

# Fore word

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I am barefoot. My absolute favorite thing. I reach down with one toe, just my big toe, to give us the barest little push to keep the swing going. I feel tiny grains of dirt on the porch floor as my toe kisses against them. The extra length of the swing's chain clanks against the chain that supports the swing, hanging taut from the porch ceiling. How long has this swing been here? We have never once had to fix it or adjust it or anything. Not like the old wooden swing outside, with its long ropes hanging from a high, sturdy branch of the giant pine. We have had to fix that swing a million times. My father would drag out the extension ladder and raise it to very near its full, tottery height to replace the swing's cord.

Despite the density and girth of the rope's tight braids, over time the cables would begin to gray, then blacken as mold crept its way through the thickness. At some point the mold turned to rot. The rot ate its way through, one strand at a time. We knew to sit cautiously, gingerly, onto the seat of the swing, lest it be the moment when the last thread of the rotten rope broke and we were destined to end up plunged into the bed of pine needles blanketing the ground. Then, my father on the ladder, again. But the porch swing has never broken. I toss my head back and look up at the ceiling bolts that hold the swing in place, ancient and painted over so many times, the barest hints of pale orange rust beginning to leak through the pigment. The thought of the bolts' strength, their endurance, amazes me. And makes me tired, exhausted. The strain of years upon years of holding up the weight of human beings. I twirl the extra chain through my fingers; I clunk it against the taut chain that is doing the work of holding us up. I look over at you. My Eddie.

A line of sweat is just beginning to break out in the crease of your neck. I want to capture the expression on your face and put it in a jar. I want to carry the jar around with me like precious fireflies from a summer night. I have never seen you so relaxed, so contented. As if you know what I'm thinking, you reach for my hand and you kiss it. I am staring at you and you know that I am staring at you, and I tear up and you laugh. You kiss my hand again. You have that shy-but-formidable look, the one you had on our first date, our real first date. The look that makes your one dimple sing out. The look that made

me think that maybe, just maybe, we might end up right here someday, swinging on this swing.

The summer that I was twelve years old, my girlfriend Karen and I had spent the whole afternoon at a swimming pool I'd never been to before. We sat in the sun and talked about boys and laughed and swam and splashed each other and waited for our favorite songs to get played over and over on the transistor radio we'd brought with us. By the end of that afternoon, I felt a kind of deep peacefulness I'd never known before.

Karen's mother had rented a convertible for a special date with Karen's dad, and she came to pick us up from the pool in that convertible. It was the first time I'd ever been in one. The three of us crowded together in the front seat. Karen's mom had gotten her hair done in a fancy French twist for the date, and she tied a chiffon scarf around it for the ride home. Karen turned on the radio, and her mother cranked it up even louder. My body had that cool feeling that stays deep inside of you when you've been in the water all day, but your skin heats up from the warmth of the sun and you feel the hot and the cool all at once. When we hit the road, the wind tossed Karen's and my long, soaking wet hair all over the place, occasionally smacking ourselves and one another in the face. All of those feelings together, it was thrilling, electrifying, but the peacefulness was still there, too. That's what it was like meeting you, Eddie. Just exactly like that.

Your hand in mine is sweaty. The cool moistness of your palm against mine sends a ripple through my body, a shudder of feeling. I reach across your body to trace the line of sweat

on your neck with the index finger of my other hand. I taste it. The salt of you. I cannot get enough of you.

You lean your head toward mine. You are going to kiss me. How many times have you kissed me, and my stomach still does a little leap? Your head jerks. What was that? you say. What was what, I ask. I didn't hear anything. I definitely heard something, you say. You didn't hear that? Sounds like someone is throwing something—balls or something like that—one after another. Listen, you say. I hear it. Sounds like it's getting closer, you say. Sounds like it's coming from the orchard. You hear it, right? you ask me. Yes, I hear it.

Stay here. I'll check it out, you say. Probably some kid having a little fun, you say.

Don't be silly. I'll come, too, I say.

The short step down from the porch, my bare foot on the hot summer grass, I am hit by a wall of humidity. The full, fertile feel of the air that marks a Pennsylvania mountain summer. Thick, wet, ripe with a steaming, green life. "I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul." That poem, the Pablo Neruda poem that you recited. The humidity reminds me. Down on one knee in an old-fashioned gesture I never would have guessed. Holding my hand and you said, "I love you as the plant that never blooms but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers."

The wall of humidity pushes against me. Your arm reaches out and you tell me to stay back. Please, you say. Please stay back. "Thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance, risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body."

I see him, you say.

Then I see him, too.

I wonder what in the world he is doing here.

Without thinking I start to call out to him. I want to laugh. I want to wave and ask him what in the world he is doing here.

Then I see his face. "Lives darkly in his body."

And I know what he is doing here. I know.

# Part I

Twelve  
years earlier.

...I

**I**t all began with that party. Well, that's when it started to go south, anyway, in a long, slow, painful, unraveling train wreck. It was the first party like that one that I'd ever been to. I didn't even know the girl—the one whose parents were away that night—but I sure knew that Samantha had legendary status as *COOL*. I just thought of it as a chance to be out with my new boyfriend—my very first one—without any grown-ups around. And at night!—which was rare, because I was only thirteen years old. Mostly Sean and I hung out at my house or sometimes at my friend Doug's house after school. But then he asked me if I wanted to go