small clapboard house built in 1912, the year Edenville became a city.

“Someone’s happier,” Dad says, brushing his hands against his shirt.

“Yeah. Things with Alec are ... they’re maybe ... good.”

Dad plucks a dead flower head from the bush.

Suzanne:

Thanks for your message, Lark.

No change here.

I’ll let you know when you can visit.

In a heartbeat, the bright day dissipates. I can’t believe I’ve been smiling while Annabelle is in the hospital. I remember her slack face, damp lashes, the shrill of the ambulance siren.

“At least no change means she’s not worse,” I say to Dad.

“Lark, you know you did everything you could, right?”

“If only I’d ... I took too long ...” Tears spring to my eyes, and though Dad tries to comfort me, I just want to forget about what happened, so I head into the house to start supper.

I cut onions and fry them in butter, then add a little flour, stock and milk to make gravy, which is how Mom used to do it. I place four sausages into a pan with a bit of maple syrup and water, cover the whole thing with foil and put it in the oven to bake. I watch some reality crap on TV and then boil water to make pasta. Then I prep a simple salad and lay two plates and cutlery on the table.

When everything's ready, I go outside to find Dad, who's talking to Cayson "Nifty" Nifteneger. Nifty is tall and insanely skinny. He and Iona used to compete to see who was going to be the tallest, but Nifty won by three inches. He's into clothes and music, and right now he's dressed like we're living in New York, with his hair spiked and a fashionably cut tee that falls loosely around his shoulders.

"Hey, wildcat," Nifty says, slipping his e-cig into his shirt pocket. "You coming to band practice?"

"Course."

Dad nods at us before disappearing inside.

"How was your day?" I ask Nifty.

"Same old." He works at a music store full-time since he dropped out of high school last year. "Got anything new for us?"

I think about the song I sang to Alec. It's one the band has never heard. My stomach twists at the thought of sharing it or the other song I started on my birthday, so I reply, "Not today."

"Okay, soon, though. We gotta get ready for the show."

"Show?"

"Hell, yes. We're on at Lydia's. I'm pretty sure we are, anyway. Hey, I hear you're dating that sexy-hot ninja hunk," he says.

"Ninja?"

"The parkour guy — right? Alec Sandcross. Wild and crazy stuntman."

"I don't know that we're *dating*."

"Mmm-hmm." He swivels his hips. "That's my Lark, baby." He pauses. "How's the little girl?"

"Same." I flash back to Annabelle being lifted limply from the water.

"You okay?"

Me and Me

“I’m okay if I don’t think about it. Wanna join us for supper?”

Nifty shakes his head and gets on his bike. “Nah, I’m going for a ride. But I do need a little advice about something.”

Alec:

Just thinking about you.

Lark:

Good.

“Bye, then, La-aa-aark,” Nifty sings.

I glance up from my phone and smile. I can’t stop smiling.

“Sorry, you wanted some advice?”

“I gotta go now.”

“See you later, at practice,” I call.

He pretends to tip an imaginary cap before he pedals away.

Day 7: Sunday afternoon

Iona's parents are über rich. Their garage alone is bigger than the main floor of my house. Every Wednesday and Sunday, our band meets here. Her parents have cleared out the back half of the garage, and Iona has her drum kit here and a bunch of equipment. My favorite spot is the old blue three-person couch, where I'm sitting this Sunday, playing with the jewel on my belly chain, which dangles out over my jeans. When Iona has parties in this garage, I people-watch from this spot. It's a great way to get ideas for songs. Suddenly I have an overpowering feeling of déjà vu. It makes me so dizzy I lean my head over my knees. The weird feeling quickly passes. I probably need something to eat.

Alec:

Not long now.

Lark:

Too long.

I look over at the rest of the band — Iona, Nifty, Reid. We've been playing together since we were fourteen — after my mom died — but we haven't got a name right now. We were the Specials Board for a while, and for at least five months before that, Nifty convinced us that Glass Returns was a good name, and before that I think we were Goodly Animals. On Wednesday after school we talked it over again, but Nifty, Iona and Reid all vetoed the name I suggested: Exploding Night of the Zesty Solitude. I told them I got it off an internet band-

name generator. It was ironic cool. They weren't convinced.

Nifty is noodling on his guitar and chatting to Reid, who is sitting at his keyboard and trying out a melody that Nifty wants him to work on. Iona is tapping her bass drum with one foot and messaging on her cell. I remember fighting with Iona for the dress-up clothes at preschool and throwing sand at Nifty. Iona was a total princess as a little kid. Now she's just under six feet tall, with huge dark bangs, crazy wild makeup all the time. Today she's drawn a blue-and-yellow star over one eye, Roller Derby-style. She's been getting more into Roller Derby recently and often heads out after practice on Sundays for a couple of hours at the rink. She's wearing a black leather jacket with US flags sewn all over it and a corset underneath that shows off her super curves. She volunteers at the crisis nursery, and the little kids think she's the coolest girl in the world.

I wonder if we'd all have ended up friends if we hadn't been in preschool together. We're into different crowds now at school. Reid's a techie, loves reading HTML and is hell-bent on being some geek superstar. He has square glasses, green eyes — his eyes are vivid, a contrast against his dark hair and sideburns. His parents fled the Iraq War and came here to Edenville. He's never talked about it in all the years we've known each other. Iona's a third-wave girl, furiously fighting for women's rights. Nifty, who was the year above us, hung with the hipsters — although he hates the term — before he dropped out of school. Since meeting Cole, he's regretted dropping out.

I cozy back up on the couch and read over the messages Alec has already sent me today. This whole week at school, things have been building up between us. Kisses against the gym wall.

Hand holding at lunch. Long conversations in his pickup when he drives me home, then sitting in the truck for ages outside my house. As I read, he messages again:

Alec:

You ready?

Finished work early.

Our Sunday practice has been kinda flat. I haven't really gotten off the couch or warmed up my voice, and it doesn't help that Nifty's in the worst mood.

Lucy:

Climbing?

He's totally going to check out your butt!

Lark:

I know. Urgh.

Am wearing skinny jeans.

Right choice?

Lucy:

Hahahaha!

Nifty interrupts. "Lark, he-ll-o-o-o-o. I told you there's a chance of a show at Lydia's in October. We need to focus."

"We'll be fine," I say. "You worry too much. And the show's not even a sure thing, right? Maybe we should just quit today. You're not in the mood."

"You're the one who's not in the mood." Nifty scowls at me,

pulls his e-cig from his pocket and then puts it back again.

Alec:

We on?

Lark:

Definitely on — coming now.

We're done here.

“Ooooh, lovergirl,” Iona sings, distracting me.

I throw a balled-up paper bag from the brownie I bought at D'Lish and read Alec's next message:

Alec:

Am here. Came to watch.

But even better.

My heart jumps as Alec arrives at the garage door, ignoring my bandmates' eye rolling. I go to him, and he puts his arms around me, bending to kiss me, briefly. I feel the metal of his stud hard inside his lip. Just having him close makes me feel safe, comforted, like I can do anything. Iona wolf-whistles.

Alec pulls away and says to the others, “Thought I'd get my girl.”

As I grab my longboard and the rest of my stuff, tingling from being called his “girl,” even though it's sappy, I catch Reid's eyes. They cloud with an unreadable emotion before he pulls his cell from his pocket and stares at it.

I swing Alec's hand. “You know everyone, right?”

Alec nods. He's never hung out with any of the band, but

everyone knows everyone at Edenville High. He takes my board as we walk out into the cool fall afternoon. “Wanna try free climbing instead of the wall?” he asks.

“I heard you were into that.” The wind blows, and I nestle into my jacket. I found it at a thrift store, and it’s silver-gray, down to my thighs.

“Who from?”

“Nifty says you’re into wild and crazy stunts.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“Apparently you’re an urban ninja.”

“Oooh,” he says, dropping my board and jumping on. “I like that.” He directs the board toward the curb and flips it fully before landing back on it. “I can be an urban ninja.”

“How did you get into it?”

“Parkour is used a lot in video games. The designers motion-capture people for the games by filming parkour. The way that heroes move — well, I gamed enough, saw parkour enough, I wanted to try it. I loved it. It makes me feel ... free.” His expression momentarily darkens.

A loud motorbike roars by as Alec nimbly leaps onto a wall, leaving my board on the ground. He somersaults to one side and lands on a small, squat brick structure I hadn’t even noticed.

“Sweet.” A few leaves fall in swirling patterns, and new lyrics come to me: *It makes me feel ... free.*

“That’s called a ‘precision drop’ — when you have a long surface that isn’t wide.” He jumps lightly to the ground next to me. “You don’t move when you land.”

“You make it look easy!”

“It gets easier the more you do it. Try it.” He spins around, his arms out wide, and tilts back to look at the sky. “Here

I am, free as a bird, trying to convince my girl to give it a whirl.” He stops to look at me. “Maybe I should leave the songwriting to you.”

“No, that was pretty good. At least the lines rhymed.” I laugh. “But I don’t need convincing. I’ll try it. What do you want to free-climb?”

“How about the old hotel? We’d have to wait until closer to twilight. A couple of hours. Then we’d be fine. We’ll get the elevator up to the eighth floor. I’ve done it before. There’s a window. I’ll show you.”

“The eighth floor? That sounds ... high.”

“We can practice stuff until then.”

His words tug at my mind. *Twilight. The eighth floor. I’ve done it before.* A couple of notes play around with the lyrics in my head, tumbling over each other like autumn leaves. I pull out my cell to make notes. There’s a message:

Alec not surfacing,
the reflection in the water
of the sky above.

There’s no number. The message vanishes, but my head begins to pound.

“What’s up?” Alec gently touches my cheek.

“Just my cell. I got a weird ...” I move back from him and rub my temples. “It was really ... I don’t even know.” I check my cell again. There’s no message. “Let’s go.”

By the time we’ve driven downtown and walked along the river for a while, practicing a few wall climbs and jumps, it’s late afternoon. We buy take-out coffees and sit on a bench with our

hands wrapped around the warm disposable cups, occasionally looking up at the hotel. I pull out my phone and put in one earbud, giving Alec the other. Together we listen to Alvways. The vocalist's voice is high, subtle, nuanced, and I love it. After two songs, Alec takes out the earbud.

"You don't like it?" I hold my hand to my chest.

"Well, it's maybe ... uh ... maybe just a bit girlie."

"Girlie? She's got great lyrics. A gorgeous voice."

"Okay, sure. She's not all high-pitched and emotional."

I jab him in the ribs. "You're a sexist monster."

"I'm a sexy what?"

"A sexist —"

He presses his mouth to mine. When we come up for air, he grins and says, "Can we climb now?"

At the hotel, a tall, thin guy opens the front door for us. A memory trickles into my mind. My mom and I came here, to this hotel lobby, and we sat here. I must have been nine. We drank hot chocolate and pretended to be rich and famous. At one point she sat at the piano. That one, right there. She began to play, and the other people sitting around stopped what they were doing to listen. And then, just as I'm trying to remember the exact sound of her voice, the memory is gone. There is only the shiny hotel lobby, the burble of other guests, and Muzak, bringing me back to the present.

Alec is saying, "It's about having three points of contact at all times."

"What is?"

"Climbing. I was just telling you. I'm guessing you weren't listening."

"Sorry. I was just ..."

He moves his thumb lightly over my cheek, then rests it on my bottom lip. “Ready now for a climbing lesson?”

I kiss his thumb and nod. The elevator doors squeak closed; the motor whirs as it goes up. We’re reflected in the glass.

“Three points of contact. One hand two feet, or two hands one foot. But this isn’t hard climbing. Not at all — the pitch of the roof up there isn’t steep. We can take some pictures, watch the sunset. Ready?”

I nod. My stomach has a stone in it.

He takes my hand and says, “Nervous?”

“Not really.” My fingers lace with his. “Yeah. Totally nervous.”

My heart races as he kisses me. His tongue is rough, and his hand slides over my shirt, then underneath it to graze my belly button, then slowly upward. My body responds, and I hear a groan escape my lips as he kisses my collarbone. A shiver runs along my arms.

The elevator dings. Alec steps back as the door whines open. I feel keenly the space where he was moments before. I want him to kiss me like that again. I wonder if it’s because I chose him that my feelings are so intense. Or the opposite. I chose him over Annabelle because this boy is the one. Urgh. I didn’t know I could be so mushy. Just as well I haven’t written any songs for a few days; they’d be schlock.

He pulls me into a carpeted hallway, where there’s a faint musty smell. At the end of the corridor is a window looking over the dusky sky. The setting sun is huge and orange. Alec draws a screwdriver from his pocket.

“Always handy?” I joke.

“Yeah. Moments like this. Keep watch for me?”

I look over my shoulder, but no one’s up here. I imagine a

security guy viewing us on a monitor somewhere, getting up, coming to stop us, but I hear only the hum of the fluorescent lights and the chime of the elevator, now on a distant floor.

When I turn back, the window is open, and Alec is standing on the window ledge. “Ready?” he says.

My cell vibrates.

Dad:

What’s for supper?

Kidding — but where are you?

Eating cheese sandwich.

Lark:

Out with Alec.

Back soon. LU.

A new message appears, no number:

He strikes a pose

as if he’s on the cover of Vogue ...

“Alec?” I say.

He’s not at the window. I hurry to look out. He’s standing to my right on a narrow ledge — maybe six inches wide — that juts from the wall and is decorated with gargoyles. The cool evening air is like a drink of water.

“It’s beautiful out here,” he says.

I glance at my cell. The message is gone. This is weird.

“Come on, Lark.”

I put away my phone and pull myself out of the window,

my stomach tight as a perfect lyric. *Boom* — racing heart, hot cheeks, eight stories to the ground below, Alec Sandcross poised on the ledge. He shuffles a few steps, and so I do, too, not looking down, my back pressed against the rough stucco. Then he steps up onto a higher narrow ledge, and I follow. He turns to face the wall, reaches up one arm, loose limbed as a chimpanzee, and pulls himself up and over the overhang. Everything is quiet and still. I hear a bump and scrape, and then both his hands appear, followed by his face.

“Let me get you over this bit.”

I hesitate. But there’s no way I can pull myself up like he did without help.

“I won’t let you go,” he says.

“Holy crap, this is scary.” I half turn on the ledge and stretch out one of my hands to his. His grip is strong. I grab his other hand, my body stiffening with the thought that if he lets go, I’ll die.

“Relax, Lark.”

Then everything happens quickly. He pulls, while I scabble for a foothold, terror lurching in my heart like a drunk. My legs freewheel, but his grip is strong, and he easily tugs me over onto the roof. I scrape the skin on my stomach, and my belly chain snaps off, slipping over the edge, but I don’t care. The roof tiles are large, but the pitch isn’t steep, as he said, and from here, the rising moon hangs just out of grasp. From here, it’s more a matter of crawling upward than climbing to get to the top, and I’m trembling all over, refusing to look down, until we straddle the peak and sit facing each other. We did it.

After my breathing steadies, I look down. Another pulse of excitement shoots through me — below, the city spreads out

like a fabric patterned with buildings, cars, tiny people, and I am here, invisible, watching, flying above the city, adrenaline hot in my veins.

“Woo-hoo!” I cry.

“Told you,” Alec says.

He kisses me hard, his tongue warm and wet, and our knees press together. Something shoots through me — I haven’t felt like this before. God, I want him to kiss me more, kiss me harder. I become liquid. I don’t want to name this feeling, but the L-word floats through my mind, springs to my lips, which open more. Nothing has felt like this before. Nothing like Alec.

Nothing like this.

Day 13: late afternoon

The river glitters between the thick trees on its banks. Alec pulls down the blind and lightly pushes me onto the dark-gray cover of his tidy bed. It smells freshly laundered, but with a not-unpleasant undertone of sweat. St. Vincent — my choice — starts on “I Prefer Your Love.” I sit up to wriggle out of my jeans and throw them onto the spotless floor. Alec kneels at the edge of the bed and pulls his shirt over his head. His toned abs flex as he leans forward to kiss the point of my chin, then the place where my collarbones meet, then the top of my breasts. I bite my lip, and a sigh involuntarily escapes me. I turn my head. Posters of scantily clad female climbers adorn the dark-blue walls. A map of the world is lacquered onto his desk, and books line the shelves. The desk has a large computer and a laptop.

My hands play with his hair, and I say, my voice husky, “Are you sure your parents aren’t coming home?”

He props himself on his forearms. “They said they’d be out all day.” Quietly he adds, “You’re beautiful, Lark. And I love your name.”

The word *love* hums between us. Again. But it’s way too soon. He leans over me and strokes my hair, looking into my eyes, and the feeling buds in me again.

“Tell me — have you, you know, a lot?” I ask.

Amusement glimmers in his eyes. “Have I ... you know? What would you mean by that?”

“Come on,” I say.

“Why?”

“I dunno. Curious.” I blush. “Not my business.”

“Your business. A few others. Only one who — I guess that meant anything.”

“Who was that?”

His face clouds. “Sharbat, from school.”

“Yeah, I knew you guys dated.”

He draws a mountain range over my chest with one finger.

“Her parents didn’t want us to be together — they’re pretty old-fashioned. They broke us up. They made her leave the school. It was ... it was pretty bad. But I’m over it now. And it’s led to good things ... like you.”

He kisses my shoulder.

“And that’s when I really got into climbing. Which gave me a huge new focus. I want to travel, see the world ... climb this.” He points at one of the posters of rock faces. “I mean, it would be awesome to be able to do that one day.”

The front door slams. Alec turns off the music, and we both start hopping around the bedroom, grabbing our clothes.

I hear a woman whimper, “Please don’t.”

“Wait here,” Alec says. He zips up his jeans, yanks his shirt over his head and rushes out of the room and down the stairs.

He isn’t quick enough to stop me overhearing a man shouting — like, really yelling — “What the hell, Karen?”

I get my shirt on as Alec says loudly, “Lark’s here.”

Alec’s dad clears his throat. “We’ll talk later,” he says, plainly at Alec’s mom.

I check my makeup in my compact and smooth my hair — in the semidarkness of Alec’s room, my hair seems even blacker than usual. When I come out of the bedroom, I try to act normal. Like I’m not coming out of Alec’s bedroom. Like hearing Alec’s dad shouting isn’t awkward.

Alec's parents stand by the front door, looking up at me as I come down the stairs. His mom is tall and slim. She wears amazingly high heels, skinny jeans and a white cashmere sweater. Her blond hair is immaculate, and her golden gel nails gleam. From her flawlessly made-up face, her very pale eyes assess me.

She smiles and air-kisses my cheeks. "Hi, Lark, a pleasure."

Alec's dad is hugely tall and built like a garden shed — boxy. He wears a gray suit and a navy tie. His dark eyes are the same as Alec's. He's clean-shaven, with close-cropped hair.

He puts a hand forward for me to shake and says, "You are just as beautiful as Alec said." His voice is jovial and friendly. "Call me 'Scott.'"

My hand seems tiny held in his. He has a gold ring on his little finger. The spicy smell of his cologne wafts over me.

"Um, thanks," I say, as he releases me. "Nice to meet you both. I should probably go, though. I'm supposed to be working in — oh, uh — ten minutes ago."

"Where do you work?" Scott asks.

"D'Lish over on Temperance. It's close to my house. Great coffee."

"Well, come by again sometime, Lark. Have supper with us — right, Karen?" He turns to Alec's mom.

She says, "Absolutely. Alec has been talking about you."

I would be thrilled if it wasn't all so ... tense between everyone.

Alec doesn't meet my eye; he just mumbles a goodbye. As soon as the door shuts behind me, he messages:

Alec:

Sorry. Meet after ur done work?

Lark:

Course xox

I grab my longboard from the front porch. I'm wearing clothes for a warm day, but it's surprisingly cool. I'm pulling on a hoodie when I hear Scott yell, really yell, "I saw that girl come out of your room! I'm no idiot."

"Not now, Dad."

"Who do the pair of you think you are?"

I'm late for work. I shouldn't be listening at closed doors. I swallow hard and then scoot away.

Lucy gives me a dirty look when I get to D'Lish, where the tables are stacked with cups and plates, and there's a long lineup. People sit eating desserts, chatting, checking their cells. The low evening lighting illuminates the series of photographs of the river that has just been hung. I clear tables, while Lucy deals with the customers. The whole shift is crazy, and it's not until after we've put the Closed sign on the door and said goodnight to the last customer that I even get a chance to apologize for not being on time.

The beads on her multicolored bandanna jangle as she shakes her head. "I'm gonna take a five-minute break."

"I'm sorry. Really."

"You've been late three times working with me in the past week. But that was crazy late. Let me guess — you were with Alec." She holds her hands together, fingers pressed, and lets out a slow breath. "Give me five minutes. I'm exhausted. It's been so-o-o-o busy." She opens the oven and takes out the

breakfast muffins for the morning, filling the back kitchen with the warm smell of bananas and toasted oats. “It’s not a big deal. I’m obviously just jealous I’m not getting it.”

“But I am sorry. And I’m not getting it.” I grin at her. “Yet.”

Lucy leans against the counter and her eyebrows dance. “O-o-o-oh!” She opens her pack of cigarettes. Even though she hasn’t yet lit one, the strong clove smell drifts over.

“It’s not just that,” I say, and she giggles. “I mean ... he’s so ... he wants to do all this stuff, like travel and climb famous rocks. I just ... what am I trying to say ... I guess ...”

“Are you in love?” She giggles again. “You’re utterly in love. I haven’t seen you like this.”

I beam. “And he’s hot. So freaking hot.”

“That is very true.”

“Go smoke. I’ll clear up in here.”

“One thing, Gooley-ball ... try not to get so distracted by Alec you forget about the rest of us. Okay?”

“As if I would.”

She pops the end of a cigarette into her mouth. “When I get back, tell me more about you nearly getting it.”

She goes out, and I place the muffins on a rack to cool. I put dishes and pots in the dishwasher and run hot water to start wiping the countertops. A weird feeling that I can’t shake rises through me. I’m a little unstable, a little dizzy. Figuring I’m hungry, I grab myself a cookie, but it doesn’t improve anything. I’ve got Anika, Boh and Hollie playing on my cell, and normally “Peace of Mind” makes me feel calmer, but I’m jittery, my mind filling with images of the lake on that day. The weight of Alec as I kicked to the shore. The wet, snaking reeds. Annabelle’s blue lips.

While I clean up, I dial the hospital. I’ve called two other

times recently, but Reception in Pediatrics kept telling me the family isn't taking any calls, and Suzanne hasn't answered her cell.

A woman picks up on the first ring, sounding monumentally bored. "St. Mary's. How may I direct your call?"

"I, um, I want to come visit a patient. Her first name is Annabelle. Annabelle Fields. She's in a coma. She's a little kid —"

The woman cuts me off, and two seconds later the phone rings and is answered by a tired female voice: "Hello?"

"I hope I didn't disturb you. Sorry," I say.

"No. I wasn't asleep."

"Suzanne? It's Lark. Sorry. I'm really sorry — God, it's late," I babble. "I thought I'd get Pediatrics Reception."

"No. It's sweet of you to call. I wish I had better news. There's no ... there's no change. Oh ..." A sob travels through the cell. "I find it hard to sleep. Just in case she wakes ... I want my face to be the face she sees."

"Maybe I could help. I could come by later this week and watch her," I say. "With Alec, perhaps."

"Sure. Maybe."

Mechanically I wipe down the countertop. The silence stretches. "I'm sorry I dived for Alec first ..." I blurt.

"Lark, there was nothing you could have done differently that day."

"I blame myself —"

She chokes back a sob. "Lark. Don't torture yourself. Anyone would have been dazed in that moment. You reacted in a perfectly normal way."

"But I could have moved more quickly, saved them both. I don't know —"

“If anything, I’m the one to blame.”

We’re both silent.

“Look, Lark, I need to sleep. But do come. If we’re still here, come ... how about Tuesday? Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight, honey.” She ends the call.

Lucy comes in. “Thanks for clearing up.”

During the call, I did more than I realized, so we’re nearly finished for the night. Lucy gives me a hug, and the smell of clove curls off her clothes and hair.

She says, “I miss you, you know, now that you’re all loved up. But I’m happy if you’re happy.”

“I *am* happy.”

“Maybe Alec wants to come with us tonight? I wanna get to know him better. This guy who gets you loved up.”

“Tonight?” I ask.

“Nitrogen Vice? At Lydia’s?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You forgot?”

“No. ’Course not. I’ll ask him right now.”

I slot away a cookie sheet. Together we wrap the muffins. I message Alec. He messages back when Lucy and I are outside D’Lish, locking up:

Alec:

Can we meet alone instead?

Lark:

I promised Lucy.

Not that I remembered.

Alec:

Can you un-promise?

We need to talk.

My heart sputters. What does that mean?

Lark:

Where do you want to meet?

Should I be worried?

Alec:

When I say talk, I might mean something else ... ;-)

Meet u at the play park by my house?

Lark:

Okay. Lucy will get over it.

Something else sounds good ...

really good ...

Lucy elbows my arm. "Is he going to meet us?"

"Would you mind if I bail?"

She rolls her eyes. "Would you mind if I mind?"

"Of course I'd mind! I can see Alec tomorrow. Let's go see the band. You and me."

She elbows me again. "No. Don't worry about it. Go. Get some."

She pulls out a clove cigarette. "Who am I to stand in the path of true love?"

"It's not love. And I'm not getting some."

"Yeah, you tell yourself that." She lights her cigarette. "Alec and Lark, sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Me and Me

I giggle. “Maybe it’s a bit love. Thanks, Luce. See you later.”

I hum a few bars of a possible song to myself as I put in my earbuds, and then I longboard away from Lucy in the bright moonlight toward the play park, where Alec is waiting for me.

Day 16: afternoon

After school on Tuesday, Alec drives us over to the hospital. We get out in the parking lot, and I am taken back to the last time I was here. Three years ago Dad walked me to the car. As he opened the passenger door, I turned to look up at the blank windows, wondering what would happen to Mom's body. Loss grabs my heart and clenches it.

Alec says, "Hey, Planet Lark, all okay?"

I nod minutely.

He takes my hand and interlaces his fingers with mine. We figure our way through the warren of hospital rooms and find Annabelle's ward. When Suzanne opens Annabelle's door, she manages a wan smile.

"I was hoping we'd be out of here before now," she says.

Annabelle's blond hair spreads out in damp tendrils on the pillow. There is a red blotch on her left cheek.

Her mom brushes that cheek and says, "Did you know that patients in comas often end up the victims of medical errors? Annabelle's allergic to lanolin. I told them."

She slumps in an armchair and gestures for me to sit on the only other chair. Alec stands awkwardly by a cabinet on which several vases of wilted flowers are parked. Suzanne falls silent.

I put my hand softly on Annabelle's — it is so small and warm beneath mine. And so very still. The only sound is the soft in-and-out takes of her breath. Her eyes seem to be moving beneath her closed lids. As I watch, a tiny tear appears at the corner of her right eye. It slides down her cheek and slips onto the white bedsheet, where it leaves a watermark. The watermark

begins spreading, as if more water were coming from somewhere. The color of the water darkens, browning.

I sense a static, a shimmer in the air. I glance up and see my *bedroom*, notes for a song scattered on my desk.

I gasp and let go of Annabelle's hand. What's happening?

Alec touches my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Um ..." Everything is as it was. I touch the bedsheet. It's dry. "I'm fine," I say. "Yeah. Just ..." I catch Suzanne's gaze. "I'm sorry," I say.

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My four children are an endless distraction and delight — thanks, all of you, for keeping so cheerful when I have to work.

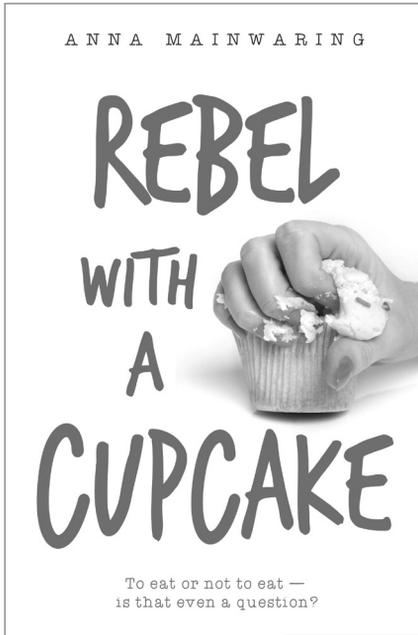
Above all, thank you, Yann. Always and forever, I am grateful and full of love. It is toward you that I swim.

About the Author

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Alice Kuipers is an award-winning, bestselling author of four previous novels, two picture books and a chapter book series. Her work has been published in 32 countries. She lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with writer Yann Martel and their four children. Find out more about her and join her free online writing course here: alicekuipers.com

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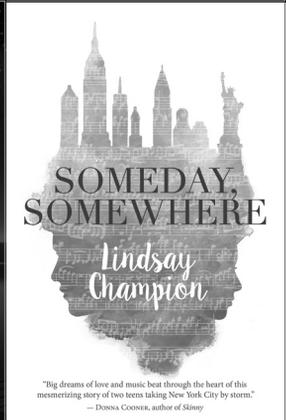
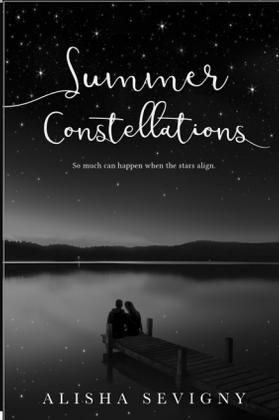
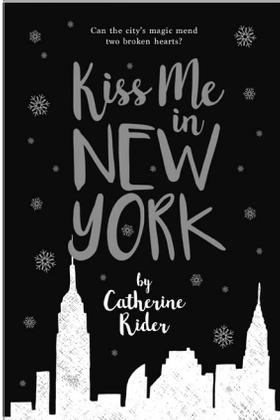
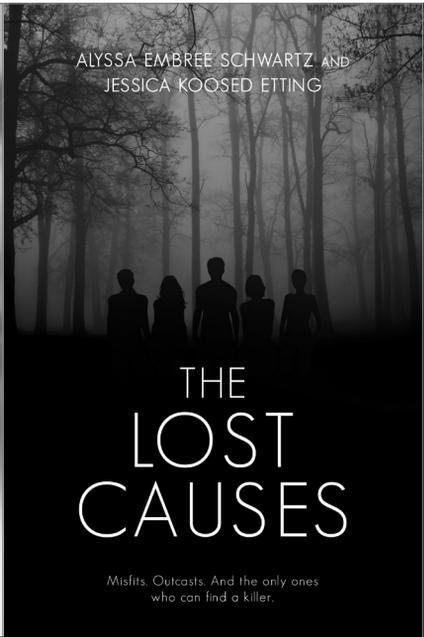
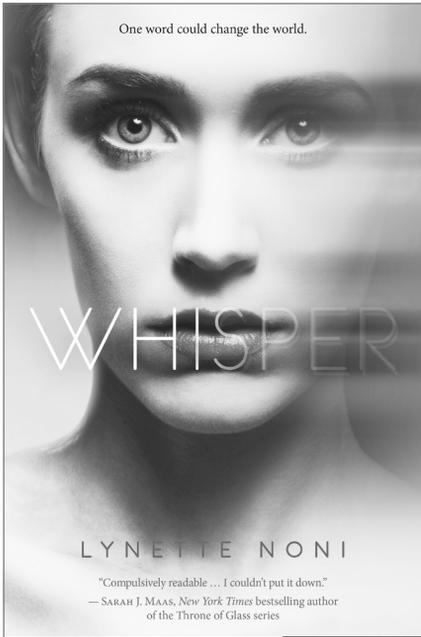


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56



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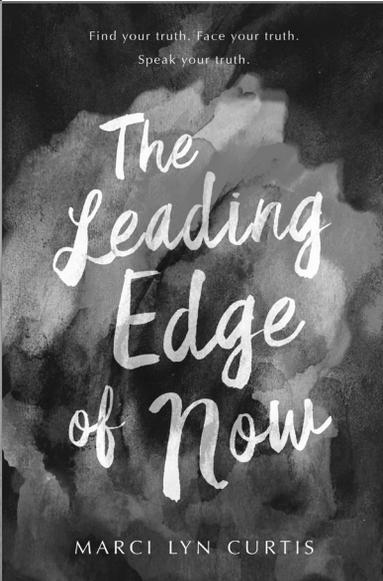
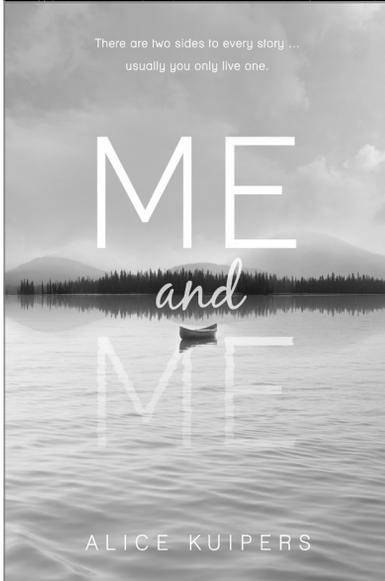
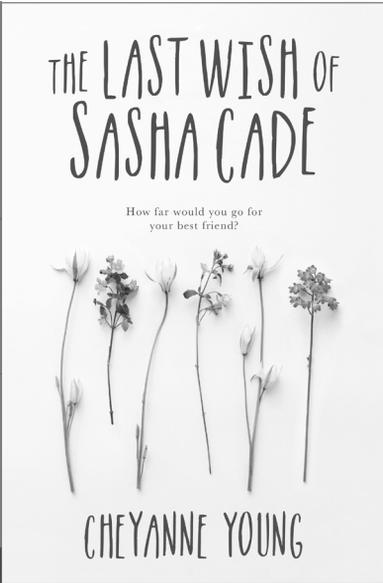
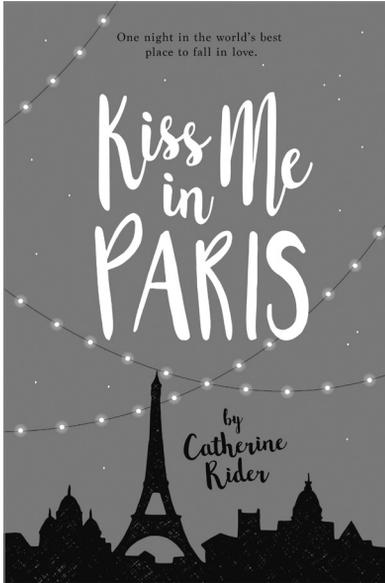


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