

Chapter One

August 25, 2018

Dear Julia,

I'm writing this because I promised Mom I'd start keeping a journal. A diary, I guess I should call it. Dr. C. said it would be a good way to channel my deepest thoughts and feelings, so I don't bottle things up again. Between you and me, I think Dr. C. smokes a lot of weed. I'd rather keep my deepest thoughts safely locked inside my head where they belong. But I've put Mom through hell these past months. I've seen her cry way too much. So ... here we are. I have no idea where we are, actually. Somewhere near Brandon, Manitoba, I think the sign back there said. I knew a Brandon once. In second grade, someone dared him to drink a bottle of red paint during art class. It was nontoxic, but he had to be closely monitored in art class after that.

What do people write about in diaries, anyway? Dr. C. said to start with the basics—how I feel about our big move across the country and beginning at a new high school, where I don't know a soul. You know, easy things. As long as I'm being honest, she said, because the only person I'll be lying to in here is myself. I'd prefer to call it denial.

She also said that if "journaling" feels weird or pointless, pretend I'm writing a letter to someone. Even an imaginary someone. So ... hey, Julia. I'll try not to bore you. Mom promised that my diary would be off-limits to her snooping, but I don't believe that for a hot second, so expect a lot of mind-numbing entries about grade eleven English and my mother, until I can find a good hiding place for this at Uncle Merv's.

Until next time,

Aria Jones

P.S. I've written my new last name at least a thousand times on this drive so far. If I still screw it up, I'm a lost cause.

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Mom casts a nervous smile at me as we wait for the front door to open.

“Do you think he fell asleep?” Light flashes through the gauzy curtains of the small, white house’s bay window, and a buzz of voices carries. A TV is on somewhere inside.

“I hope not. But it *is* late.” Her forehead wrinkles, checking her watch. “He’s usually in bed by seven.”

It’s after eleven now. And Uncle Merv is eighty years old.

“Maybe he can’t hear over the TV?” I roll my shoulders to loosen them. Three twelve-hour days in the CR-V and motel sleeping has left me stiff and aching for my bed.

Too bad Mom sold it.

It would’ve been too big for my new bedroom at Uncle Merv’s, she promised, as I watched two men march out the door with the plush queen-sized mattress in their hands and triumphant grins on their faces. They scored a great deal. *Everyone* who came through our house during the rushed “everything must go” contents sale Mom threw together scored big, leaving us with just enough to fill our car and a small U-Haul cargo trailer. It was a hasty departure—a decision she made only a month ago, solidified after a phone call to an uncle I’ve never met and an I-quit-my-lawyer-job-today-let’s-start-over-somewhere-new dinner conversation over cold Hawaiian pizza.

The hinges on the metal storm door screech as she pulls it open to knock on the wooden door again, this time harder.

Still no answer.

“What do we do now?” I take in our surroundings. The remnants of a plant sit by my feet, brown and shriveled within its forest-green ceramic pot. Next to it is a worn wooden bench on a porch that has lost half its white paint to peeling. To my left, a hedge of leggy bushes runs along the property line, hiding whatever’s beyond. The gardens are overgrown, the bushes threaded with long grass.

Even in the dark of night, it’s clear that Uncle Merv’s modest two-story home is the most neglected of the four houses in this cul-du-sac, surrounded by farmers’ fields, on the outskirts of Eastmonte, Ontario.

Mom tests the door handle and finds it unlocked. “I guess we go in. This *is* our home now, too.” She shrugs and pushes the door open. “Hello?”

My nose crinkles with disgust.

The air inside the house smells *rotten*, though I can’t be more specific. Mom smells it, too; I can tell by the way her nostrils flare. That’s the first thing I notice when I trail her through the cramped doorway. The second thing I notice is that we’ve stepped back in time. To which decade, I can’t be sure, but it involves tacky rose-patterned wallpaper, lace curtains, and wood *everything*.

“Hello? Uncle Merv?” Mom calls out again.

“Debra? Is that you?” A gruff voice calls from our left. A hefty, white-haired man struggles to haul himself out of the salmon-pink wingback chair that faces a TV, no more than four feet from the screen. “I’m sorry, my hearing isn’t the greatest anymore.”

Mom’s tired face splits with a wide smile as she traipses across the living room of mismatched furniture and floral wallpaper to embrace him. “You had us worried for a minute.”

“Worried about what? That I finally kicked the bucket?” He chuckles, returning her hug, his rotund belly making her slight frame seem all the more slender. “Likely soon, but not yet. How was the drive?”

“Oh, fine.” She waves it off, as if a thirty-six-hour road trip through flat lands and remote forest with everything you own is nothing. “I’m so sorry we’re late. There was a terrible accident near Elliot Lake this morning and the road was closed for hours. A car ... a moose ...” She grimaces. “Anyway, we’re glad to finally be here. Uncle Merv, *this* is my daughter, Aria.” She gestures toward me and I step forward, feeling my uncle’s clouded eyes settle on me.

He clears his throat and offers me a curt nod, his sagging jowls jiggling with the gesture. “You’re the spitting image of your mother when she was your age.”

I smile politely as I tuck strands of my long, sable-brown hair behind my ear. “Yeah, that’s what everyone says.”

He opens his mouth, but then hesitates as if reconsidering his words. “You know, Debra used to spend two weeks here every summer with us. Until you were how old—thirteen, was it?” He peers at my mom.

Her face pinches with thought. “Fourteen. I stopped coming the summer before high school.”

“That’s right. You were busy with summer jobs after that.” He shakes his head. “Connie always looked forward to those visits. She’d spend the whole month before cleaning this place top to bottom until it sparkled.”

It’s far from that now, I note, eying the layer of dust that coats the nearby lamp and the stacks of hastily folded newspapers on the floor. A sizable cobweb dangles from the ceiling in the corner.

“And what about *you*? You didn’t look forward to my visits?” Mom teases, reaching out to squeeze Uncle Merv’s forearm—her signature move for offering comfort. I imagine the wound from losing Aunt Connie to a massive stroke five months ago, after sixty-one years of marriage, is still fresh.

“I looked forward to the free garden labor.” He runs his thumbs along the underside of his red suspenders as he chuckles. No doubt they’re all that’s holding up his pants.

Mom laughs. “Well, now you have free labor times two. How is the garden this year?”

He grunts. “Wild. The apple trees are ready to split in half and there’re too many damn tomato plants. I told Iris not to plant so many but she didn’t listen. Now I don’t know what to do with them all. I’ve got tomatoes coming out my a—”

“Aria and I will be happy to pick and can them for you. If I can remember how, it’s been so long. Right, Aria?”

“Uh ... sure.” *Can them? What does that mean?*

“Well, that’d be much appreciated.” Uncle Merv has the kind of gruff voice that makes me think he’ll need to cough to clear the phlegm from it any moment now. “There’s a tuna casserole in the fridge if you’re hungry. Iris’s not as good a cook as Connie but it’s not half bad.”

Who is Iris?

“That sounds great.” Mom gives him her best fake smile and I purse my lips to stifle my grin. She likes tuna *anything* as much as I do—not at all.

Uncle Merv more waddles than walks toward the narrow staircase ahead of us. I can’t tell if it’s on account of age or his excessive weight. Probably both. “Also, Iris tidied upstairs. Haven’t been up there in years but I’m assuming it’s in order. She always was the fussiest of Connie’s friends.”

Ah, mystery solved.

“She didn’t have to do that, and I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Well, then ...” He smooths his hands over his belly. “It’s past my bedtime. You know me, I like to get up with the birds. ’Course, you guys are still probably adjusting to the time zone. I’ll try not to make too much noise in the morning.” He stops near the open door and scowls at the driveway. “I thought you weren’t bringing anything with you!” It sounds accusatory.

“*Barely* anything. A TV and coffee maker, stuff like that,” my mom placates in a soothing tone, catching my eye as she pats Uncle Merv’s shoulder. She warned that he might have a hard time adjusting to this new arrangement, despite his willingness. He *is* eighty, after all, and he tends to fret when his routine is interrupted. I’d say taking in his forty-five-year-old niece and her *almost* sixteen-year-old daughter for the foreseeable future hasn’t just interrupted his routine; it’s about to wreak havoc on it.

He makes a sound that might be acceptance. “I suppose you’ll be needing help unloading. The kids from next door should be able to help. Emmett’s a big, strong boy.”

“There’s nothing in there that Aria and I can’t manage. Don’t you worry about it, Uncle Merv.” In an airy tone, she says, “Aria, why don’t you head upstairs to check out your room. It’s on the left.”

I can tell that’s code for “I need a moment alone with Uncle Merv to talk about you.”

The narrow, steep steps offer a noisy creak as I climb them and venture into my new bedroom—a narrow space with steeply slanted ceilings painted Easter yellow. A window sits centered on the far side, draped with thin, gauzy curtains that do little to block out the street lights. It’s framed by bookshelves and a small bench. My mom was right—there’s no way my furniture would have fit in here. It’s already cramped with a twin bed as it is. I don’t even have a

closet. It smells freshly cleaned, at least; the scent of lemon Pledge and fabric softener battling to mask the rotten odor wafting from downstairs.

“You haven’t told Iris *anything*, right?” I hear my mom whisper. I pause to listen from inside the doorway.

“That old gossip? Hell, I’m no fool. All she knows is that you and Howie divorced and he’s got a new family. I had to give her something and I figured you wouldn’t care if they knew that much.”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t care if the town knows my ex-husband is a cheating bastard who knocked up his paralegal.” There’s no shortage of bitterness in her voice. “But I want to make sure Aria gets a fresh start and she can’t do that if anyone finds out about what happened.”

I feel my cheeks burn with a mixture of embarrassment and shame.

“They won’t hear it from me.” There’s a pause. “How’s she doing?”

“I think she’s okay. Seems to be, anyway.” The way my mother says that, it doesn’t sound convincing. “Listen, thanks again for taking us in. I know we’re turning your life upside down—”

“No, no, I’m happy to have you. Truth is, it’ll be nice to talk to someone besides myself. And I can use the help around here. I’ve been relying on Iris too much and I’m afraid she’s getting the wrong idea. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not quite as fit as I once was.”

“Yeah, Cheez Whiz sandwiches and whiskey will do that.” Mom’s musical laughter carries up the stairs. “Good night, Uncle Merv. We’ll catch up more in the morning.”

The stairs creak and I venture farther into my bedroom so I don’t look guilty of eavesdropping. I’m at the window when Mom leans against the door frame, a wistful smile on

her lips. “This used to be my room when I stayed here.” Her eyes dart from corner to corner before settling on the bed, adorned with a green leaf comforter. “I slept in that.”

“It’s small.” Almost too small to be called twin-sized.

“Let me know how the mattress is. We might have to invest in a new one. Nothing’s been updated here in decades.” She wanders over to gingerly sit on the window bench, as if testing it. “Uncle Merv built this for me when I was eight. I’d sit here and read for hours.” She smooths a hand over a bookcase. “They could use a new coat of paint.”

“Everything in here could,” I mumble.

“That’s a good idea! Let’s go to the paint store tomorrow morning and pick out a color. You know, freshen this place up a bit. What do you think?”

“Indigo blue?” I raise a questioning eyebrow.

Mom’s nose crinkles. “What about something more bright and cheery?”

I shrug. “I like dark and moody.” My gaze drifts over the slanted ceiling. “I think it’d look good. Kind of like a nighttime sky.”

Mom’s eyes trail mine, as if reconsidering her objection. “Yeah, okay. We could get those glow-in-the-dark stickers you like.”

I bite my tongue against the urge to remind her that I’m not five anymore.

Mom rises and wanders back slowly, opening the desk drawers on her way past. “This will work for your homework, right?”

“I don’t do homework at a desk.”

“What? Of course you do! You had that little purple lamp that we’d shine on the wall at night. Remember, shadow puppets?” She uses her hands to mime the shape for a dog.

“That was when I was, like, eight.” I’ve been doing my homework at the kitchen island or sitting cross-legged on my bed for years now. Mom’s never been around to notice though, too busy at the law firm or buried under a stack of legal paperwork in her home office.

“Right.” Her head bows, and the guilt radiates from her. “Things are going to change, Aria. You have a new school; you’ll have new friends. I can’t write the Ontario bar exam until March so I’ll be around *all the time* for the next seven months. So much, you’ll be sick of me.” She laughs. “And even when I go back to work, I’ll make sure I’m only working part-time, so I’m more”—her throat bobs with a hard swallow—“involved in your life. Things are going to change. For both of us. I promise.”

I could say things now—namely, that none of what happened was her fault, that it was all mine—my thoughts, my feelings, my choices. But, just like her, I am ready to put the past behind me.

“They kind of already have?” I hold my hands out to gesture at my new room in this sad little white hovel, a far cry from the sizable house we left outside Calgary. But here, three provinces away, I’m not that same girl. My name’s not even the same, now that I’ve legally changed it to take my mother’s maiden name. My dad didn’t bat an eye when we set the paperwork and a pen in front of him. That’s when I knew he’d already all but disowned me.

“You’re right, they have. And we have a lot to do around here to get this place back in shape.” She sighs, catching a cobweb that dangles from a corner with her finger. “I knew Uncle Merv was having a hard time adjusting to bachelor life but Aunt Connie must be rolling in her grave.” She rubs a hand over her weary eyes. “Get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.” She drops her voice to a whisper. “God knows how long it will take to find the corpse of whatever died down there.”

Chapter Two

It's after ten by the time I venture downstairs, my hair damp from a shower. Mom is in the kitchen on hands and knees scrubbing furiously, dressed in her yoga outfit and yellow rubber gloves. "Morning."

"Oh, good morning, hon! Try Iris's carrot cake. It's delicious. And there's some coffee left in the pot for you. Mugs are in the cupboard above it." She sounds *way* too cheery.

I pause a moment to take in the kitchen for the first time. It's as old and derelict as the rest of the house, with golden oak wooden cupboards huddled into a small space and mismatched white-and-ivory-colored appliances. A four-person rectangular table sits tucked in against the wall. Half of it is covered with flyers and unopened mail. Along the brown laminate countertop are miscellaneous pots and pans—contents of the cupboard she's scrubbing, if I had to guess. The smell of bleach lingers in the air.

"Did you sleep well?" Mom asks as I fetch a coffee mug and pour coffee.

"Not really. The sun woke me up."

"I figured. That room faces east. We'll get you some blackout curtains when we go shopping today."

"It was hot, too."

"Doesn't the ceiling fan work?"

"Yeah, but it was making this weird rattling sound, like it was going to fall and, like, *chop my head off* or something." Worries that don't inspire a deep sleep. I spy Uncle Merv in the garden through the back door, plucking red tomatoes off the vine and tucking them in a basket.

The tomatoes match the color of his suspenders, the same ones he was wearing last night. It's a decent-sized yard, I note, full of fruit trees, with neighboring farm fields stretching far beyond.

Uncle Merv shuffles slowly along, his mouth moving as if he's talking to someone, but I don't see anyone around. "He wasn't lying about getting up early." Four thirty, according to the clock on my nightstand. That's when I woke up to his first of *many* phlegmy coughing fits.

Mom chuckles. "Yeah. We'll have to buy earplugs."

I flop into a kitchen chair at the table, my fingers busy combing through my freshly washed hair. I cringe with disgust at the slick strands. "Oh my God, I still have shampoo in my hair!"

Mom glances over her shoulder once before returning to her task. "I noticed the water pressure is bad."

"*And* it suddenly turned scalding. I think I have third-degree burns on my back." My body stiffens, as if mention of the injury is enough to make the pain flare.

"That was my fault. I shouldn't have used the kitchen sink while you were showering. That's the thing about these old houses." She sighs. "Don't worry. Calling a plumber is at the top of my *very* long to-do list, along with getting cable run into our bedrooms and the internet upgraded. He's still on dial-up, can you believe that?"

"I don't even know what that means." I spy the pad of lined paper next to her coffee mug. She must have at least twenty things jotted down already. That's my mom—the queen of organization and order. Sure enough, the word "plumber" is scrawled on the first line, followed by "new toilet" and "fix water pressure?" in brackets beside it. Below that reads "cleaning lady."

I frown. "Why are you cleaning if you're going to pay someone to come in and clean?"

“Because I couldn’t leave the moldy spoiled bag of onions that stunk up the house for that poor soul. But I think I’ve got it out. A few hours of fresh air and some candles, and maybe my stomach won’t turn.” She stands with a groan, peeling off the rubber gloves and brushing away a strand of her wavy, sable-brown hair from her sweaty forehead. Gray roots peek out from her ponytail, something my mom is normally on top of but let slip this past month. I scan her list again. Sure enough, “find a new hair salon” is on there—number four.

“How could he stand it?”

“Who, Uncle Merv?” She snorts. “He’s always had a terrible sense of smell.” She takes a large gulp of her coffee and checks her watch. “Come on, you’ll have to eat that in the car. We have a million things to do.”

“What about unpacking the U-Haul?”

She waves it off. “Later. Let’s try to be home for lunch at one, after Uncle’s had his nap. Preferably with something better to eat than what’s in there.” She points to the fridge in the corner, her nose crinkling with disgust.

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“Which box next?” I ask through pants, sweat coating the back of my neck. When we left Calgary, temperatures were dwindling, the cool nights needing heavy blankets. But summer shows no sign of leaving Eastmonte, Ontario, anytime soon.

Mom’s hands sit perched on her hips as she stares into the U-Haul. “You know what? Let’s leave the rest until after the house is cleaned and your room is finished. No point moving things twice and I don’t have to return it until Monday.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll start painting?” I was fully expecting Mom to reconsider her agreement to my dark and moody indigo blue when we stood in the paint aisle of Home Depot, but she was the first to pull out the various paint chips for comparison.

“We have to prep first. Why don’t you start by taping around the built-ins ...” Her voice trails as she watches a black sedan pull into the driveway next door.

“Are those the neighbors?” The ones she met at Aunt Connie’s funeral earlier this year. She hasn’t told me much about them, other than that they have two teenaged children and they’ve lived next door for years.

“The Hartfords, yes.” We watch as a blonde lady in her forties steps out from the driver’s side. She waves at us.

“That’s Heather.” Mom returns the greeting. “She’s a portrait photographer. She took one of Uncle Merv and Aunt Connie for their sixtieth anniversary, the one sitting on the piano.”

I watch another female climb out from the passenger side, this one much younger, with a short blonde bob and glasses.

“She’s very nice. They’re *all* very nice.”

The girl seeks us out immediately. “Hi, guys!” she hollers with familiarity, grinning, her hand waving wildly in the air. “You’re our new neighbors! We’re so happy you’re here!”

I note the girl’s slightly stilted and slower dialogue.

My mom grins and calls back, “Hi, Cassie! It’s good to see you again!”

Heather begins walking this way.

“Wait!” Cassie suddenly sounds frantic. “The you-know-whats!”

“They’re on the back seat. Get them and then come over. You can do it.” Heather continues walking toward us. Meanwhile, Cassie rushes into the back seat, reappearing with a

brown bag a moment later. She gallops more than runs after her mother, gripping the bag in both hands in front of her, as if it contains something of great value.

“Debra! It’s so good to see you again.” Heather takes my mom’s hand in both of hers, a friendly gesture between two people who aren’t acquainted enough to hug yet, her eyes crinkling with a smile. “Merv’s been talking nonstop about you two moving here for the past month.”

My mom chuckles. “Good things, I hope?”

“I haven’t seen him this happy in a while.”

“Hi. I’m Cassie,” the girl next to her blurts out, thrusting the bag toward me. “We bought you cookies. The double chocolate are the best.”

Heather gestures to her. “*This* is my daughter, Cassie. And you must be Aria?” She regards me with soft gray eyes. She is a pretty lady, and around my mother’s age, though I note more fine lines marking her forehead.

“I am.” I smile politely, sizing up the large cat graphic on Cassie’s T-shirt. “Hi.”

“You’re going to my school!” Cassie announces, adjusting her red-rimmed glasses as she peers first at me, then at my mom, then at her mom. Her gaze doesn’t seem to hold on anyone for too long. “Yeah, you’re in grade eleven and I’m in grade ten. Emmett’s in grade twelve. Do you know Emmett?”

“Uh ... no.”

“Aria has never been to Eastmonte before. Remember we talked about that?” Heather reminds her daughter in a slow, articulate voice.

“Oh, yeah.” Cassie grins sheepishly. “Emmett is my brother. You’ll like him. He has *a lot* of friends.”

“Cassie has been waiting anxiously for you. I think she’s asked me *every day* for the past three weeks what day you’d be here,” Heather says with a smile and a look of forced patience.

“Shh! *Mom!*” Cassie giggles, then turns to my mom. “I met you at Aunt Connie’s funeral.”

“You’re right, you did.”

“She’s not really my aunt. We’re not related. She’s a friend-aunt,” Cassie says, as if Connie is still alive and well.

My mom smiles. “A friend-aunt. I like that.”

“Yeah. I miss her. I wish she didn’t die.” Cassie’s grin is at odds with her words.

Mom frowns deeply. “I miss her, too.”

“Yeah, do you want to come see my room, Aria?” Cassie asks me in her next breath.

“Uh ...” I look to my mom, feeling overwhelmed by the swirl of conversation.

“Maybe another day, Cassie. Aria is busy unpacking,” Heather says evenly, as if she can read my hesitation.

“Okay.” Cassie nods. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“*Maybe* tomorrow,” Heather answers for me, then turns to my mom. “Do you still have a lot to unload? Because we can help.”

“Actually, I think we’re done unloading for now. I have to make room in the house first. But we have a few heavier boxes—books, mainly—that we might need strong arms for.”

“If you can wait until Sunday, Emmett and Mark will be back. They left this morning to visit a college campus in Minnesota.”

“Wow! College in the US!” my mom exclaims, and I can practically hear what she’s thinking because I’ve heard her say it before. *Poor parents who have to pay that tuition!*

Heather's eyes widen with understanding. "I know."

"My brother plays hockey. He's *so* good," Cassie blurts out. "He has a scholarship."

"If he keeps his grades up," Heather says. "Okay. Well, we'll let you get back to it. And we want to have the three of you over for dinner, once you've settled."

"We would *love* that." My mom beams, sounding genuinely interested in the prospect of dinner with our new neighbors. I can't remember the last time she made a friend.

"It's nice to meet you, Aria." Heather hooks an arm through Cassie's. "Let's go."

"See you tomorrow." Cassie's eyes veer to the paper bag in my hand. "Those are *really* good cookies. They're fresh."

"Yeah?" I hold them up to my nose to inhale the chocolate scent. "Good, because I love cookies."

"Me too." She giggles. "Maybe I can have one?"

"You've already had *two*." Heather smiles apologetically to us and begins leading her daughter away, whispering, "Those are *a gift* for them."

"Okay."

"You can't give a gift and then ask to eat it!"

"Okay. I *know*!" Cassie's voice turns petulant.

I catch Heather's heavy sigh as they walk away.

"What other flavors are there?" Mom yanks the bag from my grip and eyes its contents, finally pulling out an oatmeal raisin. She takes a bite. "Mmm ... She was right. These *are* good."

I help myself to the double chocolate. "So, Cassie's *different*."

"Yes, she has autism," Mom says, dusting crumbs off her shirt.

My eyes trail after the girl, who climbs the porch steps of their house with the caution of an elderly woman. “She seems so social though.” There were a few kids with autism at my last school. I don’t remember ever saying much to any of them. One boy named Michael spoke in a stilted voice and moved in slow motion and *never* made eye contact with anyone, but he won races on the school’s swim team. Another boy named Robbie couldn’t talk at all and had a service dog to keep him from running off school property.

And then there was that guy who showed up halfway through the year. I can’t even remember his name. I overheard a teacher talking about how his parents were in denial, refusing to have him tested because they didn’t want him labeled, even though there was definitely something off about him. He made people nervous with what he might blurt out. Apparently, one day in class, he wouldn’t stop frowning and pointing out a giant zit on Sue Collins’s forehead that she had tried in vain to cover with concealer. Finally, she ran out of the classroom in tears and he was suspended for bullying. And then there was the story about how he hated the sound of toilets flushing—like, pacing-screaming-hitting-himself-in-the-head hated. He’d tell anyone in the bathroom with him that they couldn’t flush until after he’d left. Of course, that didn’t go over well with a bunch of teenaged boys.

After a few weeks, he stopped coming to school.

“Yes, she’s always been overly friendly, according to Aunt Connie. She used to spend a lot of time visiting. Almost every day, after school. It made Aunt Connie happy, having a little girl around to dote on again.” Mom hands the cookies back to me and closes the trailer. “She seems like a lovely girl and I’m guessing she could use a friend. And *you* don’t know anyone around here. It’d be great if you got to know her.” Mom looks expectantly at me.

“I’m sure I will.”

“Good.” Mom throws her arm over my shoulder, pulling me into her as she smoothly snatches the bag of cookies from my grip again.

