

Hooky

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Under a canopy of chestnuts, atop a canvas of beach towels, they lay on their backs. He took her hand, briefly, then released. She still wore the top half of her bikini.

The sun warmed her toes, dried her skin, and she could hear the reservoir lapping against the rocks. That morning, after dropping her little sister off at school, she had leaned against her car in the parking lot, waiting for him to arrive. She was already admitted to college, he'd reasoned, placing the backs of his fingers on her cheek. She should live a little, he'd said. She wondered now if he had planned this part, or if he had only been thinking of cliff jumping.

He was two years above her, home from college for summer. They'd run into each other at the school's catered luncheon for seniors to mingle with recent alumni and talk about the transition to college life. At first he joked that she didn't remember him, but he was wrong. Noah Coolidge. They'd taken a photography elective together, and for his final project he'd assembled a collection of pretty color stills taken at Race Brook Falls. Back then, he'd had sun-bleached caramel hair, but now it was dark like chocolate and it matched his eyes.

She remembered what it had felt like to step off the rock and out into the air, plunging some twenty feet to the water below. She was soaring and then she was surrounded, suspended, slingshotting like a rubber band. Noah's fall had been much more graceful than her own, slipping into the water like he was part of a cascade.

Her phone beeped, a text message, but she didn't look at it. A few weeks ago she had never even kissed a boy. Her younger sister had had her first kiss at fourteen. But then, Shannon had always been more socially adept than Erin. She sought boys and popularity the way Erin sought grades.

"What are you thinking?" Noah's chest vibrated against her

cheekbone. Today marked date three with him, four if she counted the luncheon.

There was a time when the excitement of her first date would not have been kept secret from Shannon, but instead shared in midnight whispers. When they were in elementary school Shannon had devised a pattern of knocks to call Erin from bed after lights out. She had most often used the code to talk about boys, but Erin had used it once when she'd been frightened about going away the next day to a sleep-away science camp. That night, Shannon, who'd been seven, had told her that if she ever felt lonely or scared at camp, she could knock on the wall of her camp room in their secret code, and she would know that Shannon was thinking about her. She had said they had magical powers because they were sisters, and that's what happens with sisters; she'd read it in a book.

It had been years since either girl had used the code. At the time of Noah's inquiry, Erin had been imagining Shannon's eager curiosity and slight jealousy if she were to use it tonight. But she couldn't explain any of this to Noah. It was too complicated and childish, so she lied and told him that she'd been thinking about going for another swim.

When they finally packed up, on the hike back to the car, Erin found four text messages on her phone. All were from her father and said some variation of "Where are you?" and "Call me." All were sent during the school day. She also had two missed calls from home, but no voicemails.

"Trouble?" Noah buckled in.

"No." She did not want him to see her fret over having been caught playing hooky and think she was too much the good girl.

Noah was an environmental science major, and as he drove he talked to her about his lab work, how they simulated different types of pollution and the long-term effects it might have on an ecosystem. He talked very fast and got technical with terms like biomagnification and soil leeching, terms she only half understood, but she nodded along anyway, too amused by his enthusiasm and embarrassed

by her own ignorance to stop him. At the bottom of her driveway he told her that he was glad he'd met her again, and even more glad she'd let him convince her to play hooky. He would call her, he promised, pressing his lips against her forehead before she got out of the car. Erin watched him drive away and when she was sure that he could no longer see her, she walked up the long, steep driveway to the house.

The front door was locked, so she lifted the garage door a foot and ducked under. Neither of her parents' cars were there. She turned the doorknob to enter the basement. Remembering the text messages, Erin pulled her phone out of her pocket and called her mother.

The phone rang four times and went to voicemail. Erin hung up. She tried her father, but his phone did the same. She told herself that it was only a coincidence. Her father was in a late meeting, perhaps, while her mother was probably taking Shannon to a friend's house for dinner.

She hadn't eaten since the picnic lunch she had shared with Noah, reclined on a rock face that sloped into the Saugatuck Reservoir. She felt flushed as she remembered, and also hungry, so she jogged upstairs, crossed into the kitchen, and swung open the fridge. As she rummaged for something that looked appealing, her cell vibrated against her leg. Erin slipped it out and answered quickly. It wasn't her parents, but Noah.

"Hey, I just got in. This is a little weird—"

"Erin, is your family home?"

"No."

"Turn on the TV."

"Okay." Erin shut the refrigerator door and crossed into the family room. She found the remote stuffed between the sofa cushions and pressed the power button.

"What channel?"

"Any channel."

The television had been left on NBC. On the screen was a picture

of the front entrance to Eastport High School. A reporter stood before the doors, which were blocked off by yellow crime tape. She was talking about something that couldn't be true. A student, yet to be named, had opened fire in the cafeteria. "There have been three confirmed fatalities," the reporter was saying, "including the shooter, who took his own life after killing one of his teachers. At least five students lie in critical condition at Danbury Hospital."

"Erin," Noah was saying from somewhere far away. "Your family is probably okay. They're probably just out looking for you. Erin, are you still there?"

Three had been killed. She thought of her friends and then the strange midday messages from her father. Shannon. But it wasn't likely. That her sister would be dead. There were around one thousand students in Eastport High School. If only three out of a thousand had died, then it was unlikely, statistically, that Shannon was one of them.

Across the room, the house phone rang. Erin told Noah that she had to go, but she was too late to reach the landline. Her father spoke on the answering machine, telling Erin that when she came home, she had better come to the hospital. He hadn't wanted to tell her this way. Shannon had been shot.

The word dropped in her stomach. She wasn't sure she even knew what it meant. It could be a graze or a flesh wound or even death. She called Noah and told him that she needed a ride. Her car was still in the high school parking lot. "Please," she said. He was quiet for a long moment.

"Yeah, all right," he said. "I'll be right over."

He didn't say anything when she stepped inside his car. They were driving, and she could watch herself like an actress in a film. There I am, sitting in the car next to Noah, on the way to the hospital to see my shot sister. The word still sounded so odd in her head—a din in a foreign language. Meaningless and exotic. Shot. She wished Noah might say something, or do something, that would call her back, but he stayed silent. Earlier, his silence had put her at ease.

She was content to listen to his breathing fall in sync with the water as it swept over stone, to hear his heart throb, his lungs fill, his stomach bubble. The silence let her think freely. Now, she did not want to think.

Noah had trouble finding a place to park. There were too many vans with television logos, too many people holding microphones or cameras or notepads, and he had to drive extra slowly to weave through them all. Far away from the E.R. entrance, Noah turned off the car. She knew she ought to move, but something held her in place. Noah stepped out, moved around the vehicle, and opened her door. He held out a hand, and Erin took it.

As they neared the E.R. men and women in suits talked into cameras. She heard the words *Columbine* and *execution* and *Juilliard*. Noah had his arm around her waist now, leading her forward. He pushed through the doors and the fast chatter of reporters cut off.

There was no one at reception. "Hello?" Noah called. An orderly whizzed down the hall, carrying several pints of crimson blood. Some moments later a woman in pink scrubs rounded the corner. When she saw the young couple, she inhaled sharply and slipped behind the reception desk. "Name?" she said.

Somehow Erin knew to say her sister's name rather than her own. The nurse typed into the computer and said Shannon was in the intensive care unit on the third floor, waiting to stabilize before being taken back into surgery.

"Back?" Erin echoed.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "I don't have the details. I'll try to page the front desk. They'll send someone down here." And then the nurse was gone.

"Erin?"

She swirled to see her father crossing the lobby, on his way back from the cafeteria. He paused mid-stride, and his body relaxed as she approached him. How absurd she must look. Her T-shirt was still crisp from the lake, her tangled hair was pulled into a low,

sloppy ponytail, and she smelled like sulfur. If her father noticed, he said nothing. She crashed into his chest and he squeezed as if afraid she might vanish. When he finally let her go, he took a large, deep breath. “Erin,” he said. She watched him compose himself, watched him sniffle and inhale and suck the tears back. He said that he hadn’t wanted to deliver this sort of news over the phone. That when it all came out, what was happening at the school, he and her mother had been so panicked that no one could find her. For a while they had assumed the worst. That her body was lying in some remote part of the school. That she was bleeding to death, alone, out of contact. And then the secretaries had produced a list of students in attendance that day, and Erin’s name wasn’t on it. She had called in sick. We found this out, his words zoomed around Erin’s head, about the same time we found out what happened to Shannon. Oh, Erin. Thank God. Her father repeated the phrase. Thank God, thank God, thank God.

“I’ve asked them,” her father said as they walked toward Shannon’s room, “what her chances are. And all they ever do is nod and tell me that they will do everything they can for her.” He didn’t ask her where she had been all day, or who the boy was, trailing behind her.

Shannon had been shot in the back and the bullet had lodged in her lower spine. The first surgery repaired some of the damage, but they had to be delicate. That was the doctor’s word. Such a dainty word, for what it ultimately meant. Her father wasn’t saying it and the doctors weren’t saying it, because they were all trying to be delicate. Delicate because Shannon might die. Delicate because if she lived, she might not ever walk again. Erin, too, couldn’t think about that, so she imagined her sister like one of those expensive porcelain dolls she had played with as a child. Be delicate, her mother always said, even though Shannon carried the doll around in a basket on her bike. Erin had never liked the porcelain dolls.

When they reached Erin’s mother, she was looking at Shannon

through a glass window. She had her hand over her mouth, as if she'd only just then heard the news. "Linda," her father said, and her mother turned. Slightly behind her father, Erin stood with Noah. Her mother ran to her.

Without a word or even a glance at the boy beside her, she enveloped Erin in a hug, clasp ing her to her breast even though Erin was three inches taller. Then she slapped her. The smack was loud enough to turn the heads of nearby nurses and hard enough to leave a lingering sting for minutes after contact had been made. "Why didn't you answer your phone?" Her mother was hugging her again, and the nurse who had started over to intercede paused in the hallway, reconsidering. "Why didn't you call me back?"

Dimly, Erin felt the sting from the slap. "I'm sorry, Mom, I was out of range, I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know, I wasn't there." Her words were muffled against her mother's shoulder, and Erin watched the fabric dampen. Until she saw this, she hadn't realized she had started to tear.

"Linda." Erin's father put his hand on her mother's shoulder. "Linda, let her breathe."

Her mother released her. "And who is he?" Noah had moved behind Erin after the slap, and now cupped her shoulder from an awkward distance. Through the glass panel Erin could see her sister lying on the bed, a slender tube running into her open mouth. If she could ignore that, and the IV, the heart monitor, and the polka-dotted gown, Shannon looked like she was just sleeping, not delicate at all.

"He drove her here," her father said.

Erin took a step backward, so that she could lean against Noah. Following her lead, he stroked her hair, his fingers snagging in the stiff knots.

"That's where she was all day? With him?" Erin's mother made no effort to keep her voice low. She told her father that Erin should explain Noah's presence. But Erin didn't want to explain his being there. She wasn't even sure that she could. Noah didn't have to take her to the hospital, and once he had decided to do that, he could

have simply dropped her off. He could have left once she found her father; he could leave now. Erin didn't want to enter into the conversation her parents were having just four feet behind her because if she did, she would have to merge her day with this day. There was a timetable, moments when her sister had taken a bullet to the spine, when her parents received a phone call, when Shannon had first gone into surgery. Over eight hours of tragedy that lined up minute for minute with the time she'd spent jumping from a cliff into the Saugatuck and having sex with a boy her family didn't know. So it was easier to pretend she wasn't listening and feel Noah's chest press into her back as he breathed, just as it was easier to not think of Shannon as delicate.

"I'm glad she was with that boy if it meant she wasn't locked inside that fucking cafeteria," her father said.

"He can't stay." At her mother's words, Erin felt Noah stiffen, and she reached around in search of his hand. When she found it, she squeezed, trying to convey *yes you can*. "He shouldn't be here." Her mother whispered this time. "We don't know him."

"No," her father said. "But he's not here for us."

After her father had shepherded her mother to the hospital

cafeteria, Noah asked her if he should leave. In response, she led them to the waiting room. "Do you want water? Or something from the vending machine? They might have Oreos in there. You like Oreos," he rambled, but she told him that she didn't want anything except to sit. When his cell phone rang a few minutes later, he shot to his feet, saying he would take the call outside.

Erin stared at the tiles on the floor. They were small white squares, efficiently laid, and she wondered how many it would take to fill up a room, a wing, a building. The waiting room overflowed with people sobbing, hugging, moaning. Doctors came and brought news and it never seemed good. The death toll was rising, Erin thought, watching a woman she recognized as a classmate's parent fall into the arms of her hulking husband. He hardly caught her, and

so she collapsed against him, supported by his bulk and her arms as they hooked around his waist. The doctor who had spoken to them let them be. Erin's parents were in the cafeteria, where she didn't know if the doctors could find them.

Noah returned, glancing at his watch. "I can get you something," he said, still standing. "Something from your house maybe?"

"What could I possibly want from my house?"

"I don't know, I just thought..." He fell into the chair beside her. "That was my mom."

"She's still awake?"

Rough fingers touched the bottom of her chin. "You're so warm." His mouth parted as if he had something else to say, but whatever it was, he held back. Instead, he put his hand on her forearm. Though the hospital was air conditioned, her skin was moist, and they stuck together.

Her little sister's back was split open on a table, and she sat in the waiting room, thinking about sliding her tongue between his lips, his hand careening up her thigh and her fingers weaving through his overgrown hair.

A little over a year ago, Shannon had burst into Erin's room. "Guess what," she said as she launched onto the bed. The force of her plop caused Erin to draw a line diagonally down the page of notes she'd been writing, and she closed the notebook to prevent any more damage.

"What?" She had clicked her pen closed but kept reading.

"Guess what Gavin Anderson did to me during study hall!"

Erin looked up from the book. Her sister was wearing eye shadow and lip gloss, something she'd been doing since middle school. Now at fourteen, she somehow looked not like a child too eager to grow up, but like a young woman, already grown. Shannon had always been the pretty one, despite the fact that underneath her clothes and make-up and poise, Shannon looked remarkably like her elder sister. They had the same shade of blondish brown hair, the same dark hazel eyes. Although they were roughly the same height

and both trim, Shannon did have a slightly larger cup size, and she highlighted her emerging curves with tight jeans and blouses, whereas Erin always imagined herself to be like one of those walking stick bugs. Slender, awkward, and camouflaged. Shannon may have been growing up, but she was still Erin's overeager, bubbly baby sister, and Erin assumed she was about to hear some tale about how Gavin had smiled at her, or winked at her, or touched her hand. Gavin was Erin's year and in with the popular clique. She doubted he would take her little sister seriously.

Playing along, Erin sighed. "What did he do?"

"He kissed me! Erin, it was so romantic! We were in the cafeteria, and right in front of everyone, he pulled me close to him and kissed me. I don't know if I did it right. If a guy sticks his tongue in your mouth, are you supposed to put your tongue in his mouth, too? At the same time?"

Erin looked back at her textbook. She couldn't answer Shannon's questions, so she clicked her pen and started writing again. "That's great, Shan."

Her sister sat there for another minute or so, as if waiting for an answer. Eventually, she left Erin to her books.

In the hospital, Erin slid her hand from Noah's. "What did your mom say?"

"Some of the names are out."

At this, Erin sunk back into the chair. Brighton, she remembered now. The woman whose husband had failed to catch her was Mrs. Brighton. Her daughter, Isabella, was in Shannon's grade. Noah hesitated. "They're saying five are confirmed dead now, another three in critical condition. It was a lot of seniors. I don't know who you're friends with."

"Just tell me."

He rattled off a list of names, all of which she recognized, but none of which she knew well. When he mentioned that Isabella Brighton was the only other non-senior "hit" besides her sister, Noah winced, then apologized for his insensitivity. He suggested that he

should leave before he said something else to upset her. Erin assured him it was okay, she wasn't offended, she wanted him to stay. Isabella was not just "hit," Erin thought. She was dead now. Whatever had happened in that cafeteria, they were all dying. Perhaps she should feel offended. Her sister had been shot, might be dying, might even at this very moment already be dead. Any minute now a doctor could emerge from the doors of the surgical wing and announce his condolences.

"Who else?" she asked.

He finished the list. There was another vaguely familiar name, but they would probably be more familiar to Shannon. They were Shannon's friends. Then he said a teacher had been killed: Miss Rhodes, Erin's A.P. Biology teacher.

Already sitting sideways in the chair, she leaned back against the armrest, not caring as the plastic dug into her spine. Noah didn't try to touch her or offer comfort this time. He held his lips tight. His eyes angled away from her face, toward the window overlooking the parking lot. "Miss Rhodes is dead?" Erin said. The words could have come from someone else.

Noah nodded.

"Have they released yet who did it?"

"Benjamin Finley. He committed suicide after he killed Miss Rhodes."

Out of all the names, besides Miss Rhodes, she knew Ben the most. He'd probably been in every honors class she'd ever taken, but he rarely spoke. Sometimes she would go to the library during lunch, and on the way she would pass the music room. He'd be in there, playing Bach or Chopin on one of the pianos. He was quite good, and supposedly he'd gotten into Juilliard.

"Ben did this?" She tried to picture the gangly boy with a mop of floppy blonde hair wielding a gun. The image was so discordant, it might have been funny. Once he'd helped her adjust the lens on her microscope when she'd been having trouble getting it to focus. She tried to remember a moment when he might have seemed off, or

violent, but she couldn't think of one.

At some point she crawled out of her own seat and into Noah's lap, where, sometime later, she awoke to the sound of her father's voice.

"Your sister is out of surgery," he said. He was looking at Noah. Erin sat up and stood up all in one motion. Noah rose more gracefully, his fingers brushing her palm.

"Is she ...?"

"She made it."

Erin closed her eyes and took a breath. Shannon was alive.

"They'll let us see her, one at a time." He looked down the corridor, at the floor, anywhere but her face. "You should come with me. Your friend can come too, if you like." He got ten paces down the hall before Erin and Noah followed.

Her mother was in the room when they arrived. Erin, Noah, and Erin's father stood in the hallway to wait. There was no glass panel, like there had been in I.C.U., and it seemed absurd to Erin that her sister, who rarely stayed still for anything, could be lying so still for so long. Even when Shannon had pneumonia last year, she'd shuffled back and forth from her bedroom to the sofa, antsy about lingering in one place. Despite all that she'd seen, Erin still had the sense that this was some sort of mistake, that when she opened the door, the person lying there would not be Shannon. According to her father, Shannon wouldn't be awake for a few more hours, until the anesthesia wore off. Then he told her there was something she needed to know before she went inside.

He had trouble getting the words to come out. He said things about the doctors trying hard, about the damage that was done to Shannon's spine, about swelling. He reiterated the doctor's tagline "wait and see," trying to instill hope in the phrase. As he talked she noticed that the tiles here were different, smaller, than the ones in the waiting room.

Her father shuffled his hands into his pockets, then took them

out again, and offered one to Noah. “Declan Brody,” he said, and Erin wondered why he was introducing himself by his full name. Maybe he, too, was on autopilot.

“Noah Coolidge.”

They were shaking hands when the door opened, just enough for Erin’s mother to slither out. She curled into her husband’s embrace, arching her eyebrows at Noah. Erin brushed against his side before she entered the room the same way her mother had exited it: like a snake, slipping into a crevice unknown.

It occurred to her that she shouldn’t have left Noah with her parents, and she worried for a moment that he might leave to avoid the awkwardness. But then she reminded herself that Noah could hold his own against the silence—or the non-silence, if that’s what met him. Two years ago, they had been partnered on an in-class photography assignment, and she had drawn from a hat the theme “silent picture shows.” For a half hour they had traipsed the hallways, photographing black and white stills of each other with overly expressive faces. All the while Noah talked in mock-1920s slang, calling her “doll” and “dame” and saying things like “ain’t that the cat’s meow.” He used a rough, radio-announcer voice that made her laugh.

At the memory Erin smiled too quickly, before she could stop herself. With Noah she felt all her emotions crisp and tangled, like weeds washed ashore and dried in the sun. But when she thought about Shannon, all she could feel was the details of the day slipping through her grasp, as if she were struggling to hold on to the specifics of a dream. Trying to banish Noah from her thoughts, Erin closed the door.

She had kept the handle turned so as to minimize the sound of the latch clicking into place, but the seal seemed to reverberate off the walls. Erin took a step into the room and heard the rubber of her flip-flop plunk against her heel. She stopped, swallowed. Even though it seemed as if she was being preposterously loud, Shannon, still sedated, had not woken.

A chair had been pulled up along the edge of Shannon's bed and Erin sat there, surprised that she could still feel her mother's shape on the cushion. She heard voices—Noah's voice—but she couldn't make out any of the words. In the hall there was also the sound of footsteps and carts being rolled over tile and in the room the hum of the air conditioner drowned out the low beep of Shannon's heart monitor.

Dwarfed by all the machinery, she looked younger, but otherwise normal, as if she might jump up at any moment and scuttle into Erin's room to deliver the latest news on her social life. Well, Erin thought, she could do that, instead.

"I played hooky today." The words sounded so trivial now. In the hallway, Erin heard a stifled chuckle, but it was low, her father's baritone. She guessed that Noah had managed to make her father smile, and for a moment, that made her smile, too.

The air conditioner cut off. Without it, the sound of the monitor was all Erin could hear. After a few seconds, she got up and went out of the room.

As her father went inside, Erin told her mother that she needed to take a walk, and then she motioned for Noah to follow her.

"How does she look?" he said.

"Like she's half-machine."

"Erin, I'm sorry, I didn't mean ..." He took hold of her hand. As they walked she thought about raising his arms above his head, pinning him against the wall. With a kiss, she could go back to the reservoir and slingshot herself off the cliff, plummet underwater. Two years ago he was just a boy who made her blush. Now he somehow made her forget that she was in the hospital where her sister lay crippled.

Noah's gaze went beyond her face, to something behind her. Releasing his hand, she turned around, saw the clock on wall. Quarter past three.

"It's late. You should go home."

"I can stay," he said. They kept walking. He touched her hand

again, and this time, without understanding why, she pulled away. Maybe it was because she knew that he would leave soon. He'd been wanting to go all night, and finally, she wanted the same. Something had changed, and although in time the comfort Noah brought her would morph into a horrible memento of this night, for now, she only wanted to be alone. When they reached the end of the corridor, she told him that she had to go back and be with her family. He didn't ask if he should come back with her, only nodded and left with a promise to call her the next day.

When she returned, her father was the one standing in the hallway. "Your mother is going to stay here overnight," he said. "I'm going to take you home. We both need to eat something, and try to get some sleep. Your friend, Noah?"

"He went home."

"At some point you're going to have to explain him to your mother. But not tonight, and not tomorrow."

They said nothing in the car on the ride home, nothing when they pulled into the garage. In the kitchen her father dropped two ice cubes into a glass and poured himself some bourbon. Erin went upstairs. She doubted she'd be able to sleep, so she walked into Shannon's room, and without bothering to turn on any lights, she curled into a half moon on Shannon's bed, wondering if her sister would have to be carried up there from now on.

Rolling onto her back, she noticed the glow-in-the-dark stars taped to the ceiling fan. Erin remembered when Shannon had picked them out as a reward for good grades. She must have been six or seven years old, and had been struggling with reading aloud. For weeks Erin had spent the hour before bedtime acting as her sister's audience while Shannon stumbled over pronouns and compound sentences. Now, the stars were the only decoration in the room that hadn't been swapped for something more adult.

Lying there, all Erin could think about were the things Shannon still didn't know. Who had died today. That she might not walk again. Noah.

The television was on downstairs. Erin slid off the bed and went to join her father.

He was watching Animal Planet. Some show about life on the savannah. When she sat down beside him, he put one arm over her shoulder, pulling her close. Eventually, he set his drink down.

Erin thought of Noah. He'd be home by now, maybe even asleep. She knew he would call tomorrow. It wasn't just one of those things people said. He would call because he liked her and because, despite the terrible turn the night had taken, he was not afraid to be a part of her life.

Beside her, her father slept. Tomorrow, they would sit with her mother in the hospital, waiting for her sister to wake. Beyond that, Erin didn't know. She listened to her father's heartbeat against her ear, and she stayed like this for a while, watching giraffes forage.

