



When my mother was a little girl, she walked to the playground by herself every day after school. I can picture it easily; photos of her as a child are almost indistinguishable from photos of me when I was little. I used to look at her old yellow-edged school photographs a lot. My mother had a shy, quiet look, a round face, and the same straight brown hair I used to have, though in every picture hers was pulled back from her forehead in two tight little pigtails.

She was lonely when she was little. No one ever asked her to play; she was the clumsy one whom nobody sensible wanted on their team, the timid one who was too chicken to climb on top of the monkey bars. It was the same for me. While other children swirled over the jungle gym and slides in a frenzy of make-believe and hide-and-seek, I would sit by the swings on my own, kicking at the dust. We were two of a kind when we were really young, I can tell. But that was before she met Leigh, and long before I learned how to be strong.

I don't know much about what happened before Leigh, about the lonely time. All that was just a vague prologue; meeting Leigh, and what happened after that, was the real story. That was what I'd grown up listening to my mother tell and retell, until I'd heard it so many times that I had the dialogue memorized and could whisper the whole thing to myself if I wanted to. Not only was it about my mother, but it was about me, too. In a way, it was the beginning of both of us. And I treasured that story so much that I used to let it own me. Looking back now, two years gone by since everything that happened when I was sixteen, I think perhaps that was my first mistake.

My mother's part of the story started on a Tuesday, a week or so before her seventh birthday. She'd arrived at the playground and found her usual swing occupied by a girl wearing a pink tutu over her clothes. The girl had a pair of rhinestone-studded sunglasses perched on her head, and from her feet dangled her mother's shoes, red and high-heeled. She was swinging her legs back and forth contentedly, admiring the shoes, but she looked up when my mother drew near. Her hair was blonde and wavy, and reached down to her waist. My mother never mentioned being jealous of it, but I had a feeling she must've been.

"What's your name?" the girl said.

"Sarah," whispered my mother. I used to move my mouth along with my mother's as she told this part of the story, echoing her lines.

"Last name?" prompted the girl.

"Quinn," said my mother hesitantly.

“Sarah Quinn,” repeated the girl. She looked up at the sky, and back down at her pumps. “That sounds like a superhero’s name. The name they have when they’re not doing hero stuff, I mean. Like Clark Kent is Superman’s regular name, you know?”

“Yeah,” said my mother. “What’s your name?”

“Leigh Latoire,” answered the girl.

My mother said she was in a state of faint awe. “That sounds like a movie star’s name,” she said, which was exactly what I always thought whenever I heard this part.

“Thank you,” said Leigh graciously. “But I don’t want to be a movie star when I grow up. I want to be a pirate queen.”

“I want to be a vet for horses,” said my mother, who was currently in The Horse Phase, which is an important part of growing up (I myself have gone through The Horse Phase, meaning that I am definitely a normal girl).

“That’s nice,” said Leigh politely. She had not gone and would never go through The Horse Phase, because she was out of the ordinary. My mother understood this right away. She stood leaning against the frame of the swing, and looked at Leigh — at the rhinestone sunglasses, at the red high-heeled shoes, at the tutu, at her long, flowing blonde hair, at her eyes, which were a pale, pale blue. And as she looked, she began to feel like she really was in the presence of a queen. Perhaps even a pirate queen.

“Hey,” my mother said, “do you want to come to my birthday party? I invited everyone in my class at school.”

“Sure,” said Leigh. “Sure, I’ll come to your party, Sarah.”

She was the only one who did.