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SISTERS

A NOVEL

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SUMMER SISTERS

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Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing

Superfudge

Fudge-a-mania

Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great

Double Fudge

For Middle Grade Readers

Iggie's House

Blubber

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.

Then Again, Maybe I Won't

It's Not the End of the World

Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself

Deenie

Just As Long As We're Together

Here's to You, Rachel Robinson

Picture Books

The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo

The Pain and the Great One

Freckle Juice

SUMMER SISTERS

A Novel

JUDY BLUME

Delta Trade Paperbacks

To Mary Weaver
my "summer sister"

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Prologue

Summer 199

THE CITY IS BROILING in an early summer heat wave and for the third day in a row Victoria buys salad from the Korean market around the corner and has lunch at her desk. Her roommate Maia, tells her she's risking her life eating from a salad bar. If the bacteria don't get you, the preservatives will. Victoria considers this as she chomps on a carrot and scribbles notes on herself on an upcoming meeting with a client who's looking for a PR firm with an edge. Everyone wants edge these days. You tell them it's edgy, they love it.

When the phone rings she grabs it, expecting a call from the segment producer at Regis and Kathie Lee. "This is Victoria Leonard," she says, sounding solid and professional.

"Vix?"

She's surprised to hear Caitlin's voice on the other end and worries for a minute it's bad news, because Caitlin calls only at night, usually late, often waking her from a deep sleep. Besides, it's been a couple of months since they've talked at all.

"You have to come up," Caitlin says. She's using her breathy princess voice, the one she picked up in Europe, halfway between Jackie O's and Princess Di's. "I'm getting married at Lamb's house on the Vineyard."

"Married?"

"Yes. And you have to be my Maid of Honor. It's only appropriate, don't you think?"

"I guess that depends on who you're marrying."

"Bru," Caitlin answers, and suddenly she sounds like herself again. "I'm marrying Bru. I thought you knew."

Victoria forces herself to swallow, to breathe, but she feels clammy and weak anyway. She grabs the cold can of diet Coke from the corner of her desk and holds it against her forehead, then moves it to her neck, as she jots down the date and time of the wedding. She doodles around it while Caitlin chats, until the whole page is filled with arrows, crescent moons, and triangles, as if she's back in sixth grade.

"Vix?" Caitlin says. "Are you still there? Do we have a bad connection or what?"

"No, it's okay."

"So you'll come?"

"Yes." The second she hangs up she makes a mad dash for the women's room where she pukes her guts out in the stall. She has to call Caitlin back, tell her there's no way she can do this. What can Caitlin be thinking? What was she thinking when she agreed?

Four weeks later Caitlin, her hair flying in the wind, meets Victoria at the tiny Vineyard airport. Victoria is the last one to step out of the commuter from LaGuardia. She'd spotted Caitlin from her window as soon as they'd landed but felt glued to her seat. It's been more than two years since they've seen each other, and three since Victoria graduated from college and got caught up in real life—a job, with just two weeks vacation a year. No money to fly around. Bummer, as Lamb would say when they were kids.

"Going on to Nantucket with us?" the flight attendant asks and suddenly Victoria realizes she's the only passenger still on the plane. Embarrassed, she grabs her bag and hustles down

the steps onto the tarmac. Caitlin finds her in the crowd and waves frantically. Victoria heads toward her, shaking her head because Caitlin is wearing a T-shirt that says simplify, simplify, simplify. She's barefoot as usual and Victoria is betting her feet will be as dirty as they were that first summer.

Caitlin holds her at arm's length for a minute. "God, Vix ..." she says, "you look so grownup!" They both laugh, then Caitlin hugs her. She smells of seawater, suntan lotion, and something else. Victoria closes her eyes, breathing in the familiar scent, and for a moment it's as if they've never been apart. They're still Vixen and Cassandra, summer sisters forever. The rest is a mistake, a crazy joke.

PART ONE

Dancing Queen
1977–1980

Summer 197

VICTORIA'S WORLD SHOOK for the first time on the day Caitlin Somers sashayed up to her desk, plunked herself down on the edge, and said, "Vix ..." It came out sounding like the name of a beautiful flower, velvety and smooth, not like a decongestant. Caitlin had transferred to Acequia Madre Elementary School just after Christmas, having moved to Santa Fe from Aspen over the holidays. Everyone in Vix's sixth-grade class fell instantly in love with her. And it wasn't just the way she looked, with her pale, wavy hair, her satin skin and deep-set, almost navy blue eyes. She was scrappy, fearless, and had a smart mouth. She was the first to say fuck in class and get away with it. No teacher, no adult, would have believed the words that rolled so easily off Caitlin's pretty pink tongue. And then there was that smile, that laugh.

Vix was too shy, too quiet to even speak her name. She sat back and worshiped from afar as the others fought over who would get to be her partner, who would share desks with her. So she thought she'd heard wrong when Caitlin asked, "Want to come away with me this summer?"

Vix was wearing worn bell-bottoms and a juice-stained purple T-shirt, her dark hair pulled back into a sloppy ponytail. She had a pencil smudge on her left cheek. As Caitlin spoke Vix could swear she heard Abba playing in the background. "Dancing Queen" ... She missed most of what Caitlin said except it had to do with some island in the middle of the ocean. The ocean, for God's sake, which she had never seen. She was unable to answer, sure this was a trick, a joke. She expected the rest of the class to start laughing, even though the last bell had just rung and the other kids were rushing past them toward the door.

"Vix ..." Caitlin tilted her head to one side and the corners of her mouth turned up. "My dad gets me for the whole summer. July first until Labor Day."

The whole summer. The whole goddamned summer! The music swelled. You're a tease, you turn 'em on, Leave them burning and then you're gone ... "I've never even seen the ocean." She could not believe how stupid she sounded, as if she had no control over the words that were coming out of her mouth.

"But how is it possible in this day and age that you've never seen the ocean?" Caitlin asked. She was genuinely interested, genuinely surprised that a person could have lived almost twelve years without ever having seen it.

All Vix could do was shrug and then smile. She wondered if Caitlin heard the music, too, but the music followed her wherever she went. From then on whenever Vix heard "Dancing Queen" she was back in sixth grade on a sunny afternoon in June. The afternoon some fairy godmother waved her magic wand over Vix's head and changed her life forever.

At home, Vix asked her mother, "How is it possible, in this day and age, that I've never seen the ocean?"

Her mother, who was bathing her youngest brother, Nathan, looked at her as if she were nuts. Nathan had muscular dystrophy. His body was small and misshapen. They had a contraption that allowed him to sit in the bathtub but he couldn't be left alone. He was seven, sassy and smart, a lot brighter than her other brother Lewis, who was nine, or her sister Lanie, who was ten.

"What kind of question is that?" her mother said. "We live in New Mexico. Hundreds of miles from one ocean and thousands from the other."

"I know, but so do plenty of other people and they've been to the ocean." She knew damn well why they'd never been to either coast. Still, she sat on the closed toilet seat, arms folded defiantly across her chest, as she watched Nathan sailing his boats around in the tub, stirring up waves with his arms.

"This is *my* ocean," he said. His speech was garbled, making it difficult for some people to understand him, but not Vix.

"Besides, you've been to Tulsa," her mother said, as if that had anything to do with what they were talking about.

Yes, she'd been to Tulsa, but only once, when her grandmother, a grandmother she'd never known she had until then, lay dying. "Open your eyes, Darlene," her mother had said to the stranger in the hospital bed. "Open your eyes and have a look at your grandchildren." The three of them were lined up in front of their mother, while Nathan slept in his stroller. The grandmother person looked Vix, Lewis, and Lanie up and down without moving her head. Then she said, "Well, Tawny, I can see you've been busy." And that was it.

Tawny didn't cry when Darlene died the next day. Vix got to help her clean out Darlene's trailer, the trailer where Tawny had grown up. Tawny took some old photos, an unopened bottle of Scotch, and a couple of Indian baskets she thought could be worth something. It turned out they weren't.

She couldn't sit still. She'd never wanted anything so badly in her life. And she was determined. One way or another she was going away with Caitlin Somers.

"Stop squirming," Tawny said, tossing Vix a towel. "Get Nathan dried and ready for supper. I've got to help Lewis with his homework."

"So, can I go?" Vix called as Tawny left the bathroom and headed down the hall.

"Your father and I will discuss it, Victoria," Tawny called back, letting her know it wasn't a done deal.

Tawny never called her Vix like everyone else. *If I'd wanted to name my daughter after a conch remedy, I would have.* You'd have thought a person named Tawny would have been more flexible.

She'd been to Caitlin's house, an old walled-in place on the Camino, just once, in March when Caitlin had invited the whole class to her twelfth birthday party. They'd had live music and a pizza wagon with a dozen different toppings. Caitlin's mother, Phoebe, dressed in faux Indian clothes—long skirt, western boots, ropes of turquoise around her neck. Her hair hung down her back in one glossy braid. Some of Phoebe's friends were there, too, including her boyfriend of the moment, a guy with long, silvery hair, a concha belt, and hand-tooled

leather boots. Vix had never been to a party like that, in a house like that, with grownups like that.

She'd brought Caitlin a blank book for her birthday, covered in blue denim, with a silver chain as a page marker. She only hoped it was worthy of Caitlin's thoughts and feelings. She dreamed about touching her hair, her sun-kissed skin.

She wrote her parents a letter, making a case for letting her go, not the least being Caitlin's promise that it wouldn't cost them a penny.

But Tawny didn't buy it. She claimed Caitlin came from an unstable family. "Just one look at that mother ..."

"But we won't be with her mother," Vix countered, "we'll be with her father and he's very stable."

"How do you know?"

"Everybody knows. He's going to call you. You can ask him yourself."

In the end, it was *her* father who convinced Tawny to let her go. Her father, a man who looked surprised when he opened their front door to find he had four noisy children inside. A man of so few words he could spend a whole weekend without speaking, but if he did, his voice dropped way low on the last part of every sentence and someone was always asking, "What? *What'd you say, Dad?*" But he was never unkind.

She imagined jumping into his arms, hugging him as hard as she could to show how thankful she was, but that would have embarrassed both of them so she said, "Thanks, Dad." And he mumbled something, something she didn't get, while he rested his hand on top of her head.

Until then the highlight of her childhood had been the weekend her father installed a molded laminate shower in the half-bath in her parents' room. When it was hooked up and working Vix, Lewis, and Lanie all begged to be first to try it out. Her father looked right at her and said, "We'll do it in age order. Vix gets to go first."

How proud she was that day! How grateful to her father for recognizing her as having a special place in the family. First daughter. Eldest child. A yellow shower with its own glass door. She'd wanted to stand under the warm water forever. Only later did she realize how crowded their house was, with small, high, north-facing windows, making it dark and cool year-round, even in relentlessly sunny Santa Fe.

She knew next to nothing about her parents' early lives. Whenever Vix asked her mother a personal question Tawny answered, "We don't wash our linen in public."

"I'm not public," Vix argued. "I'm family. I'm your daughter."

"You know enough," Tawny told her. "You know what's important. Besides, curiosity killed the cat." But satisfaction brought her back again, Vix thought, not that she'd dare say it out loud. If she did, Tawny would shout, *That's enough, Victoria!* So she quit asking questions. What was the point?

Sometimes she tried to imagine Tawny on the day she graduated from high school, boarding the first bus out of Tulsa and traveling as far as her money would take her, all the way to Albuquerque, where, thanks to her typing and shorthand skills, which Tawny reminded them of regularly, she found a job working for a young lawyer. Seven years later

she was still working for him. By then she was engaged to Ed Leonard, a Sioux City boy, polite and nice-enough looking, whom she'd met at a dance at Kirtland Air Force Base.

They were married by a justice of the peace when Ed got out of the service. The young lawyer, who wasn't that young anymore, threw a party for them in his backyard. Tawny didn't invite Darlene. Didn't even tell Ed her mother was living.

Then came the dead babies, three in five years, born before they were old enough to breathe on their own. Vix and Lanie used to play The Dead Baby Game the way other kids played A, My Name is Alice, reciting the names Tawny and Ed had chosen for their babies: *William Edward, Bonnie Karen, James Howard*. They'd just about given up hope when Vix was born, strong and healthy, a survivor. Lanie and Lewis followed. They moved to Santa Fe where Ed landed a job selling insurance. And then they had Nathan.

Her father used to joke about making the Millionaire's Club, selling a million dollars' worth of insurance in one year. Then he might win a vacation to some exotic resort, maybe even Hawaii. If he did, he promised he'd take all of them. Vix dreamed about that vacation until the insurance company went under and her father was out of work for close to a year. Tawny was lucky to find a job working for the Countess. Even after Ed found a new job as the night manager at La Fonda, the old hotel on the Plaza, Tawny kept hers. "It's hard enough to make do on both our salaries," she'd say.

The Countess wore suede jodhpurs, blue nail polish, and exotic jewelry. She had five dogs. Nobody knew her exact age. Tawny had to take her to AA meetings. Sometimes, when the Countess fell off the wagon, Tawny would get really mean at home.

Vix lay in bed in the room she shared with Lanie, dreaming of the summer to come. She envisioned palm trees swaying in the breeze. She could almost feel the long, sultry nights, hear the beat of reggae music. Fantasy Island or, at the very least, Gilligan's. She had to pinch herself to make sure it was real, that she was really going away with Caitlin Somers, that she hadn't invented the whole thing.

Lanie didn't like the idea. "It's so unfair!" she cried. "You get to do everything."

Lanie was probably wondering why Caitlin Somers, the biggest deal in the whole school had invited her to spend the summer. She was wondering the same thing herself. She tried to console Lanie. "Look at it this way ... you can have our room all to yourself for the whole summer. You can have friends stay overnight and everything."

"Can I have your Barbies?"

"Have? No way."

"Use?"

"Use ... okay ... if you promise you'll keep them exactly the way they belong. And Barbie Dream House is off limits."

"No fair ... that's the best."

"Then no deal."

Lanie pouted. She and Vix shared Tawny's dark eyes and high cheekbones, a gift from some Cherokee ancestor. But Lanie was the best looking of all of them, with Ed's auburn hair and fair skin. "Okay ... I won't touch Barbie's Dream House."

Vix was almost asleep when Lanie whispered, "If you go away you'll miss your birthday."

"No, I won't. I'll just be in a different place."

Phoebe never drove to Albuquerque, even when she was flying somewhere herself, so Caitlin rode down with Vix and her family in the RV, fitted for Nathan's chair. At the airport, when Vix bent down to hug Nathan goodbye, he said, "Don't worry ... I won't forget you," and he gave her his lopsided smile.

"I won't forget you either," she promised. As she stood up she noticed a woman staring at Nathan. She was used to the way people looked at him, with a mixture of curiosity, pity, and revulsion. They'd look away if she happened to catch their eye.

Once they were on the plane, seated and buckled in, Vix pulled a lunch bag out of her backpack. Tawny had packed two bologna sandwiches, several juice cartons, and bags of pretzels and potato chips, as if Vix were going on a camping trip. She unfolded a note scribbled on lined paper.

In case you don't like the airline food. Mother

She wasn't sure if she was going to laugh or cry.

"What's that?" Caitlin asked.

"A note from my mother."

"She wrote to you already?"

Vix nodded.

"Phoebe loves having summers off from being a mother," Caitlin said proudly. "She's going to the south of France. She'll send a postcard and bring me back something great to wear."

Vix was thinking her mother would give anything to go to France. But the Countess never missed opera season in Santa Fe. She'd throw huge parties and Tawny would be responsible for everything.

The plane was taxiing down the runway now, picking up speed, faster and faster until they lifted into the air. As they did Vix closed her eyes, said a prayer, and clutched the arms of her seat.

"Wait ..." Caitlin said. "Let me guess ... this is your first flight."

"Right. And don't ask, *How is it possible in this day and age.*"

Caitlin laughed. "You're totally different," she said, squeezing Vix's arm. "I like that about you."

Tawny

~~WHAT WAS SHE THINKING, packing a lunch for Victoria? It's not like her to fuss over her children.~~ They have to be prepared for life and life is hard, full of disappointments. She shouldn't have listened to Ed, shouldn't have agreed to let Victoria go to an island, of all places, when she can't even swim. And telling *her* not to worry. Worry? She's too tired to worry. She can't remember what it's like not to be tired. She closes her eyes and prays to God to protect her daughter. To keep her safe. But it will never be the same. Once Victoria gets a taste of another way of life, once she spends a summer with a girl like Caitlin Somers, she'll be lost to them, sure as a dog chews a bone. She knows it even if Ed doesn't.

And now the other children are pulling on her, begging for money for the gumball machine. Only Nathan is still thinking of Victoria. She can see it on his face. She's surprised herself that Victoria just up and left him. She counts on Victoria to help out over the summer. The other two are useless, cut from a different piece of cloth. But Victoria is more like her. She does what needs to be done.

Ed

~~TAWNY EXPECTS TOO MUCH of the girl. Gives her too much responsibility. She's still a kid, just turning twelve. The same age he was when his father died. For three years his mother's neediness nearly suffocated him. My little man, she'd called him. Hell, he was no man. Never mind how hard he tried. And then one day, with no warning, she announces she'll be getting married over the weekend, to a man he's never met, a man he's never even heard of, a widower with three children, all younger than him. Just like that.~~

His stepfather hated his guts. *That's a useless kid you've got there, Maddy.* And the kid taking his lead, took pleasure in tormenting him.

Is he shy?

Nah, he's just stupid.

Cat got your tongue, Eddie?

Nah, cat's got his dick!

For a while he quit talking at home.

His mother said, *We need him, Eddie. Try to understand. He's got a good job. He'll take care of us. You'll see ...*

But she was the one who took care of him and his three brats and the twins she had with him seven months after they were married. Worked herself into the grave before she hit fifty.

Not that he'd hung around to watch. He'd enlisted at eighteen. *Join Up ... See the World* Sounded good to him. Anything to get away.

All he wanted was a decent job, a family of his own, kids to love. He'd be a real father, not that he'd ever seen one in action, but he'd figure it out. Then he met Tawny, a woman who knew her mind. He liked that about her. She was no wish-wash like his mother.

Now ... hell, it's all different. And it's made Tawny hard. Nobody's fault. Just the way it is.

CAITLIN DIDN'T ALWAYS tell the truth. She left things out. Sometimes, important things. She had a brother. A brother and a dog. The brother was puny for fourteen with a sad face framed by shaggy brown hair. He didn't look anything like Caitlin, didn't even live with her, but she swore they were from the same mother and father. She called him Sharkey.

The father had already told Vix to call him *Lamb*. "As in baby sheep," Caitlin added. "As in *baaa baaa ...*" Maybe they had some kind of animal fixation.

"Lamb," Vix said, trying it out. It felt weird to call a grownup, somebody's father, *Lamb*. He was tall and lean, wearing Birkenstocks, jeans with an iron-on patch, and a black pockmarked tee. He had the same toothy smile as Caitlin, and when he held out his hand to welcome her, she saw that his arms were covered in pale fuzz, lighter than the hair on his head, which was mixed with gray even though he wasn't *old-old*, not that his age meant a thing to Vix. Parents were parents. They were all about the same.

In the baggage area at Logan she identified her bag and Lamb grabbed it from the carousel. She wished she had a canvas duffel like Caitlin's instead of her mother's old Black Water plaid suitcase held together by duct tape, with her name printed across it in Magic Marker.

The dog, a black lab with a bandanna around its neck, was in the back seat of a beat-up gray Volvo wagon. The brother was in the front. "They both live with Lamb in Cambridge," Caitlin told her, before dashing across the street, making the driver of a Toyota slam on his brakes. But Lamb didn't say anything. He just smiled and shook his head. Tawny would have shouted, *Watch where you're going, Victoria! Do you want to get killed? Do you have any idea how much a funeral costs these days?*

"Sweetie, you old thing!" Caitlin cooed, kissing the dog on the mouth. "Hey, Vix, this Sweetie ... she's older than Lamb in dog years. Give Vix a sniff," she told the dog, who did exactly that, starting with her crotch. Vix felt her face redden. She shoed the dog away and crossed her legs.

When Caitlin introduced Vix to Sharkey she said, "You better treat her right!"

"I treat all your friends right unless they don't get it," Sharkey said.

Vix vowed then and there not to be a person who didn't get it. Whatever it was.

The drive seemed to take forever. Lamb tapped the steering wheel, keeping time to the music on the tape deck. "Hey, Jude." They came to a bridge with a sign that read, *Feeling desperate? Call the Samaritans. It gave a phone number. Did that mean desperate enough to jump? Suddenly, a wave of homesickness washed over her. What was she doing here? What was Caitlin, really?*

It was almost sunset as they pulled onto the ferry, another first for Vix. She'd never seen so much water in one place but Caitlin assured her this was not the ocean. Seabirds circled the boat as the ferry glided along and Caitlin warned Vix to stay alert because when they let off their stuff it went flying.

Forty-five minutes later, when they docked, Vix sensed that this would not be the tropical island she'd conjured up in her fantasies. The night air was far from sultry, there was no

reggae music, and the trees were pines and oaks, not palms.

The phone was ringing as Lamb unlocked the door to the house. He ran for it, then handed it to Vix. “For you, kiddo.”

“You were supposed to call,” her mother said.

“I know, but—”

She didn’t give Vix a chance to explain that they’d just arrived. “I expect you to do what you’re told, Victoria.”

“I will, it’s just that ...” Lamb turned on a light and Vix saw they were in the kitchen. There was an old stove, shelves but no cabinets, red linoleum on the floor, a table whose yellow paint had cracked and peeled.

“How was the plane trip?” her mother asked.

Caitlin was motioning for her to hurry. She pointed across the room to eerie-looking shadows dancing across the windows.

“The plane?” Vix asked.

“Yes, the plane,” her mother repeated.

Caitlin threw a towel over her head and walked toward Vix, arms outstretched like a zombie. Sweetie started barking, excited by Caitlin’s antics. “The plane was okay,” she told her mother. Already, it felt like ages ago. Her first trip on a plane. She wondered if all the firsts in her life would go by so quickly, and be forgotten just as quickly.

Phoebe

~~SHE SINGS ALONG with Paul Simon as she packs her bags. *Just slip out the back, Jack, Make a ne plan, Stan ...*~~ She twirls over to the dresser, grabs an armload of lingerie—lace bras with matching bikinis, long satin nightgowns, teddies. She dumps everything onto her Habitat, sleek, white, four-sided bed topped by a Mylar mirror.

She's always had wanderlust. Not like Caity, who never wants to go anywhere unless it's to be with Lamb. She's beginning to think it was a mistake to take her away from him all those years ago. Of course, if Caity wanted, she could live with Lamb. All she'd have to do is ask. She won't be hurt. *Really*. She knows she's not a bad mother, just not a very good one. But she and Caity get along.

Sharkey, on the other hand, is a complete mystery. Grown men she can understand, she knows what they want, what they expect, but this is something else. Maybe they're all odd. Fourteen. She's sure he'll appreciate her when he's older. He'll be glad then to have a live wire for a mother. They both will be.

Funny about this girl Caity took away for the summer. Another of her impulsive decisions. Last year's friend lasted just ten days. Ten days and she'd flown home, and as far as *she* knew, Caity hadn't given her a second thought. After the summer, when she'd asked *What happened?* Caity told her, *She just didn't get it.*

Get what, Caity?

Come on, Phoebe ... you know.

But she didn't. Ah well, it wasn't her problem, was it? Let Lamb work it out. Ten months a year is enough to be a parent. Everyone needs time off to rejuvenate.

Tonight she'll be in New York, tomorrow night, Paris.

IT WAS THE KIND OF SUMMER you don't write home about. Vix didn't exactly lie, but like Caitlin, she began to practice selective truth telling. What her family didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

The house was dark and messy, a place where nobody cared how much sand was on the floor or in your bed. Caitlin called it Psycho House. Vix could see why. Their room had unpainted wooden walls, twin beds with squeaky springs, faded red bedspreads, and pillows that smelled worse than the damp sponge used to clean off the lunch tables at school. The shelves were crammed full of headless Barbies, Legos, board games with missing pieces, tennis racquets with broken strings, starfish, hermit crab shells, jars of dead insects, pyramids of rocks.

The bathroom was down the hall. They shared it with Sharkey. When Vix sat in the clawfooted tub she could look out over Tashmoo Pond, which was a mile long. It opened into the Sound, allowing boats to come and go.

In the pond things floated, brown things that looked like turds. Caitlin swore they weren't but Vix wasn't so sure. Caitlin swam every day in her purple tank suit. Vix's suit was blue and white with red stars. She hated it. Her mother said there was no point in buying a new one she didn't plan on getting it wet. And she didn't. She'd be like Sharkey. He never went anywhere near the water. He never even wore a bathing suit.

Another thing about him and Caitlin, they hardly ever changed their clothes. But the real disgusting part was Caitlin didn't change her underpants. Sometimes she didn't even wear underpants. She hadn't taken a bath or shower since they'd arrived. Her hair needed shampooing. She and Sharkey were both starting to smell of unwashed feet and something else, something Vix couldn't identify. But it wasn't good. If Lamb noticed, he didn't say anything. He was so laid back he was practically horizontal.

"He was a hippie for a while," Caitlin told Vix. "He lived up island with all the other hippies. Some of them are famous now. Some of them are rich."

Vix was dying to ask the obvious but she didn't. Nobody was going to accuse her of being the person who didn't get it. Sometimes at the end of the day Lamb took them fishing. If they caught a blue or a bass he'd cook it on the grill, wrapped in foil, with tomatoes, green peppers, and onions. *One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish* At first Vix wouldn't even taste Lamb's concoction. The closest she'd come to eating fish was tuna from a can. Lamb didn't mind. He'd say, "No problem, kiddo ... make yourself a peanut butter sandwich instead." After all, Sharkey didn't eat fish either. He ate only Cheerios.

But after a while the fish started to smell good and Vix discovered it didn't taste that bad except for the bones. She marveled at the way Caitlin pulled them out of her mouth and lined them up on her plate, while she sometimes had to spit a chewed-up mouthful into her napkin.

Caitlin taught her to play jacks. She shook baby powder on the floor so their hands would slide easily across the old pine boards of the living room. Caitlin was a whiz, running through three fancies before Vix could finish sevensies.

There was no TV in the house. In Vix's house in Santa Fe the TV was on all the time. Lew

and Lanie watched re-runs of sitcoms before supper and Tawny never missed *Laverne and Shirley* or *Charlie's Angels*.

This place was filled with old books. They smelled musty. One rainy day while she and Caitlin were browsing they came upon *Ideal Marriage and Love Without Fear*. That night in their room they took turns reading aloud to one another, breaking up over the language, but disappointed neither book had pictures. Caitlin said *coitus interruptus* sounded like something you ordered in a French restaurant.

They used the dictionary in Lamb's study to look up *cunnilingus*, *fellatio*, *dingleberry*. The last was their favorite. *Dingleberry: a small clot of dung, as clinging to the hindquarters of an animal*. Vix told Caitlin if she didn't start wearing clean underpants she was going to get the Dingleberry Award. Caitlin took this seriously for a few days, then returned to her old ways.

The first time Caitlin led Vix through the woods with Sweetie following, along the secret pine needle path that led to the north beach and Vineyard Sound, they clasped hands, closed their eyes, and vowed they would never be ordinary. Phoebe had told Caitlin that to be ordinary was a fate worse than death. Caitlin called this the NBO pact. "NBO or die!" she sang into the wind. "Agreed?"

"Agreed." At that moment Vix felt like the luckiest person on earth. She was the chosen one, chosen for reasons beyond her comprehension to be Caitlin's friend, so if Caitlin wanted her to swear she would never be ordinary, fine, she'd do it. She made her mark in the sand, heart with a V inside, while Caitlin drew an elaborate lightning bolt around her initials.

Caitlin was impressed by how dark Vix's skin turned in just a few weeks. "It's my Native American gene," Vix explained. "I'm one-sixteenth Cherokee on my mother's side." She wasn't sure of the exact fraction. She just knew it was something to be proud of.

"God, that is so interesting! I wish I had unusual genes."

"I'm sure you do," Vix said, thinking of Phoebe and Lamb.

When Caitlin swam Vix watched over her until she was just a dot, bobbing in the sea like a lobsterman's buoy. "I can't swim," Vix confessed to Sweetie. "So you'll have to save her if she needs saving. Okay?"

Sweetie didn't seem concerned. She cocked her head as if listening carefully, then ran off to find something to roll in, something dead or decaying. Whatever it was, it would leave her fur smelling like old fish.

Caitlin shook herself off like a dog when she came out of the water, then wrapped a beach towel around her waist so it dragged in the sand like a long skirt. "Did I ever tell you that in my former life I was a mermaid?" "But in this life you're a human," Vix reminded her, just in case she forgot. "And I wish you wouldn't go out so far." She drizzled turrets of wet sand onto their elaborate castle.

"I like the way you worry about me," Caitlin said.

"Somebody has to."

In their room at night they played Mermaids, using the makeup Caitlin bought on Lamb's charge at Leslie's Pharmacy to paint their lips dark red and outline their eyes in coal black. The mirror on the wall above the bathroom sink was as old as the house, with a crack that stretched diagonally across it, making them look as if they had scars running across their faces.

They vamped and sang to Abba, the Eagles, Shaun Cassidy—"Da Doo Ron Ron"—socks stuffed into the tops of their bathing suits to see how they'd look with big breasts. Caitlin was still totally flat but Vix had tiny mounds, the beginning of something.

Caitlin was fascinated by Vix's pubic hairs. "Lay down," she said, "and I'll count them for you."

"What for?"

"Aren't you curious? Don't you want to know how many you have?"

"Curiosity killed the cat," Vix said.

Caitlin looked at her as if she were beyond hope. "A person without curiosity may as well be dead."

Vix wished somebody would explain that to her mother. To prove she was far from dead she lay on her bed with her underpants pulled down, laughing hysterically as Caitlin lifted one strand at a time, counting out loud. "Sixteen," Caitlin said, announcing the grand total. "You're so lucky!"

"I don't see what's lucky about having sixteen pubic hairs."

"You would if all you had was this!" Caitlin pulled down her shorts to show Vix her tiny patch of pale fuzz. Not that Vix hadn't seen it before.

Sharkey barged in on them like that and they shrieked so loud he took off, a terrified look on his face. From then on they shoved a chair in front of their bedroom door because there were no locks in the house.

When they grew bored with Mermaids they invented a better game. Vixen and Cassandra, the Summer Sisters, the two sexiest girls on the Vineyard, maybe anywhere. They had The Power. The Power was inside their pants, between their legs. They'd just discovered that if they rubbed it in a certain way it was like an electrical current buzzing through them.

Dear Folks,

Having a great time.

Love, Vix

And then there was Von, the most gorgeous guy Vix had ever seen. He was maybe sixteen with a long sun-streaked ponytail, muscles in his arms, and a pack of Marlboros tucked in the sleeve of his T-shirt. His lips were full and so soft looking Caitlin said she could suck on them all night. Until then Vix had never thought of sucking on anyone's lips.

Von worked at the Flying Horses, which was supposed to be the oldest carousel in the country, one of those national treasures people on the Vineyard were always raving about. He collected tickets and fed the rings back into the machine as the carousel spun round and round. Vix thought Von should be declared the National Treasure. Every time Lamb headed for Oak Bluffs they'd beg to come along. He'd give them a couple of dollars and while he ran errands they'd ride until they were so dizzy they could hardly stand.

Von called them *Double Trouble*. He groaned when he saw them coming, pretending they were a real pain. Caitlin punched him in the arm when he acted that way. She loved to tease him, pulling his ponytail, jumping from horse to horse, daring him to stop her. She broke all the rules but he never kicked *her* off the carousel. Vix knew he never would have noticed her if it hadn't been for Caitlin. But she didn't mind. She was proud to be Caitlin's friend.

One night the National Treasure introduced them to his cousin, Bru. Bru was taller than

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