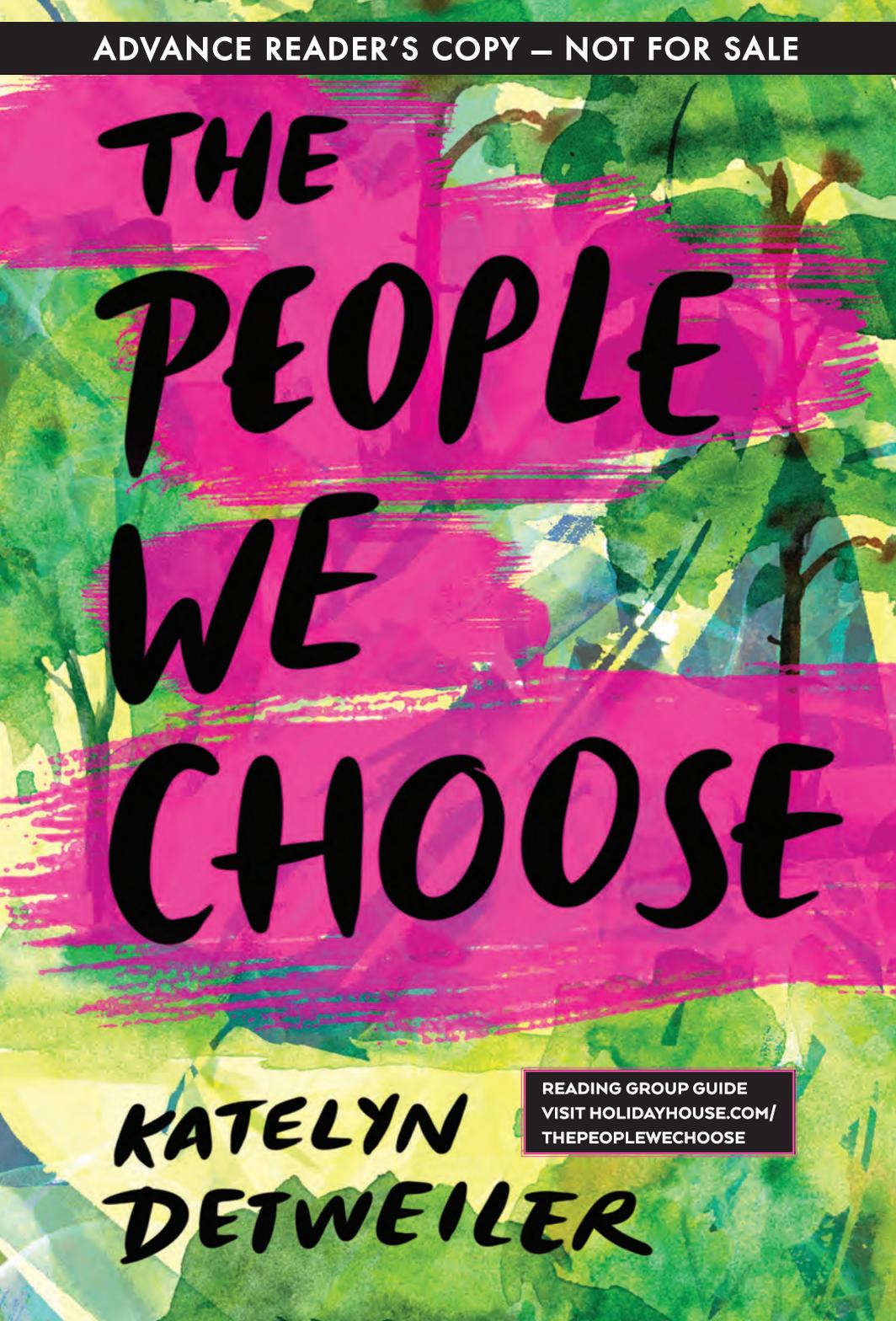


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THE PEOPLE WE CHOOSE

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Printed and bound in March 2021 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.
www.holidayhouse.com
First Edition
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Detweiler, Katelyn, author.
Title: The people we choose / by Katelyn Detweiler.
Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2021]
“A Margaret Ferguson Book.” | Audience: Ages 14 and up.
Audience: Grades 10–12. | Summary: Seventeen-year-old
Calliope Silversmith’s lifelong friendships are transformed when she starts
dating new neighbor, Max, but her life is turned upside-down when she learns
the identity of the sperm donor her mothers chose.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020034226 | ISBN 9780823446643 (hardcover)
Subjects: CYAC: Best friends—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction.
Lesbian mothers—Fiction. | Identity—Fiction.
Sperm donors—Fiction. | Families—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.D48 Peo 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020034226>
ISBN: 978-0-8234-4664-3 (hardcover)



To Danny and Alfie,
the people I will choose,
every day, always.



THE
PEOPLE
WE
CHOOSE

Chapter One

AT first I wonder if he's a mirage.

The air certainly seems hot enough.

Rustling branches along the tree line, and then two legs, two arms, one head. The pieces come together to make a boy, and that boy walks across our wild grassy lawn and up to where I sit on the porch.

I put down my dog-eared copy of *Sense and Sensibility* to take him in. Long limbs and warm brown skin, black T-shirt and black cutoff jeans. His clothes are splattered in streaks of bright paint, golds and blues and reds and greens and purples, like *he* is the painting. He is the work of art.

I'm out here early today because I needed to breathe. Mama and Mimmy are firm believers in open windows and fans, even during the first heat wave of the summer. They only have air conditioners at Hot Mama Flow, their yoga studio—with aerobics classes and weight-machine circuits, too, because yoga isn't popular enough to sustain an entire business in our small town of Green Woods, Pennsylvania. And even there they keep the AC off for most classes. "A little hot yoga is good for the soul," Mama says, usually as she's upside down, balancing on her hands, legs in a split, as if gravity is not an actual thing. And maybe for Mama it's not.

“I was looking for some sign of life,” the boy says, his voice somehow deeply growly but sweetly musical at the same time. “I just moved in next door. If you can call it *next door* when there’s five minutes of woods between us. I mean, Jesus. How is this only an hour outside of Philly? I feel like I’m lost in some kind of West Virginia wilderness.”

I raise my eyebrows. He looks less art worthy now. And it’s really more like ninety minutes most days because of traffic, at least during rush hours, but I don’t correct him.

“So anyway,” he starts. Stops. Runs one hand through his tight-cropped curls. “Sorry. I’m Max. Should have started with that.”

“Calliope.”

“That’s an interesting name.”

“My moms are big on mythology.” I emphasize *moms* and say it like a challenge. It’s a hard habit to break, maybe because Green Woods still has some people clinging to the Dark Ages. But Max doesn’t react.

“That’s cool. I like it. I don’t actually know why my parents named me Max. My mom does love a good T.J.Maxx deal, but I hope that’s not the reason.”

“Uh-oh. The closest T.J.Maxx is a forty-minute drive from us. Will your mom survive out here? You can assure her we do get mail. Much faster since they ditched the horse and buggy last year. Mail trucks now, can you believe it?” I smile, kicking back in my midnight-colored rocking chair. Right between Mama’s sky-blue chair and Mimmy’s sunny-yellow one. The wooden slats of the porch floor creak. Our little stone house was built sometime

in the early 1800s—or so the Realtor said when Mama and Mimmy bought it before I was born, and I believe it because every last piece of it feels old and persnickety.

Max squints up at me with dark amber eyes and laughs. “I get it. I was trash-talking your home before I even introduced myself. Not the best way to meet a new neighbor. My mom would tweak my ear for that one. So maybe don’t tell her?”

I shrug. I don’t love his attitude. But it’s not every day I get to meet someone who hasn’t spent their whole life here.

“Let’s start over,” he says, taking it upon himself to climb the porch steps. He sits on Mama’s chair, like it was put there just for him.

“I hope all that paint is dry. Mama will ruin you if you mess with her favorite chair.”

He looks down at his shorts. “Oh right. I was painting my bedroom walls this morning. I was just going to do normal boring gray on all of them, but then I had this vision of our apartment view, so I painted a mural of my old bedroom window and the scene outside it on one wall. We lived in the tallest building on our block, so I got a peek of the Philly skyline right when the sun comes up. That’s always my favorite time to paint.” He grins at me, bright white teeth with a small gap in the middle. It’s a really good smile.

“Why did you move here then? If you love Philly so much?”

The whole porch seems to shift around us with that one question. The good smile disappears.

“Family stuff,” he says. There is an extra-bold black period at the end of his sentence.

“I’m sorry,” I say, because I’m not sure what other response there is. “But Green Woods isn’t so awful. I promise. You’ll get used to it. There’s plenty of good to go with the bad.” I glance above me at the sprawling canopy of deep green leaves that line the woods surrounding our house—dark and dense, swallowing us up from the rest of the town. “Just close your eyes for a minute.”

He looks like he wants to ask why, but doesn’t.

“Just sit there and listen,” I say. “Breathe.”

I close my eyes, too, even though I know all the sounds and smells as well as I know my own fingers and toes: the soft rumble of the creek that coils behind our meadow of a yard, the buzz of cicadas and grasshoppers and the sea of other insects that come to life every summer, the heady scents of damp soil and wildflowers and freshly cut grass.

“I bet you didn’t have all this in Philly, did you?”

“Nope.” He sighs. “Definitely not.”

I sneak a peek through lowered lids. He’s leaning back in the chair with his eyes still closed, arms spread open. Like he is drawing it all in, this day, this porch, these woods.

Our old landline phone rings from inside, and his eyes flip open. He looks around, like maybe he’s in a dream. But then his gaze falls on me, and he blinks again, like worlds have clicked back into place.

I let the call go to voice mail. Only robots call that number these days.

“I actually came over here for sugar,” he says, laughing. “Which sounds like a bad line from an old TV show. But my mom

and I found everything for coffee this morning except the sugar, and there's no way I'm drinking that stuff unsweetened. Dad's got the car for a Philly trip today and I have no clue what direction the store is in or if I can even get there on foot. I won't talk down on your town—*our* town, wow—anymore, but . . . there's something to be said for having three bodegas within a block of your home. I'll leave it at that.”

“It's nice to have trees on every side of your house, too. And no people. Except for neighbors that are a five-minute walk away.”

“I guess we'll see about that.”

“Uh-huh. And I hate to say it . . . but you walked in the wrong direction. My moms refuse to keep white sugar in the house. The devil's drug, as they say. We mostly use stevia, and sometimes agave or honey or maple syrup. I could pour some stevia into a cup for you if you want?”

His mouth drops open in disbelief. “So you're telling me . . . if I'd gone five minutes the other way I'd be walking home with bags of deathly but delicious sugar right now?”

“Actually, no. That's an old Boy Scout camp that no one uses anymore. If there's sugar there, you wouldn't want to use it. Maybe ten minutes north through the woods. I think you'd hit the Coopers' house then. And they are the jackpot because Mrs. Cooper runs the school's biannual bake sale. She's fully loaded, I'm sure.”

“Do you have a compass on you?”

“Nope. I usually just lick my finger and see where the wind's blowing.”

“Whoa. Really?”

“No, not really. That was a joke. But I *can* use the sun and the moon and the stars. Plus, I’ve lived here for seventeen years. I’ve walked through the woods once or twice.”

“Are you saying you want to be my escort?” The really good smile is back.

“No thanks, but I can point you in the right direction so you have at least a fifty percent chance of making it there on your own.”

“You have better things to be doing then?”

I don’t. I’m working at Hot Mama Flow this summer—odd hours here and there at the front desk, whenever the moms need me to fill in gaps for their regular employees—but not today. Mimmy and Mama are both at the studio now, as they are most days, rotating with the rest of their staff between teaching, training, desk work, cleaning.

My only plan for today was to read on the porch for as long as I could bear it, then call my best friends, Ginger and Noah, to see if they want to come sweat here with me. Fill up the new inflatable turtle kiddie pool in the backyard with ice water and eat Mimmy’s homemade strawberry basil ice pops, while we complain about having nothing to do all summer except work and sit in my yard eating ice pops. The same thing we did last year, and the year before that, and so forth, only with a pool this time. One of my better ideas, I’d say, bringing back the kiddie pool for the first time in a decade. We spend most of our time together at my house in “the country”—their term, as if living in Green Woods proper

with a few streetlights and sidewalks somehow makes them actually urban.

“Maybe not, but I’d rather do nothing on this hot porch than trek through hot woods with a stranger.”

“Well, we’re not technically strangers anymore. We’re neighbors and potential new best friends. Besides, those woods look pretty thick and shady if you ask me. I bet it’s much cooler in there. And filled with all sorts of weird bugs and animals that a city slicker like me can’t deal with alone.”

“Bad news. I’ve had the same two best friends since I was out of the womb. Ginger and Noah. That’s how it works in Green Woods. Total cliché story, too, our moms all meeting at Lamaze class. We were destined prebirth.”

“Huh.” He pauses, his face suddenly serious. “Well, looks like you and Ginger and Noah might just find yourselves in a quartet now.”

Before I have time to respond, his pocket starts blaring music.

“*Ghostbusters* theme?”

“You got it,” he says, grinning as he slides his phone out. “Hey, Mom!”

I pretend to go back to *Sense and Sensibility*, but I don’t read a word. I’m watching Max over the edges of the book. Watching that grin fade, a small frown taking its place.

He ends the call after a minute, and I put my book back down. “Mom needs me. My thirteen-year-old sister, Marlow, is on a rampage because her vast collection of shoes is nowhere to be

found, so I need to go through the Mount Everest of boxes in the garage to save the day. I'm going to have to chug the coffee down straight. Desperate times. But you are *not* off the hook."

"Oh?" I brace my feet against the porch.

"Nope. We're going for that walk in the woods." He stands up, salutes me, and takes all three porch steps in one leap.

I watch until he disappears back into the woods alongside our house, the wild trees eating him alive. Until it's almost like I did imagine him after all. A trick of light and heat.

It's hard to refocus on my book after that. I've read *Sense and Sensibility* so many times—too many times, probably, given how many books exist in the world. Maybe because as an only child, I've always been envious of the Dashwood girls. My copy of *Little Women* is just as exhausted looking, filled with rips and scribbles and food stains. I used to dream about being a March sister—minus civil wars and scarlet fever and other such unpleasanties, of course.

I use my last reserves of energy in this heat to make sure the bird feeder in our backyard is full, and then I top off the birdbath, too. The birds in these woods need the relief as much as I do.

I curl up in the hammock after, the shadiest place in the backyard. And sure enough, soon I hear tires rolling down our long gravel driveway, and a moment later Ginger slides in next to me. I forgot to call her. Noah, too. Not that I ever have to call either of them to make plans. They just appear.

"Hey," she says, lazily turning over to smile at me. Thousands

of little freckles shine like copper glitter on her pale skin, and her hair is lit up a blinding golden white from the sun. So bright I need to squint just to face her. I find her eyes, the greenest I've seen in real life. If I hadn't woken up next to her a thousand times at sleepovers, I'd never believe she didn't wear contacts.

"They didn't need me at the diner today and my mom was annoying the hell out of me. Not even air-conditioning made staying home more attractive. I'd rather drown in my own sweat over here with you."

"I'm sorry. About your mom."

"Yeah, well. Same old Sophie. She *casually* mentioned setting me up with the son of my aunt's sister-in-law's cousin or something like that. The woman just can't help herself."

I was born first, the early baby. Ginger was second, right on schedule for the first and only time in her life. Noah came out late, two weeks after his due date—a September birthday, which meant when the question of kindergarten came up, our moms decided to keep all of us summer babies together, always the oldest kids in our class. Our families understood we couldn't be separated at that point. Noah's mom, Beverly, still pops over sometimes for a glass of wine on the porch, but Mama and Mimmy's friendship with Sophie faded over the years. It turned out they didn't have much in common other than their pregnancy timeline.

"I would have come sooner but I was waiting for my leopard nails to dry." She flutters her fingers in my face, the light catching on her shiny collection of mood rings and crystal bracelets. "Noah's here, too. In the kitchen, whipping up some iced green

tea for us. He was talking about cutting up some ginger and limes for infusing when I left him. How did we get so lucky?"

"I don't know. Our parents conceived around the same moon cycle?"

She ignores me. "I'm telling you, some girl is going to swoop in and snap him up, and where will that leave us? Hm? Making our own infused tea? Ugh. In case you forgot, I'm not straight, so it's not my duty to lock him in to a monogamous romantic relationship. And besides, we both know I'm not the one his sweet, soulful heart wants, no matter which way I sway. Also, can I say, very objectively, that our boy is growing into quite a heart-throb. He's got that whole skinny-but-ripped thing going on. It's bizarre."

I don't bother responding. The three of us had our yellow-poop-drenched diapers changed side by side. We played mermaid and merman in the tub together until we turned five and our moms decided it was perhaps time to acknowledge our different genitalia.

Noah is a brother to us. I understand as well as anyone that family isn't always about blood.

"People moved into the old Jackson house," I say, knowing Ginger will quickly latch onto this sparkly new tidbit dangling in front of her. Max didn't have to say where he moved into, because it's the only empty house in a five-minute radius.

"Oh my god, *what?* Hanging out with the ghosties? Yikes. I guess no one warned them. I don't think I could live in a house where humans have died."

“Lots of people die in houses, Ginger. That’s not so unusual. And Mr. Jackson seemed pretty ancient.” He’s the old recluse who had died there when we were kids. The police found his body during a check-in after he stopped picking up the newspaper from the top of his driveway. He—and the house—had become a source of all kinds of popular local lore.

“Not Mr. Jackson, though I don’t fancy the idea of meeting his ghost either. I mean whoever was murdered. Before him. Or *while* he lived there.”

“We don’t know for sure that happened.”

“We don’t know for sure that it *didn’t* happen.”

I shake my head. Sigh. “Anyway. Not the point. There’s a boy who moved in, maybe our grade. He came over asking for sugar this morning.”

She giggles, a light, bubbly sound. “Sugar? For real? That’s actually a thing people do?”

“Apparently.”

“Fascinating.” She lifts her eyebrows, two perfectly symmetrical white-blond arches. “What was he like?”

I shrug. “Not sure yet. But he wants to be best friends with us.”

“Did you tell him it’s a pretty exclusive club? Tied forever to our moms’ vaginas?”

“Ew, Ginger. Unnecessary visual. But yes. I did express it, though more politely.”

“Well, I suppose we can give him a chance to earn it.” She pauses. “Is he pretty?”

There's no point in lying. "Very pretty."

"Worth breaking the rule for?"

"Ginger! No! I am not—"

She exhales loudly, cutting me off. "I know, I know. It doesn't matter if he's very pretty. Or very charming, sweet, smart, funny, talented, et cetera et cetera. You aren't dating anyone before college."

I reach out and pinch her elbow. "Yes, and it's a good rule. A *great* rule."

A rule that served various helpful purposes. I could focus on friends, family, school. Avoid the drama and heartbreak that goes along with dating in high school—especially a small school like ours, where relationships are often like a messy overlapping Venn diagram. But the primary purpose—the one I absolutely never say out loud, and the reason I came up with the rule in the first place—is because of Noah. I can avoid the idea of dating *him* specifically if I make it clear I'm not dating anyone period. He'd slipped an anonymous Valentine's Day card in my locker sophomore year, but "anonymous" isn't possible after a decade and a half of learning your best friend's handwriting. *You are the most beautiful human in the world*. I knew the loops and slants of his letters as well as I knew my own. But it was obvious without the card anyway. Had been for a while, really. The way he looked at me was evidence enough. I never acknowledged that I knew—that I'd recognize his words anywhere. Instead, I declared my rule the very next day: No dating until college. To be fair, I had never dated even before I came up with the rule. No one had ever asked. But there was no one I wanted to ask me either.

“It’s an arbitrary rule.” She pinches me back with those fresh leopard nails, the tips fittingly sharp and clawlike.

I wince and rub the half-moon imprints on my wrist. “It’s not arbitrary. And it’s more important now than ever. We only have one year left in Green Woods together. *One*. I intend to use my time wisely. You and Noah. My moms. College applications. The Environmental Club—which, now that I’m president this year, I fully expect you to join. So, yes, actual important things. Not a meaningless relationship that’ll inevitably end anyway when it’s time for long distance.” And I *do* believe in all of these reasons. They’re good ones. Just not the only ones.

“Uh-huh. And have I ever told you that you seriously overthink everything?”

“Oh, at least a million and two times before today, I’d say.”

“Well, then let’s make it a million and three. Because you do. Overthink. Just let life happen sometimes, okay?”

I shake my head, and Ginger knows me well enough to move on. “Anyway, in other news, I think Penelope Park smiled at me a little . . . I don’t know, wistfully, yesterday when I went to buy some almond butter and fluff at the store. She was checking me out—at the register, I mean, but maybe actually checking me out, too—and our hands touched for a good three seconds when she handed me the receipt.”

“Not to be a buzzkill, but isn’t Penelope still with Ethan? And . . . potentially straight?”

“Well, right, that’s why I said the smile was a little *wistful*, like she maybe wants to be with me but is still too ensnared in the

oppressive chains of her heteronormative lifestyle to break away quite yet. But maybe she will. I can be patient. It's hard to come out when there are only two confirmed lesbians in a school of, oh, you know, *five hundred* students."

The kitchen door opens before I can respond, and Noah steps outside slowly, balancing a pitcher of tea and three glasses on a wooden tray. He's dressed like he usually is, plain white T-shirt and dark denim shorts, battered gray slip-on sneakers. In the cold months it switches to dark jeans and a sweater over a white T-shirt. He has the kind of fair skin that somehow turns a deep tan after one summer day in the sun—whereas I go straight to pink—and he already has that bronze glow now. His thick golden-brown hair is curling up in the humidity, looking purposefully, artfully messy, but I know he's never touched a dab of product in his life.

He smiles wide when he sees me watching him.

Ginger looks between us and sighs dramatically. "What a shame."

"What's a shame?" Noah asks as he puts down the tray on the picnic table. He pours two tall glasses of tea and then delivers them to us in the hammock.

"Oh, nothing important," Ginger says, waving him off as she lifts the glass to her bright red lips and takes a sip. "Mm. Excellent infusion. I do have a real affinity for all things *ginger*, not surprisingly."

"I was just telling her," I say, "about the new neighbors that

moved into the Jackson house. It's a shame, isn't it? A nice, innocent family picking such a sad place for a home."

"Seriously?" Noah looks off toward the woods, as if he might actually make out the Jackson house behind all the trees. "Someone is really living there?"

"Yep. I met one of them, a boy around our age. Max."

"Yeah? Well, we'll have to be extra nice to Max. Show him Green Woods isn't all scary and gloomy like that house. Boring, maybe. But the scariest thing about Green Woods is the lack of good food options. Or maybe the fact that even a mediocre hospital is thirty minutes away." He turns back to the table, pours himself a glass of tea.

"That house is definitely scary," Ginger says, crunching on a piece of ice. "Especially since the roof has looked on the verge of collapse for the last decade or so."

"That's probably a bit dramatic. Maybe just the porch roof," I say, and then I taste the tea. Ginger's right. The ginger-lime combo is excellent. Maybe Noah's best yet.

I sit up taller in the hammock and raise my glass. "Let's toast."

Ginger raises her glass up next to mine, and Noah comes over to join us.

"To summer," I say, "and to the beginning of our last year together."

"We'll always be together," Noah says. "I'm pretty sure we don't need Green Woods High for that."

"But it will be different."

Ginger clinks my glass hard. “To embracing different. Because that can be a good thing.”

I clink back harder. “But to keeping our friendships the same. No matter what.”

“Always,” Ginger says.

“Always,” Noah echoes.

We tilt our heads back and drink.

Always.

Chapter Two

"I'M feeling celebratory today," Mimmy says the next morning, putting a stack of fluffy blueberry pancakes in front of me. Sun streams in through the lacy buttercup-yellow curtains, making circles of light dance around our old wooden kitchen table. "Mama and I got coverage for the opening shift at the studio, for one. And it's officially the first Saturday of the summer. A few happy months of sunshine ahead, and then our baby girl is a senior. A *senior*."

"Jesus Christ, we're old," Mama says, coming up behind her with a bottle of maple syrup—the real stuff, of course. It's a festive morning in the Silversmith house. "Feels like just yesterday she was sliding out of our uteri, doesn't it, Mimmy? Almost makes my eyes damp."

Uteri, always. Never uterus. Though Mimmy is the one who technically carried me for nine months and pushed me out into the world. I've seen photos of her bump, so I know that much. But they refuse to say whose egg was responsible for creating me—whose egg was used to make the embryo, my petri-dish beginning. It's supposed to be a forever mystery, which one, Mimmy or Mama, has half of my genetic code. They won the sperm bank lottery, apparently, because it's completely impossible to tell whose egg spawned me—the donor must have a weirdly precise

blend of both my moms' features. I have Mimmy's light freckles and permanently tangled auburn hair, Mama's blue eyes and slightly upturned nose, which she calls a ski slope and I call a pig snout. I have Mimmy's squeaky laugh, Mama's strong yoga arms. Mimmy's dimples, Mama's pointed ears. I like to bake and create like Mimmy, but she's softer than me, dreamier and more meditative. I'm not as tough as Mama either, but I'm type A like she is, a planner and an overthinker—as Ginger likes to remind me. I'm miraculously a perfect fusion of them both.

Mimmy was once upon a time a Silver, Mama was a Smith.

But we're all Silversmiths now.

"At least we have almost a month until she's eighteen," Mama says, digging out a blueberry from the top pancake on my plate. "We can still baby her."

"Don't you have your own pancakes to plunder?" I pretend to slap her hand away, but she catches my fingers in hers—all ten of them together, long and slender and big knuckled, I can hardly tell which are hers, which are mine. "You took the best blueberry."

"Mimmy still has mine on the griddle. We both love you enough to give you the first ones, so don't you dare complain to me."

"Do you and Ginger and Noah have any plans today?" Mimmy asks, sipping from her mug of foamy green matcha with one hand as she flips pancakes with the other. "It's gorgeous out there. Maybe you should have a picnic at the lake? I made some hummus last night and picked a handful of tomatoes and peppers from the garden."

"Ginger's around, I think, but Noah's busy. He's taking an

intensive all-day private cello lesson on Saturdays at a studio in Philly this summer. Prep for college auditions.”

Mama and then Mimmy settle in at the table with their pancakes, and the conversation moves on around me: studio schedules and garden supplies and the merits of veggie burgers versus salmon burgers for the grill tonight. I eat my pancakes in a contented silence, picking all the blueberries out first. I pour more syrup into the holes and watch the dark amber sunrays skim to the edge of the plate.

“I will forever blame Frank for your sweet tooth and odd eating habits,” Mama says, swiping the syrup bottle from my hand. “This is why we only have pancakes on special occasions.”

Frank. The donor.

His name’s not really Frank. Or maybe it is, I have no clue. I’ve been calling him Frank, though, for as long as I knew that half of me logically must have come from someone else. The legend goes that Mama was always listening to Frank Zappa when I was little—she still does sometimes, though the nickname has ruined the music for her, she says—and one day I asked if he was my daddy and that’s why she loved him so much. That was when I learned to never say *daddy* again, because whoever this man is, wherever he might be—he’s not my *daddy*. Being a daddy is about much more than DNA. But *donor* sounded too cold, like I’m a science experiment from a lab—even if, yes, that’s what in vitro fertilization actually means—so Frank stuck.

“When I’m eighteen, I’m buying my own supply of syrup, and you can’t tell me not to.”

“Speaking of eighteen, and Frank, and the decision you’ll have to make—whether or not you want to be in touch . . .” Mimmy squeezes my hand and gives me a very meaningful look.

“That again, Margo? Seriously, Frank could have died years ago,” Mama says, her eyes focused intently on her pancakes.

Mimmy and I sigh at the same time. We’ve heard this argument before. “Well,” I say, “he could have chosen to be an anonymous donor. But he didn’t. And you could have picked an anonymous donor to use for me. But you didn’t.” *Just in case*, they say. *Just in case* of what exactly, I’m not sure. I don’t think they’re sure either. Maybe access to future medical information. Or maybe it just felt too final to close that door for good. “You picked someone who was willing to be contacted. When I turned eighteen. If he’s still alive.”

I might not even request any information about him. A month from now, or anytime ever. Because then what? We talk on the phone? I search for him online? Pore over photos that come up, dissecting eyes, lips, cheekbones, ears, to find something that looks slightly like mine?

Mama impales a blueberry with her fork. “That may be true, but—”

“Can we talk about something else?” I interrupt, tapping my fork against Mama’s plate so she’s forced to look up at me. “Aren’t we supposed to be celebrating?”

“Sorry. I do come on strong, don’t I?” She grins. “Part of my charm. Can’t deny it.”

“Mm-hmm, whatever you say, sweets,” Mimmy says. She

rolls her eyes, but in a loving way. She'll never be immune to Mama's charms. "Oh, I have something else to talk about! I went for a walk this morning, and I saw a car pull out of the driveway next door—the old Jackson place. I wonder what that was about? Could someone actually be moving in?"

I glance toward the window. "Yes. A family—they already moved in. I met the son. Max."

"Oh?" Mimmy asks. "When?"

"He came by yesterday morning. Asking for sugar. I forgot to tell you last night."

"Sugar!" Mama laughs incredulously. She scoops a forkful of dry, unsyruped pancake into her mouth.

"Yes, *sugar*. I had to regretfully inform him that sugar wasn't allowed in our home."

"So what was he like? It's hard to imagine anyone besides Mr. Jackson living there. I assumed at this point that house was permanently abandoned." Mama tilts her head, likely considering all potential cons of this development. "At least if they're terrible, we have a sturdy army of trees between us."

"I'm not sure we need an army. He seemed friendly enough."

"Maybe we should bake something for them?" Mimmy says. "Welcome them to Green Woods. It can't be easy, living in that house."

That house.

My skin prickles at the way she says it, even though it's already ninety degrees in our kitchen.

"There's nothing wrong with that house," Mama says,

shaking her head. “It’s just an innocent dilapidated pile of dust and stone and I’m glad someone outside of this silly town can clean it back up. Otherwise it might as well be knocked down so the animals can have more room to play.”

Mimmy doesn’t seem convinced. “Maybe the stories aren’t all true. But I don’t have a good feeling when I drive by there. I swear my bones can feel it. The sadness.”

We all quietly continue eating after that.

Mimmy looks like she’s still thinking about ghosts. And Mama looks like she’s mentally planning out poses for her weekend classes.

I wait until I’ve cleared every last golden pool, running my finger against the plate and licking it clean. And then I say: “You’re right, Mimmy. It’s a good idea to bake something for the new neighbors.”

I walk into the shadowy trees later that afternoon.

I’m carrying a plate of Mimmy’s signature dessert, peach cobbler bars, with a tiny bowl of homemade maple-tofu whipped cream on the side. She’d walked me through the recipe before she and Mama left for the studio. Hopefully it’s at least half as good as hers. Half as good would still be far better than anyone else’s peach cobbler bars.

The woods become thicker and duskier as I get close, branches dipping low across my path. Leaves muffle the sound of the creek that runs behind both of our properties. I am alone. The only creature on this planet.

But then a ray of sun filters in. The trees open up slowly, one by one, like the woods are laying down a leafy golden trail for me.

One more step, and there it is, a hulking stack of old stones and wooden beams. The Jackson house. Looking just as decrepit and foreboding as I remembered. Even the meadow it sits in seems washed out, like every natural color has been bleached from too much exposure to the sun. Noah never understood our squeamishness, but after Mr. Jackson died, Ginger and I used to dare each other to see who would get closer to the house. She touched the front door once with the tip of her pinkie. I couldn't even make it up the porch steps. It's been a few years, though, since we cared about the house. Or cared enough to pretend to be brave.

But I'm brave today.

My feet skitter purposefully across the dull green grass, broken up with patches of cracked dirt and debris, rotting remains of old leaves and weeds. There's a light scent of smoke in the air. I don't see any cars, though the garage door is closed.

The first porch step is fine, but the second one gives as I step down, and I hop quickly to the third and onto the porch. Empty windows watch me. I can't hear anything besides my own breath.

I knock three times. Wait. Knock again, louder. I even try what looks like an old rusty doorbell, but I can't tell if it chimes inside the house.

No one comes.

I don't leave the dessert on the steps. Animals might eat it, after all.

Maybe I'll try again tomorrow.

* * *

An owl hoots outside my windows that night. My owl.

Calling out to another bird. Serenading the stars. I see this particular great horned owl sometimes, yellow-eyed and resolutely somber-faced up in the high branches. I like to believe she guards our clearing by night.

My bedroom is in the attic, planked wooden floors and rough plaster walls, the ceiling slanted on both sides with a steep point in the middle. Mama and Noah both have to stoop when they come inside. If I wear a bun, my hair snags on the rafters. Ginger's hair, too. Only Mimmy fits just right.

From the big round window over my bed, I see leaves and branches and sky. My moms tried to keep me in the bedroom downstairs next to theirs, but I'd always wanted this. So when I turned twelve, I moved up here. My bird's nest. A tower in the clouds. The walls are covered in photos—some snipped from old magazines, others professional prints I've ordered, framed and unframed, a total mishmash of animals, trees, insects, mountains, lakes, rivers, oceans. Pictures that I've seen and thought: this is our world and I'm lucky enough to live in it.

The owl hoots again.

Ginger is sound asleep on a cot across the room. There's a breeze coming in the windows, making the curtains rustle. I listen to the rhythmic hum of the fan, Ginger's soft in-and-out breaths. I should feel sleepier than I do.

I lie in bed, my feet at the wall, my head on the pillow—the headboard perfectly positioned in the middle of the room so I can

see out the round window. The pale sliver of yellow moon smiles down at me through the trees.

There's a row of small wooden drawers built into the wall next to my bed, mostly filled with treasures from outside—heart-shaped stones and dried flowers and bits of old pottery and glass that Mama and Mimmy and I have unearthed while gardening. I reach for the bottom drawer, my fingers wrapping around the pocket-size green notebook I've kept there for as long as I can remember. Because I can't shake this morning's breakfast conversation.

My moms don't know about this notebook. Neither does Ginger or Noah.

Mostly it's lists of things I'd tell Frank if I ever had the chance. Questions I'd want to ask him. There are notes about Mama and Mimmy, too, speculations about which one's blood I have pumping through my own veins. Midnight scribbling usually fueled by some kind of disagreement, like Mama telling me I couldn't die my hair purple, so of course that night Mimmy seemed like the better candidate to be Biological Mom. But some nights, even without any arguing, I couldn't help but think about Frank before I fell asleep. Does he have a wife? A husband? Other kids? Does he live somewhere close or somewhere on the other side of the world? He'd been here, in Pennsylvania, at least once. To go to the cryobank near Philly, do his business in a little plastic cup, walk away with money in his hands. But that was almost two decades ago. Now? He could be anywhere. Including buried underground or piled up neatly inside a little metal urn.

I grab a pen from my nightstand. *Cons*, I write, squinting at the page in the dim moonlight. There are a lot of them, surely.

1. Hurting Mama's and Mimmy's feelings, even if Mimmy would support my decision.
2. Making them both feel like they're not enough for me. Like this family, us, isn't enough.
3. Complicating and confusing everything.
4. Feeling crushed/disillusioned/broken if I find out that Frank: is dead; is a horrible human being; doesn't care even a tiny little 0.01% bit that I exist. Being dead might be better than being horrible. (Though maybe I'm horrible for even thinking that, which makes the genetic odds of him being horrible, too, more likely...)
- 5.

Other cons? That can't be it. Though I suppose hurting Mama's and Mimmy's hearts or hurting my own heart are both two fairly big potential risks.

But to keep it balanced and fair, just in case: *Pros*.

1. Learning more about who I am and who/where I came from.
2. Answering some of the questions in this stupid notebook so I can sleep better at night instead of doing things

like this, such as: Am I the only one? Or do I have half-siblings? Why did Frank donate? Does Frank wonder about me? Does Frank love nature documentaries as much as I do? Does Frank hate fake fast food burgers, too? Does Frank have blue eyes like mine? Does Frank have the same scary dreams about flying over a never-ending icy ocean? Do any of these dumb questions even matter? But if they don't, why do I keep asking them???

3. No more worrying/wondering about the truth because I'll know and whatever it is can't be that bad because it won't change anything about my life with Mama and Mimmy.

Because no matter what, I don't actually want him *in* my life. It's not about that. No. I don't need him to start playing dad. It's just about knowing. Scratching an itch.

I put the pen down. I can't decide anything for a month anyway.

I shove the notebook away and slide the wooden drawer shut.