

ANNA SORTINO

# give me a SIGN

All they  
need are the  
right words.

FREE  
SAMPLER!



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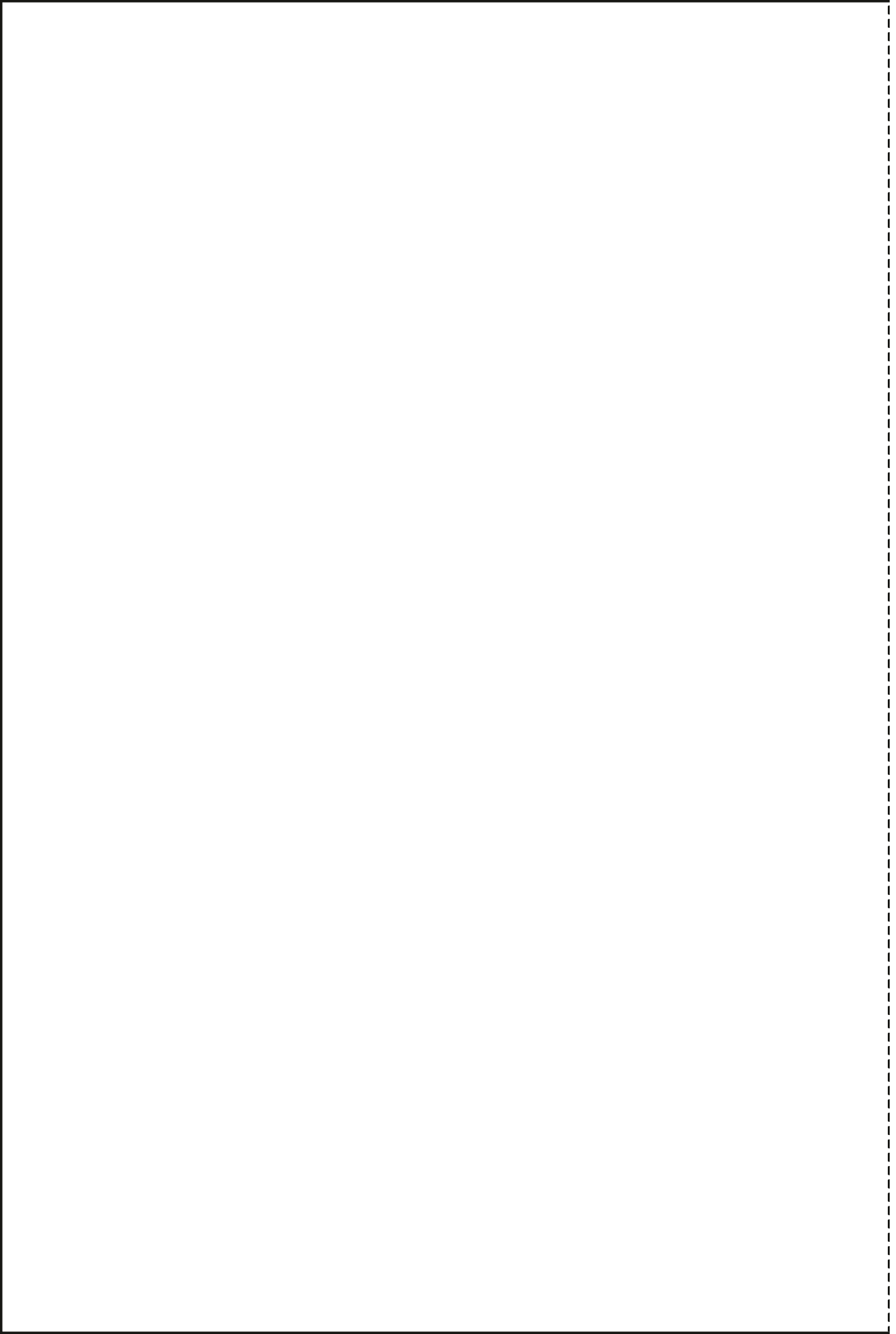
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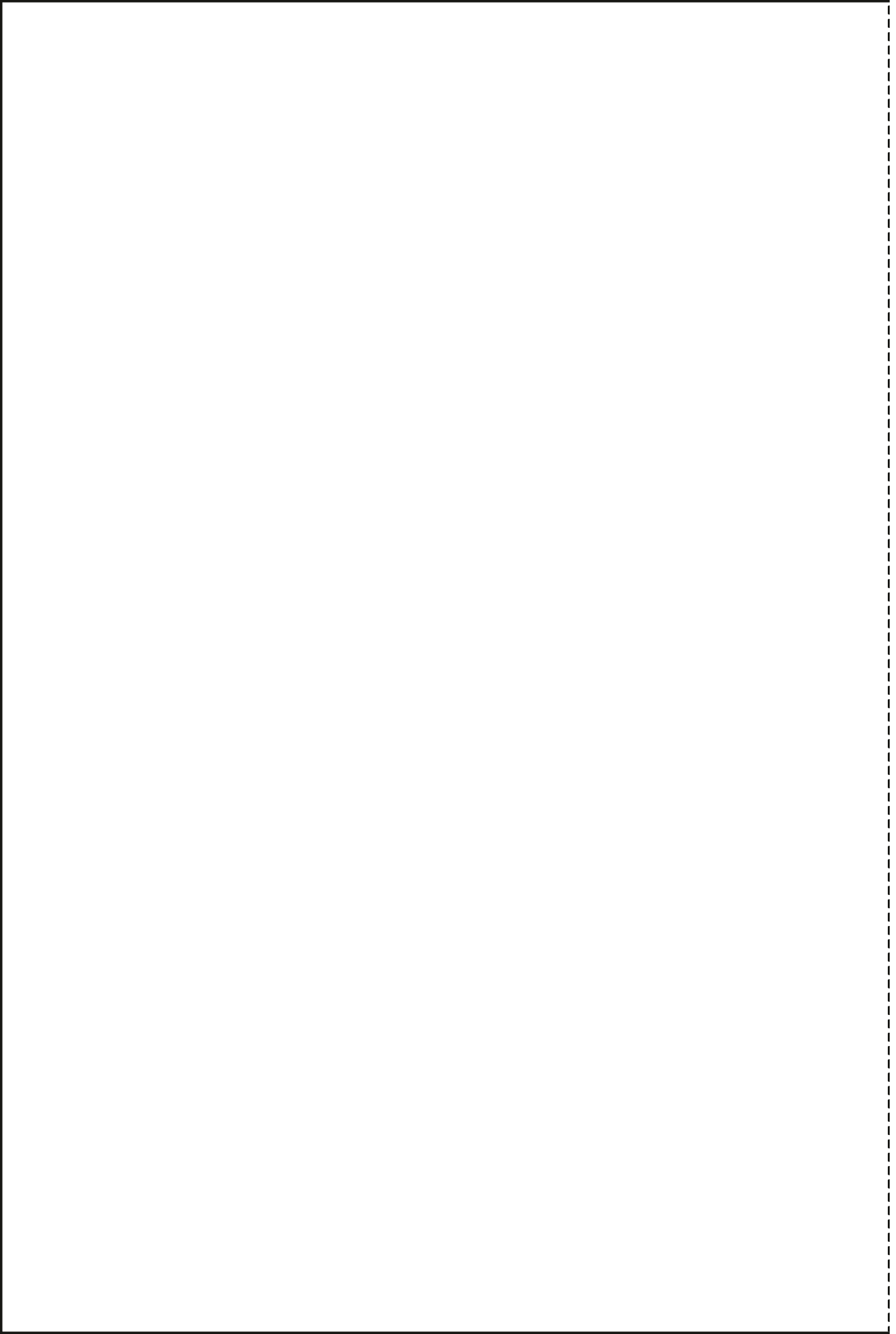
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*For my twin, six years younger*



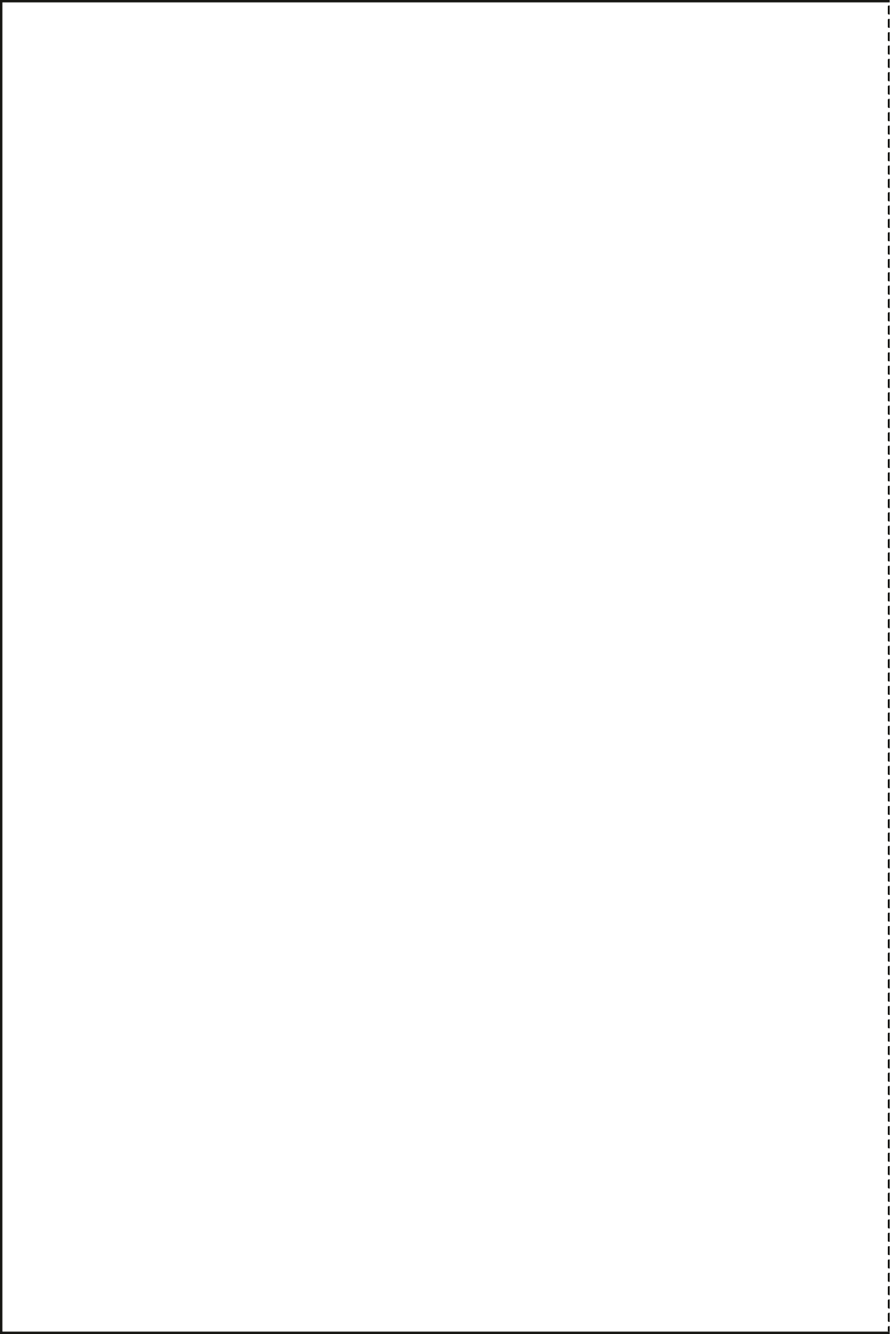


## NOTE

To distinguish between spoken English and American Sign Language, I've italicized when characters are communicating with sign.

There's no guarantee that children with hearing loss will be provided access to sign. A range of communication styles exist, such as Sim-Com (simultaneous communication of both sign and speech), PSE (a hybrid of ASL and English grammar), and SEE (verbatim English), as well as regional dialects, notably BASL (Black American Sign Language). Many signs don't have direct English counterparts.

Thus, italicized wording in this novel is *not* a literal translation of ASL. It's Lilah's internal interpretation of what's being signed.





# CHAPTER ONE

No one knows my deafness as well as I do. There isn't a single test that can truly get inside my head and understand how I'm experiencing the world. Doctors, parents, and strangers like to chime in with their assumptions. But after seventeen years, *I'm* still figuring it all out.

My annual audiology appointment is every January. My mom and I are driving through melting mounds of snow to get there. She won't let me do this alone because she doesn't trust me to be on top of things, especially after I got my fall semester report card this morning.

"We agreed you could stop using the FM system so long as your grades didn't slip." It's not the first time we've fought about this wireless device I'm supposed to use in class. My mom stares straight ahead as she drives down the highway, and I have to crane my neck to read her lips. "Are you proud of getting straight Cs, Lilah?"

“Half of my teachers practically refused to wear it anyways,” I mumble. “It’s too much of a hassle.”

“Then you have to remind them to use it.” She sighs, and says something about “———— outlined in your IEP.”

“It *isn’t* in there?” I ask, not sure I’d heard correctly.

“It *is*,” my mom repeats, turning to face me. “So you need to use it. We didn’t pay for it to sit in a case all year.”

I wanted high school to be different, but these past few years have been rough. When my teachers use the FM system, it brings their voices directly into my hearing aids, making their words louder but not necessarily clearer.

All these necessary accommodations bring attention to me, which I hate. So instead of pointing out that I need closed captions wherever we watch a video, I sit there quietly. I don’t catch most of what’s being said, and I fail the quiz on the material afterward. Plus, teachers accuse me of “talking during class” whenever I try to ask the person next to me to repeat what the assignment is—after struggling to follow the lesson in the first place. So, I get another bad grade. Every day is exhausting.

“And you’ve been skipping your group meetings with the hearing itinerant?” my mom asks.

Those are . . . not fun. An hour each week, I’m forced to learn how to “advocate for myself,” which often boils down to a reminder to sit in the front row.

“How am I supposed to get better grades if I’m pulled from class?”

My mom can’t think of a response to that one. She clenches her teeth and turns carefully into the hospital’s salt-covered parking lot.

We wait in the lobby for my audiologist. A toddler fitted with two large hearing aids runs across the room. His parents are trying to hide the fact that they're observing me closely. I'm used to the stares, especially here, since I'm one of the oldest patients at this children's center. It's possible this kid and his family have never seen someone my age with hearing aids before. They wonder what he'll be like when he grows up. When I was young, I didn't really know any older deaf people either.

Until I went to summer camp.

My audiologist brings us back for my hearing test, and I take a seat in an office chair positioned in the middle of the dark-gray enclosed sound booth. This space doesn't exactly scream comfort.

To the outside observer, this may seem a strange little room. There's a creepy animatronic monkey on the shelf in the corner, with its cymbals hanging lifeless since it's used when testing little kids. The wide metal door to my right seals this chamber shut.

I wish I were alone. Instead, my mom sits on an identical chair against the back wall, holding her purse, silently observing. I steady my hands together in my lap, resisting the urge to crack my knuckles.

My audiologist, Ms. Shelly, a cheerful presence throughout the years, has me remove my hearing aids. They're now sitting on a tissue at the side table to my left. She leaves the booth and takes a seat in the other half, looking at me through a small window. She turns on background clatter and loud crashing sounds, supposedly reminiscent of daily life surrounding me, as I struggle through the chaos to decipher words she says into a microphone.



“Say the word ‘baseball.’” Ms. Shelly’s voice is initially set loud enough to rival the noise.

“Baseball?” I answer, my voice funny in my throat. I suspect I whispered my response. People tell me I speak too loudly, but whenever I’m focused on the volume of my voice, it comes out too quiet.

I cough to clear my throat, wondering why I’m nervous. I’ve done this every year of my life. It’s nothing new.

“Say the word ‘hot dog.’”

“Hot dog!” *Whoops*, sort of yelled that one. I need to settle into a happy medium.

The chair scratches my thighs as I shift to relax my shoulders and stare ahead. But my audiologist is holding an envelope over her mouth so I can’t read her lips. She keeps gradually lowering the volume now, so it’s projected at a level that isn’t necessarily comfortable or effortless to hear. “Say the word ‘ice cream.’”

“Ice cream.” I’m still confident enough in the words to repeat them.

But it gets more difficult. Ms. Shelly increases the background noise, and I almost can’t tell if she’s still speaking. She’s being drowned out by the roar. From the familiarity, I recognize, “Say the word ————.” Yet I can’t make out the rest.

I scrunch my nose and tilt my head to the side. Definitely didn’t catch this one. It was . . . no. I’m supposed to give my best guess, but I can’t even think of a word similar to what I heard. A hint of frustration rises within me.

*It’s my hearing being graded, not me.*

This is the point in a typical conversation where I’d proclaim my most often used word—“what”—as many times as it’d take for a person to get their message across. It’s best when someone

can switch up their wording to help me along. The greater the context, the more likely I am to pick up on what I'm missing.

However, right now, there is no context. Only background noise and an elusive word. At least this is better than the frequency test. I swear by the end of that one I'm imagining beeps that don't exist.

I give up and shrug. What's another failed test at this rate?

Ms. Shelly continues. Another twenty or so words later, she finally puts down the envelope and gives me a smile while shutting off the background noise and returning her voice volume to full blast. "Great job, Lilah. We'll move on now."

She enters my side of the booth, her laminated ID badge dangling from her neck, and sticks various diagnostic tools in my ears and on my head. Throughout several rounds of different examinations, I suppress the urge to compare this to an alien abduction.

When it's all over, Ms. Shelly returns and reopens the sound-proof door to our half of the booth, leading us over to her office, where I usually get fitted for new earmolds and have my hearing aid levels adjusted. We take a seat around a small side table. My mom pulls her chair forward so they can crowd together over my results. I sit back, a little anxious, though there hasn't been any reason to be yet. My hearing loss, which I've had since birth, isn't supposed to be degenerative.

My mom frowns at the printout. I scramble to push in my hearing aids, looping the backs over and behind my ears. Wearing them helps, but they're never going to be a perfect fix. What people don't understand is that when I'm wearing my hearing aids, there's still a lot that I miss. And without them, there's still a lot I *could* catch by relying on lipreading and deductive reasoning.

We peer at the audiogram as my audiologist points to the zigzag lines trailing downward along the bottom half of the graph. The results for my left and right ears are close together, a fairly even loss across both sides.

“So we have a small dip since last time,” Ms. Shelly explains seriously, but then she smiles. “I wouldn’t be too worried about it.”

“All the more reason for her to use her accommodations for school,” my mom says.

“There is a newer FM she might prefer.” Ms. Shelly reaches back to her desk to get a pamphlet for my mom, bypassing other ones that showcase different hearing aid brands or earmold color options. “Look how cool! It’s sleek and modern.”

But I don’t care. While they discuss the pros, cons, and *cost* of a newer model, bemoaning the lack of insurance coverage, I stare back at the audiogram. I’ve always wondered what an additional loss would feel like. I’m not upset about it. If anything, I’m annoyed it’s not more significant.

To hearies, that may seem weird. I can’t really express why I feel this way, other than it might be nice to not stay caught in between. Like, if I had to choose between being fully hearing or fully deaf, I’m not certain my decision would be obvious.

And maybe, if the loss were profound, my family would be forced to finally take learning American Sign Language seriously. I’d seem “deaf enough” that my classmates would truly understand my need for all those school accommodations, rather than silently judge and question me. Because right now, they know I’m not hearing, but I don’t fit their expectations of deafness, either.

It’s a strange realm, here in the middle.

Since I'm overdue for a new set of hearing aids, Ms. Shelley gets out the supplies to create earmold impressions. I sit still as she squeezes cold pink goo into each ear. In a few weeks, I'll come get the molds and processors when they are ready and assembled. It will take wearing them a while for my brain to adjust to the latest technology and for the world around me to sound like I'm used to.

I'm not ashamed of my disability or anything like that. What bothers me is trying to fit into the hearing world. That I'm constantly the odd one out, the one who always has to explain or adjust.

I can think of *one* place where I didn't feel this way: Gray Wolf, a summer camp for the Deaf and Blind. I stopped going after eighth grade, since leaving for an entire summer didn't really fit into my plans once high school began. But it was a unique place where I didn't have to explain my hearing loss to anyone. And it was my introduction to sign language and Deaf culture.

I'm starting to really miss it.



## CHAPTER TWO

Two months later, our school has a half-day Friday to kick off spring break. My friends and I are sitting at a metal table outside Mackie's. We're enjoying the spring weather, which is unseasonably warm for the Chicago suburbs. I gather my long brown hair and tie it up with a purple ponytail holder. We're trying to figure out how to start off our vacation, but hunger and exhaustion from a morning full of exams has us parked here for lunch.

Kelsey takes a big bite of her chicken sandwich, putting a hand over her mouth to finish speaking while she chews.

"What?" I ask, leaning forward. It's times like these that remind me how much of my hearing is supplemented by lifelong lipreading skills.

"No," my other friend Riley says. "Not that one."

Kelsey takes a big drink of water and tucks her blond hair behind her ears in a feeble attempt to stop the light breeze from

blowing it in her face. She hasn't repeated what she said yet. I've hardly touched my cheeseburger and have to swat away a pesky gnat that won't leave it alone. I turn to Riley instead and ask, "What'd she say?"

Having someone else repeat for me helps sometimes. Even if they aren't any louder, I might understand them better if they are closer to me, enunciate more clearly, or have more familiar lips.

But Riley doesn't echo exactly what Kelsey said. She unbuttons her shirt, tying it around her waist to sit cooler in just her tank top, and reaches for lotion from her bag to soothe her dry, white knuckles. "We're trying to figure out what movie to see. It's too hot to hang out outside."

I knew that much. What I still don't know is what movie options were being discussed.

"Is there even a showing soon?" Kelsey asks. Both girls pull up their phones to check the times, so I do the same but get sidetracked on Instagram.

In the midst of a Deaf identity crisis after my audiology appointment, I've recently started following a ton of ASL accounts to improve upon my dwindling sign language skills. Fortunately, I remember a bunch from my time at Gray Wolf, but the reality of how much I still have left to learn is hitting hard. At least I know enough that I can determine if an account has a fluent Deaf teacher, versus an unqualified hearing person giving inaccurate lessons.

Even though I remember summer camp being a welcoming place for kids from all backgrounds, it can be hard to reconcile that with what I've seen on the internet—people arguing over speech, sign, culture, devices, and more. Sometimes it can seem

like all I truly know is that I'm *not* hearing. I could spend days scrolling through conflicting takes of people within the community debating semantics as I settle deeper and deeper into impostor syndrome. People give too much power to labels. It can feel exclusionary, whether intentional or not.

"How about something"—Kelsey says—"like, uh . . ."

"What?" I ask again, my mouth jumping to the word before my brain can piece together that she said "like, uh" and not "Li-lah." I shake my head in response to the blank stares from my friends. "Never mind. You two pick. As long as it's something fun."

"Okay, let's do the superhero one," Riley says.

My burger is cold, but I take a few final bites. Kelsey always sits up front in Riley's car, so I climb into the back and stare out the window the entire way, since it's impossible to hear them over the noise of the vehicle and the radio.

At the Regal, Kelsey and Riley buy their tickets. When it's my turn, I step forward and say, "The same one they got."

The guy at the booth nods. I reach for my wallet once the price lights up on the register and slide the cash beneath the glass. He gives me the change and says something I don't catch. But my friends have stepped toward the door and are scrolling through their phones.

"What was that?" I ask him.

He repeats what he'd said, but I can't hear it or read it on his lips since he's behind a computer screen.

"I'm sorry, what?" I ask, pointing to my ear and then the glass. I try to get my friends' attention.

Kelsey steps forward. "What's up?"



“Can you tell me what he’s saying?” I ask, gesturing back to the window.

But the worker rolls his eyes, pulling the ticket from the printer and handing it to me. He dismissively waves me away as he tosses the receipt in the trash.

“Never mind,” I tell Kelsey as we head inside the building. Of course it was about the receipt. I should have just defaulted to “no, thanks” and moved things along for everyone.

At the snack counter, Kelsey gets a slushie and Riley asks for Junior Mints. I don’t want to spend more money, but I’m starving and will need popcorn to get me through the next three hours of explosions and indecipherable dialogue. There’s no way I’m renting a pair of those sticky and hideous captioning glasses that theaters offer as an excuse to not put captions on-screen. They’re the last thing I want on my face when I’m out with my friends. The machine doesn’t work most of the time anyway.

While waiting for me to get my food, Kelsey and Riley run into some other kids from our school, so they once again aren’t with me to repeat anything the cashier says.

“One medium popcorn, please.” I hand over the money to the girl behind the counter, who then asks me something.

“No, thanks.” I smile. I don’t need the receipt, so I’m not going through that whole ordeal again.

She turns around to fill the container, and then hands it back to me along with the receipt. I walk away and grab a handful. Crap. What I’d said no to was the butter.

I join my friends, too irritated to bother figuring out what everyone’s discussing, especially since there seem to be two separate conversations happening across the circle.



I nudge Riley. “Hey, should we get to our seats?”

“Yeah, sure,” she says, turning to get Kelsey. “Let’s go. I don’t want to miss the trailers.”

Riley and Kelsey lead the way to our seats and sit side by side, leaving me at the end of the row. “Do you mind if I sit in the middle?” I ask, still standing, offering up my snack. “I can share.”

“That’s okay,” Kelsey says, staying in her spot between Riley and me. “I’m so full.”

The lights dim and the first trailer starts. “Ah, yes!” Riley points to the screen, saying something excitedly toward Kelsey and me.

I plunk down and stuff my face with popcorn.

A few times during the movie, I nudge Kelsey and ask, “What’d they say?” But she either repeats it staring straight at the screen or whispers it directly into my ear. Neither works, because I can’t hear her when she’s facing forward or read her lips when they’re beside my ear.

Ah well, whatever. The superhero is saving the day; that much is obvious.



“You’ve been quiet,” Kelsey tells me once we emerge from the theater back into the daylight. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I say, attempting to shrug off the listening fatigue. I’m exhausted and ready for a nap. “Do you guys want to do something next week?”

“Sure,” Kelsey says. “I just can’t on Monday ’cause I’m going into Chicago to interview for that summer internship.”

“Right, I almost forgot!” Riley says. “That would be so cool if you get that.”

“Nah, I mean, it’s mostly just answering phones and things like that.” Based on the way Kelsey talks about the job, it must be a cool position. I remember her mentioning it before, but I wasn’t able to catch the company’s name. “There’re several positions. You both should apply too. We could take the train into the city together all summer.”

“I wish,” Riley says. “But I’m not about that office life yet. I’m going back to the coffee shop and teaching dance lessons.”

We stop in front of the car. For a moment, I wonder if I’ll get the passenger seat this time, but we all climb back into our usual spots. When the engine starts, so does the loud music. Riley looks over her shoulder to tell me something.

“What?” I ask. “Can you turn off the music real quick?”

Riley lowers the volume. “Do you think you’ll apply for the internship?”

What I really want to say is that answering phones and taking coffee orders both seem like impossible tasks to me. Instead, I answer, “Actually, I may see if I can get a job as a counselor at this summer camp I used to go to . . .”

*Hmm*, I don’t know where that came from. I mainly said it so I wouldn’t have to explain to my friends why I didn’t want to go for the internship, but there could be something to this idea.

“Oh, that’s fun. What kind of camp is it?” Kelsey asks. “I used to love theater camp.”

“Well, it’s like, um, a Deaf camp,” I say, nervous about how my friends will react.

“Death camp?” Riley blurts out.

“No . . .” I say, grazing my fingers along the side of my head to reveal one of my purple hearing aids. “Deaf.”

“I always forget you have those,” Riley says. “Like, you don’t sound deaf. You know what I mean? Have you seen”—she gestures to the side of her head, and I already know what she’s going to say—“one of the head things that, like, fixes your hearing? Why don’t you get that?”

“A cochlear implant? No.” I don’t have the energy to explain further. “That’s not exactly how that works.”

“That’ll be fun, though,” Kelsey interjects, probably sensing my irritation with Riley’s response. “It’d be amazing to spend the whole summer outside. Promise me you’ll have a summer romance.”

“I don’t know about that . . .” I say, amused by the possibility.

“We’ll miss you all summer,” Riley says. “We’ll have to do some major catching up when ———.”

I don’t catch the rest but get the gist. Sure, I’ll miss the pool parties and sleepovers. Having to jump through hoops to feel included? Yeah, I won’t miss *that*. Going back to Gray Wolf would be an easier time, at least in terms of accessibility.

My friends turn the music back up and we drive off. I’m left staring out the window . . . again.

I watch the trees as we go by, still wondering where this counselor idea came from but growing more confident about it by the minute. I have been wanting to practice my ASL. And getting away from my family for a bit might be nice, especially since my mom thinks I should study over break to get my grades back on track next year.

But will it be weird going back to Gray Wolf after all this time? It's a pretty small camp. Will anyone there remember me? My counselors all seemed so much older and cooler, though they were probably just, like, my age.

The idea is at least worth a Google search to see if they're hiring soon.



## CHAPTER THREE

Okay, the Gray Wolf web page hasn't been updated since the nineties. I've literally never seen a site this old before. It only has a home page, with the name of the camp, the address, and an office number.

*Ugh*, I don't want to struggle through a call. How have they seriously not included a contact form yet? I could ask my mom to do it for me, but how would that look, trying to apply for a job by having my mother place a phone call for me? Someone needs to fix this website, like, yesterday.

I give up and scroll through Instagram, where I've been paying more attention to posts from people I went to camp with. People I haven't seen in ages—like Ethan, who was a first-year counselor during my last summer at Gray Wolf three years ago. When I see his photo holding up a staff polo, I actually stop to read the caption announcing that he's just been promoted to assistant director for this summer.

*Ahh*, I feel weird messaging him. But I *do* want to apply for a

camp job, and he might be able to help. What's the worst that could happen? He could just ignore this message if he has no idea who I am. But I remember him being really friendly and outgoing, so it's worth a try.

**Lilah:** Hi Ethan! Congrats on the new job! You probably don't remember me, but I used to go to Gray Wolf and was actually wondering if there are any counselor positions to apply for this summer. I didn't see anything on the website.

I hit Send. Time to Google search for some ASL lessons and confront how much I actually remember. Languages can be "use it or lose it," and sign language is no different. Eventually, I find a Deaf-taught series on YouTube and am relieved at how much vocab I remember. I race through the first few lessons at 2x speed, since I'm already confident in the alphabet, colors, numbers, family members, and so on.

I'm watching the video, practicing, when a notification pops up.

**Ethan:** Of course I remember you. We'd love to have you back! And yeah . . . we need a budget to update that site. What's your email? I'll share it with our camp director Gary. We'll be looking soon.

"Yes, yes, yes," I say to myself, quickly typing out and sending my email address. This is all going so well! I really didn't expect my plan to come together this easily.

**Lilah:** Thank you so much! And congratulations again :)



For the next several weeks, I constantly refresh my email. There's less than a month left of school, and my friends have already lined up their summer plans. My mom's got it in mind that I'm going to do summer school to help fix my grades. I haven't told my parents about Gray Wolf yet, because have I applied, really? All I did was give Ethan my email address. There hasn't been any sort of interview, and summer is already right around the corner.

So far, I've resisted the urge to message Ethan again, since that may come across as desperate. If they haven't contacted me by now, maybe they don't plan to. Who am I to skip several years of camp and think I can waltz back in and get the job? If Ethan remembers me, he must also know I wasn't fluent in ASL. Is that one of the job requirements?

Maybe I got my hopes up too high about being a counselor this summer.

Whether or not I get this job, I want to improve my ASL. So I pull up the video lessons again. I've reached the point where the signs are half familiar, half brand new. Like, when it comes to weather signs, I totally know words we'd have used at camp, like "rain," "wind," or "lightning." But I've never seen "hurricane," "earthquake," or "drought" before.

My eleven-year-old brother plops down on the couch beside me, still in his jersey and cleats from a soccer game he had this morning.

"What are you doing?" Max asks, wiping the sweat that drips from his short brown hair down his tanned neck.

“Ew, go shower.” I scrunch up my nose.

Max stares at the vocabulary video that’s paused on my screen. “Do I need to ———.”

“What?” I look back toward him.

“Do I need to know all this?”

My brother has the same kind of hearing loss I do, though one of his ears reaches further down the severe category. But we have hearing parents, and like most other deaf and hard of hearing kids, we’ve been raised with the goal of being hearing-passing. As far as we know, our hearing loss is genetic, even though there’s no apparent family history of deafness. But we didn’t have any childhood illnesses or head injuries, either. We were simply born with less hearing.

“If you want.” I shrug. Max has never been to Gray Wolf, so his exposure to sign language is even less than mine. Instead of ASL lessons, Max and I got years of speech therapy. Which is fine, I guess, but why not both? “I learned a ton when I first went to Deaf camp.”

“You learned there?” he repeats to confirm he heard correctly.

“Yeah.”

He nods, furrowing his eyebrows. “I don’t know. Do you really have to go for the whole summer?”

“Well, it’s two months. There’s still some time at home.”

“Not much . . .” He scrunches up his mouth, probably thinking about his friends and sports that usually occupy the school break.

“Why?” I ask. “Do you want to go to camp?”

This summer was going to be my thing, but I guess it won’t be the end of the world if my brother is there, too. Especially since if he learns sign language, it’ll be easier to use it at home.



“Did you like going there?” he asks. “Or was it, like, school where you had to do a lot of learning?”

“Max, it’s fun! There’s a lake and a pool and all sorts of outdoors stuff. I think you’d like it.”

“Cool. I don’t know, maybe. I’ll ask Mom.” He finally leaves and, fortunately, so does the smell.



I’m home alone Saturday morning, attempting to focus on a particularly tricky ASL lesson about grammatical sentence structure. I *have* to look busy when my parents get home from Max’s soccer match; otherwise they’ll ask why I’m not studying for finals. But of course, I keep getting sidetracked on social media.

My phone gets a notification right before my parents and Max walk in the door. No way is this what I hope it is . . . It’s an email, and I do a double take when I read who sent it.

Gary@CampGrayWolf.com

Saturday, May 25, 9:46 a.m.

Dear Lilah,

Sorry to be emailing so late! Ethan has nominated you to be a junior counselor this summer, and we’d love to have you on board. Can you be at training on June 1? Campers will be there from Sunday, June 9 through Saturday, July 27, and there’s usually a day of cleaning and counselor celebrations afterward.

There's a weekly stipend of \$250/week,  
which we know really isn't much, but  
obviously room and board are all free.  
You don't incur many expenses when  
enjoying the great outdoors at  
summer camp!

Let me know.

Gary

Director, Camp Gray Wolf

I have to reread the email several times to get over my surprise. I got the job? I'd almost given up on the possibility. I have to be there in a week—the day after school lets out. Am I ready? I wish I had more time to brush up on my ASL.

"Don't you need to be studying for finals?" my dad asks, walking over to the couch and glancing at my laptop screen.

"Actually..." I say, noticing the skepticism on his face. "Well, yes. I need to study. *But*—I just got a job for this summer."

"A job?" my mom calls from the kitchen. "What job? You were supposed to take classes over the break."

"I don't want to do those..." I look back at the email to confirm once again that it's real before telling my parents. "Junior counselor at Gray Wolf. It'll be all of June and July."

"Hmm..." my mom says. It doesn't seem to be what she expected. But I can tell the wheels are turning in her brain. "That does leave a few weeks in August to prepare for the new school year."

"Sure, I guess," I say. A few weeks is better than a whole summer of homework. "So, can I go?"

“Yeah.” My mom gives me a sly look. “And Max did just ask me about maybe going this year, so we’ll send him, now that you can keep an eye on him.”

“Right,” my dad agrees. “We always meant to send him.”

“He does have a busy June,” my mom says. “I wasn’t sure if it would work, but especially with you working there, they’ll probably be open to taking him late.”

Somehow my new job has now become about Max? Whatever, as long as they let me go. “I have to be there next Saturday.”

“That’s fast. But we can make it work.” My mom nods. “Proud of you for finding a job.”

“Yes, great work,” my dad adds. “I’m sure it’ll be a great time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say nonchalantly but filled with so much relief. I get to go be a counselor, hanging out with the college kids. I text my friends to share the excitement.

I’m already starting to feel a little overwhelmed. Sure, I know the sign language alphabet backward and forward, am decent with numbers, and still have a good grasp on camp-related vocabulary—enough to hopefully discuss the lunch menu or the activities schedule or the weather. But I’m not fluent enough to handle complex subjects like dreams and goals or life and love—the type of things I’d probably talk to the other counselors around the campfire about.

But I got the job, so they must think I’m qualified. I just have to put aside the creeping impostor syndrome that has me wondering . . . what if I struggle in the Deaf world as much as I do in the hearing one?



## CHAPTER FOUR

I've never driven this far by myself before, but the three hours to the campgrounds at the Illinois-Wisconsin border are a breeze. My parents were worried about this old Civic making the journey, and reminded me several times that I'll have to run the car periodically throughout the summer or else I may not be able to get it to start for the way home.

But I don't worry about any of that as I blare music and bask in the sunshine warming my sleeveless arms.

The GPS tells me it's only a few more minutes, but it's nearly impossible to find the small arrival sign in the forest along the country road. In fact, I drive past my destination and have to make a hasty U-turn. I go slow down the long dirt entry-way and approach the campsite as my stomach flutters. It's an unceremonious arrival site, just a patch of gravel and a few parked vehicles. But I know what's waiting beyond the path

through the trees. My nerves dissipate at the sight of Ethan waiting for me.

“Lilah!” he shouts, his arms outstretched as I park and climb out of my car, beaming ear to ear.

“Hey, Ethan!”

“You’ve grown, like, a whole foot since I last saw you, and that’s not saying much because you’re still so short.” Ethan tackles me with a hug. I smile, having almost forgotten how Deaf people tend to make a lot of visual comments about appearance.

It’s such a relief to see a familiar face at a familiar place. Ethan’s been at camp forever, climbing the ranks. He looks older too, and absolutely in his element here. He’s Latino, short and stocky, and wearing bright yellow socks with gigantic smiley faces patterned all the way up to his knees. His T-shirt spells out “Deaf Pride” in ASL lettering, and his dark-brown hair is long and shaggy, falling over his two silver hearing aids.

“It’s great to be back,” I say. “Anyone else I’ll know back this year?”

“Hmm, did you ever meet Natasha? We’ve got several former campers on staff.”

“Maybe?” I shrug, glancing at a pale freckled girl who just walked over to stand beside Ethan. She is wearing a long-sleeved black shirt despite the heat. I can’t place why she looks vaguely familiar.

“Oh, this is Mackenzie,” Ethan introduces her. “She’s one of our new counselors this year.”

“*You’re L-i—h, right?*” she signs.

“Yes.” I nod. I only caught a jumble of letters that started with an *L* and ended with an *H*, but I assume she spelled my name.

“She’s an interpreting major,” Ethan adds, answering the question he knows is on my mind. “So, do you still use the ASL you learned here?”

“*I maybe remember some,*” I sign to his delight, since he’s the one who taught me much of what I know from way back when. This is a strong start . . . but I also practiced this sentence over and over in my head on the drive here.

“*Perfect.*”

We both grab my stuff from the car and head into the campsite.

“Wasn’t there a welcome archway?” I point toward the path that leads to the entrance. There used to be a tall wooden board with a giant gray wolf—a friendly-looking painting that peered down at everyone passing through.

“It had to come down last year,” Ethan says sadly. “After that big storm.”

Without the sign, now it looks like the campgrounds have a secret magical entrance, where tall evergreen trees surround a rickety wooden footbridge that crosses a small creek. Even the temperature changes as we go over the water, though I’ve probably got the shade and cool breeze to thank for that. The dirt path before us stretches on until it divides into two at the clearing, forming a circle that hugs the entire perimeter of Gray Wolf’s fields and open space, splintering off toward the cabins, the dining hall, the dance barn, the pool, and the lake. It’s all the same—but changed. This place has fallen into some disrepair, but the charm is still there.

I wipe sweat from my forehead, glad I don’t have to lug my things for much longer. Mackenzie walks alongside us. She waves to get my attention.

*"Where do you go to school?"* she signs, extremely slowly, over-mouthing the words with her lips. *"A deaf school?"*

"Mainstreamed," I tell Mackenzie, not able to sign back because I'm carrying stuff. "You can just talk to me right now. Dramatically mouthing kind of butchers the ability to lip-read. And I don't always use sign, so you don't need to." That might be rude of me to say, but she could benefit from the explanation. "When talking to just me, at least," I clarify.

"I see," she says and signs, finally using her voice. After a pause, she again speaks slowly to keep pace with her hands. I turn back to watch her lips. "But it's best to always sign anyways, so other people around can see and join in the conversation if they want. Like how other hearing people could join us talking."

I frown. "I'm not hearing."

Mackenzie doesn't address this and keeps walking behind Ethan.

"I thought most everyone here would sign. But so many people speak." She momentarily occupies her hands fixing her red braids.

I'm sure one of her professors sold her on this summer gig as a great way to practice sign. She's being showy with her ASL, which she probably only just started learning. Granted, that's more classes than I, with a hearing loss, have ever had the opportunity to take.

"Well, we new people have to stick together," she says and signs.

I take a deep breath to stop myself from correcting her again and telling her I'm not "new" here. I need to practice, but Mackenzie isn't my ideal partner.

Ethan can sense my frustration and gives me a knowing smile as he comes to my rescue. “Lilah was a camper here for many years. And hopefully will be back now for a few more.”

“That’d be great,” I say, wondering about his use of the word “hopefully.” Is becoming a senior counselor after being in the junior role *not* a guarantee? Maybe that’s when there’s an actual interview or something.

“Well,” Mackenzie says and signs. “Since you’re a junior counselor, I hope you’ll be assigned to help my group. We can learn together. It’s such a beautiful language. And it’s so special to be able to help deaf people.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say, relieved to have arrived at the cabins.

“When you get a chance, you should check out my YouTube channel,” Mackenzie adds. “I practice and interpret songs.”

*Yikes.* That’s why I recognized her! She’s one of those hearing people doing ASL videos. I watched about ten seconds of one and knew right away it wasn’t something I should learn from. Based on her absurd number of followers, I doubt others realize that.

I pretend I don’t hear her and follow Ethan into one of the small, red-wooden cabins, where I get to drop my bags. If I packed too much, it’s all in an effort to get through the summer with minimal laundry runs.

“Didn’t there used to be more cabins?” I ask Ethan.

He nods. “We lost one last year. The roof caved in over the winter from that big snowstorm. It’d already taken some major wind damage before that, so it was a lost cause. Enrollment is down anyway, so we have to make do without it.”

It’s a bit musty here, being the start of the season and all. I quickly choose a free top bunk.



“All the counselors will be staying here during training,” Ethan explains. “We’ll spread out to all the cabins once the campers get here.”

“Right.” I nod. So that’s why so many beds are made.

Ethan grabs a phone charger from his bunk, but Mackenzie hurries over and taps his arm, despite the fact that he’s already looking at her. “Yeah?” he asks.

“Sorry, I forget,” Mackenzie says and signs. “What’s your sign name?”

“I have two,” Ethan says and signs. “My usual one is like an *E*”—he demonstrates, shaking the letter in an animated twisty motion near his head—“because of my hair and how excited I can be. But for camp, we like to pick summer words for everyone, since not all campers arrive with a sign name.”

“That’s why I forgot. You have two,” Mackenzie says and signs. “What’s your camp one?”

“Socks,” Ethan says and signs. “Because”—Ethan sticks out his foot to show off his bright-yellow socks.

“I still need a sign name. For camp or just in general.” Mackenzie pauses, clearly hoping Ethan might get the hint. But when no one answers, she turns to me and says, “It has to be given to you by a Deaf person.”

“I know,” I say and sign, trying to keep my tone neutral.

“Lilah already has hers,” Ethan says.

“Right . . .” I smile, remembering. “Weren’t you the one who gave it to me?”

“How could I forget?” he says. “*Bug*.”

The memories come flooding back. “*Bug*,” I sign, holding my thumb to my nose, and crunching down my index and middle fingers twice. I love it. There’s no mistaking this sign, unlike

when I'm listening and I mistake someone mumbling "like, uh" and assume it's my name.

"Why that sign, Lilah?" Mackenzie asks.

"Her very first summer at camp, she had so many ladybugs land on her. A sign of good luck." He smiles. "'Ladybug' got shortened to 'Bug,' and it stuck." He checks his watch. "Okay, we'll let you get unpacked. Meet Mackenzie and me outside, and we'll walk over for dinner."

I unzip my backpack and toss any nonessentials up into my bunk so it's lighter to carry around all summer. An old, faded-purple JanSport, soon to be filled with first aid items and a waterproof Otterbox for hearing aids, is now a proud symbol of my new junior counselor status. I tuck my water bottle, decorated with stickers, into the side pocket.

I scan the room, hoping to find a place for my duffel. But there's not much space to leave my stuff on the floor, especially since I tossed my empty mesh laundry basket into the only free corner. I hoist the bag up to the foot of my bunk, wavering when it's stuck over my head because I'm not tall enough to push it the rest of the way. This was not the smartest decision.

The floorboards move beneath me, and I feel my bag sliding off the bed. I'm about to drop it when an extra pair of arms comes to my rescue, pushing it onto the top bunk. I turn around, expecting to see Ethan or Mackenzie, but it's someone else.

A guy about my age is standing there in a blue baseball cap and a Cubs T-shirt that fits him perfectly. He looks like he belongs in the team's dugout, although his hat has a cursive *L* on the front that I don't recognize. A small tuft of hair curls at his forehead. He has a warm-brown complexion and kind, dark eyes that are set on me. He's standing with his hands loosely clasped

together, ready to sign, with a woven bracelet around his wrist, perhaps from last summer.

My heart is racing, and I'm not sure if it's from lifting the bag or from realizing who helped me. "Thank you," I say breathlessly.

"*You're welcome,*" he signs. He points past me and signs something else.

I freeze. I want to answer him in sign, but I'm unsure exactly what he's asking. He gives a small shrug, likely knowing that I didn't understand, and walks around me to grab his backpack from his bunk . . . which is directly below *mine*. Of all the beds I could have chosen! At least he won't be able to hear me if I snore in my sleep.

"*Are you new this year?*" he asks, this time mouthing the words a little bit, which I know is purely for my benefit.

"Um, no," I say, begging my brain to remember any of the ASL I practiced. "Long time ago, I was here," I say and sign. "As a camper."

"*Wait . . .*" He tilts his head to the side. His wonderfully expressive eyebrows do a lot of communicating for him as he raises them and leans forward. "*I think I remember you. Bug, right?*"

"Whoa," I say and sign. "Yes! You were a camper here, too?" I am certain I would remember him.

"*Yeah, and then ———,*" he signs. I don't follow most of his response, but he raises his hand from his chest to his head, signing that he's grown taller. "*I look different, maybe.*"

"Oh right, good," I say and sign, nodding while my brain still races to try to process more of what he signed.

"*Good?*" he asks, his eyebrows raised and a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Good, as in, I think I remember you now, too,” I say and sign quickly, cursing my limited vocabulary and feeling the blush rise on my cheeks. I stare down at his worn running sneakers that are caked in dry mud and laced with bright-green cords.

“*I’m I———*,” he signs.

“Sorry,” I say, hoping that my frustration at my lacking ASL doesn’t come across as overly apologetic. “*Again, please.*”

He smiles and patiently spells out his name again. “*I-s-a-a-c.*”

“*L-i-l-*” But my hand is shaking, and I mess up, jumbling my letters. I close my hand into a fist, take a brief pause, and start again. “*L-i-l-a-h.*”

“*Camp sign name Spider,*” Isaac adds, signing with one wrist crossed over the other to resemble the eight-legged creature. “*Like—*” He makes a web-slinging gesture, a clear reference to Spider-Man.

“You and your friends always won all the games!” I say, forgetting to sign, but he reads my lips and nods enthusiastically. I do recall a small group of boys about my age who were always off playing sports. I shake my head, smiling. “*B-a-t man, too?*”

He nods and points toward me excitedly. “*Yes!*” He shows me the sign. “*Bat. He’s a counselor here, too.*”

“*Awesome.*” I’m still smiling ridiculously. “I thought no one here would remember me,” I say.

He watches my lips, grinning. “*Nah.*”

We just kind of look at each other for a moment, reconciling the little kids we used to be with the person in front of us now. He’s still standing beside me, near enough for me to pick up the citrus of his freshly washed tee that already has a hint of musty outdoor aroma, soon to include traces of campfire smoke,

sunscreen, and cut grass. His scent puts me at ease. I guess being this close to people comes naturally at camp. Strangers at the beginning of the season can be very best friends by the end. While this interaction wasn't as smooth as I would have liked it to be—my signing impressed no one—it's just a matter of time before I can hopefully converse with him better. I've got all summer.

*"Let's go eat?"* He nods toward the cabin door.

"Yeah, Ethan said it was almost dinnertime," I say, grabbing my backpack. Crap, I forgot to sign my response again. I can't keep doing this. I'll just have to push through, even if I don't know the word for something yet.

Isaac and I head out of the cabin, where Ethan and Mackenzie are waiting, and we all start walking to the dining hall. Isaac turns around and walks backward to face us as he signs, *"What's for dinner?"*

*"I have no idea. Maybe pizza?"* Ethan signs.

Rather than going along the perimeter path, we cut through the large grass field for a direct route toward the dining hall. We move together in a semicircle so everyone is visible for the conversation, a necessity for both signing and lipreading. It's little things like this that bring back memories of my time as a camper at Gray Wolf. I'm thrilled with how much of the signing I'm able to follow, even if it's only been simple communication so far. Maybe all my practicing made a difference.

*"Yeah, hopefully pizza,"* Mackenzie signs.

*"Same,"* I join in, ready to prove my language skills. I throw in another sign I'm able to conjure from memory. *"I'm really hungry right now."*

This doesn't spark the chorus of "same" reactions I'd expected. Isaac throws his head back, squeezing his eyes shut while his mouth hangs open in silent laughter.

Ethan sports an amused grin. "Are you sure that's what you meant to say?" he says and signs.

Mackenzie winces. "Awkward." She leans into the sign, wobbling her body side to side while she raises and lowers three extended fingers on both hands.

I turn back to Ethan, desperate for an explanation, but instead, Isaac waves at me, still wiping tears of laughter from his eyes with his other hand. Deaf waving isn't like a casual hello. Rather, it's like reaching out to slap a table to get someone's attention: You bend your wrist forward to hit the air horizontally as many times as it takes to get the person to look at you.

I want to cover my bright-red face, but I have to leave my mouth visible. "What? No one else is hungry?" I ask, with my hands resting on the straps of my backpack, suddenly apprehensive about signing.

Isaac holds up one finger on his left hand, drawing his right hand to his chest where he signs the word "hungry," slowly running the C shape down from the base of his throat. He holds his left hand forward with one finger out to emphasize the single movement.

I shrug, not sure what he's getting at, because that looks similar to what I just signed, so he takes a different approach. He signs the word the way I did, moving his hand up and down his chest more than once. He shakes his head no, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, so I signed it wrong?" I ask.

“It’s okay,” Mackenzie says and signs. “I’ve made that mistake before.”

Great. Once more, I look imploringly toward Ethan.

“If you sign ‘hungry’ like that,” Ethan explains, “it means ‘horny.’”

“What?” I hope I misheard. Did I really sign to everyone that I was horny right now?

Isaac steps closer to me and takes hold of the back of my hand. *No*, it’s not a romantic gesture, although his action still sends a shiver down my back. Deaf interactions can be touchy. Lots of reaching out to get each other’s attention and to emphasize certain things being said. As we’re walking, he moves my hand from my throat to my chest once, nodding yes. He lets go and repeats the sign against his chest multiple times, vehemently shaking his head no.

“I . . . see where I went wrong.” My embarrassment turns to anger when I realize Mackenzie has interpreted what I just said in sign for Isaac. It shouldn’t have to be like this. “*Sorry.*”

Mackenzie falls into step with me. “It’s all right,” she says and signs. “Everyone makes mistakes when they’re learning.”

“I’m tired of learning. I just want to be fluent,” I say, holding my hands tight against my chest. “I should know it already.”

We’re getting closer to the dining hall. I slow down and check my phone, not wanting to walk beside Mackenzie. Isaac and Ethan converse, and Isaac reaches into his backpack and pulls out a Fruit Roll-Up, scrunching most of it into his mouth so he can still sign with Ethan while he’s eating. He’s about to shove the wrapper into his pocket when he glances back at me.

“*Still hungry?*” He lifts his eyebrows. That’s all it takes for the blood to rush right back to my face. I shake my head. Isaac



tilts his head and widens his eyes into an apologetic puppy dog stare. “*Sorry, that wasn’t funny.*”

“*It’s fine.*” I tap my thumb against my chest, confident I know this sign.

He leans forward with eyes wide. “*Friends?*”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding. “*Friends.*”

I speed up to keep pace with the group but hide on the opposite side of Ethan. My brain is spinning—that’s enough conversation for now.





## CHAPTER FIVE

This evening there's only one long table set up in the center of the dining hall. We're a small staff, so all ten of us grab a folding chair from the stacks along the wall and squeeze together. There's no food at the buffet station. The camp chef will be here in a few days. Instead, there's a platter of grocery store sandwiches and bags of chips on the counter near a Gatorade jug full of water.

"Welcome to training week, counselors!" A man sprints to the front of the hall, clapping. Ethan follows, standing by his side to interpret. "For those of you I haven't met yet, my name is Gary. This is my second year here at Gray Wolf."

Gary looks . . . like a Gary. He's a high school science teacher with short, prematurely graying hair. He's wearing a tie-dye T-shirt and khakis, a uniform of sorts. For the next ten minutes, Gary outlines what we can expect during training, as well as once the

campers arrive. I may or may not tune out at the end, eager to get on to the eating portion.

“So to recap, this training will go over safety, familiarizing ourselves with the grounds, and refreshers on games and activities.”

Gary stands in stark contrast next to Ethan, who is interpreting with less enthusiasm than he would if the campers were here, but with plenty of facial expressions still. They’re so different. Old and young. Hearing and Deaf. Reserved and energetic. Gary is lean and sports a scraggly beard, while Ethan is stocky and has tied his hair into a topknot.

“And the storm cellar is here in the dining hall basement,” Gary says, wrapping up his spiel. “I do have one last point to make, now that the usual summer procedures are out of the way. As you may or may not know, I’m usually the guy camps bring in when things aren’t looking too hot in one way or another.” He must be greeted by a lot of concerned faces, because he immediately clarifies. “What we have here is a simple budget issue.”

That makes sense. Gray Wolf was never a state-of-the-art campground, but it does look worse for wear than I thought it would. And I’m not sure how anyone is supposed to know about this place with such an outdated website. But where does the money come from? Any kid with a qualifying hearing or vision loss can attend, and it’s all free, which is why my parents were able to send me here when I was little.

“Essentially,” Gary says, “the original source of financing has been depleted over the years, faster than additional funds have been procured. We’ll need some new revenue to keep things going.”

To keep things going? I'm finally back at Gray Wolf, but is it possible this could be the last summer? Talk about terrible timing. This is the most Deaf-friendly job I'll probably ever have. And there are so many more kids who should experience this place.

"Obviously, we don't want to have to charge our campers," Ethan interjects.

"Exactly," Gary says. "Things aren't that dire yet. The board and I are discussing solutions. One of which is to woo some new donors."

Isaac waves and asks a question, which Ethan relays to Gary. "So what exactly does this mean for us this summer? Is anything changing right away?"

Gary knows to face Isaac as he responds, and Isaac glances back and forth between him and Ethan's interpreting. "This year should look similar to last summer. But as you know, we've been cutting a lot of the typical activities, such as the occasional off-site trips."

Around the table, we all solemnly nod in understanding. I guess that means I'm not getting the chance to go horseback riding anytime soon.

Gary tries to lift the mood. "We'll be raising money so that camp can not only continue to exist but once again thrive!"

He wants to be reassuring, but I'm stuck on "keep things going" and "not only continue," which suggest things are, in fact, pretty bad.

"I'll be giving a few tours over the summer to these potential donors, but nothing that should interrupt the usual routine. Oh, we may have a luncheon at some point. But for the most part, you can just pretend they aren't here." He nods and checks his

clipboard. “Yep, I think we can go ahead and eat dinner.” He looks back up at us. “Any questions?”

Our group is still digesting the news and too hungry to come up with any thoughts.

“Okay, Ethan will pass around your group assignments. Read through the children’s profiles to identify any dietary requirements and other needs. You have my cell, and Ethan’s, and each other’s. I’m used to good old-fashioned walkie-talkies, but for obvious reasons, phones are a better fit here for a variety of accommodated communication. Text or call me with any emergencies. Oh, and you have our lovely nurse’s number as well.”

“Yes. Hello, everyone!” the elderly, bubbly camp nurse says and signs. She’s sitting at the head of the table beside where Gary is standing. “I recognize many smiling faces. I’m excited to get to know you better when we have our first aid and CPR training.”

I’m surprised there’s finally a nurse with a working knowledge of ASL. Honestly, it should be a requirement for the job, but she is the first one as far as I know.

“Let’s eat!” Ethan says and signs. “After dinner, you’re free for the rest of the night.”

Mackenzie throws both hands into the air to start a round of sign language applause. “My, I just love this,” she says, and wiggles her fingers in the air in silent, overly enthusiastic celebration.

Ethan hands me a deck with the profiles of my campers. Since I’m only a junior counselor, I’ve been paired with a senior one—and of course, that happens to be Mackenzie . . . Yay, me.



While we eat dinner, the two counselors sitting beside me introduce themselves as Bobby and Simone.

Bobby is a former camper with low vision. He's got a splotch of sunscreen near one of his eyebrows. Still, his attempt to coat his pale complexion was unsuccessful. None of us spent that much time outdoors today, but the sunburn on Bobby's face grows redder by the minute. His cane is folded up in the pouch of his backpack, presumably because he primarily uses it after dark. But from what I've already observed at dinner, despite hovering at least a foot taller than Simone, he likes to default to grabbing onto her arm when he needs a guide.

Bobby is the epitome of clashing colors in a purple shirt with orange shorts, but Simone has the athleisure look down, sporting the latest Old Navy line from head to toe. She's Black and studying to work with blind and low-vision kids. She and Mackenzie are the only two counselors this summer without a hearing or vision loss.

"So I don't know how I feel about having randoms wandering around camp," Bobby says, taking a bite of his sandwich and letting most of the lettuce fall out onto his plate.

"Is this something we should tell parents up front?" Simone asks.

"I'm sure Gary's on top of that. Gotta keep the children safe. What do you think, Lilah . . . ? As the resident child here," Bobby jokes.

"Come on, I'm seventeen." But I don't take it too seriously. I've been amused by the banter between Simone and Bobby and am glad to be easily roped into the conversation.

"But not eighteen yet, so where's the lie?" Bobby says. "You didn't answer my question."

“I don’t know . . . I mean, if people want to see what they’d be donating their money to, that should be fine, I guess.” But then I imagine a squad of four old dudes roaming around on a little golf cart like they’re on a paid safari, clicking away to take zoomed-in photos on their phones. “Okay, it has the potential to be weird.”

Simone agrees. “Yeah,” she tells Bobby. “It really depends.”

“Couldn’t there be another way to bring in the money?” I ask. “Online or something? I mean, seeing how out of date the website is, that’d be a technological challenge.”

“Yeah, this place is ———,” Simone says.

“What was that?” I ask.

“This place is getting desperate for money,” she repeats, a bit louder. “Wages could use a lift. I almost had to take a different job this summer.”

“But she wouldn’t dare,” Bobby says, nudging Simone’s arm. He turns toward me. “This financial stuff is probably part of why Ethan didn’t get the promotion.” He pauses, nodding to where the others are sitting. “There aren’t any ears named Gary nearby, right? I’ll fill you in on our off-season drama since last summer.”

I look around. Our camp director and nurse have already cleared their places and are chatting near the door. “You’re good. What happened?”

“I don’t know if you were old enough to really know this the last time you were here, but we didn’t have an assistant director before. They made the position just for Ethan, rather than letting him be the director, ’cause they’d rather keep Gary around.”

“Couldn’t they have been co-directors?” I ask.

“My thought exactly . . .” Simone chimes in.

“Okay, but Lilah. Do you remember beeper baseball?” Bobby asks, diving into a tangent.

“Ouch,” I say. “How could I forget.” It’s a game obviously meant for the blind, but those of us who aren’t cover our eyes to play. Whoever is in the catcher position watches the pitch and uses a long stick to poke deaf batters to let them know when the ball is thrown. This camp is all about accessibility, which may sometimes be taken to slightly unreasonable levels in the name of a fun challenge.

“I’m gonna destroy everyone in a game tomorrow.” Bobby grins. “I brought plenty of bandanas.”

“I think it’s a little skewed in your favor, with a bunch of blindfolded Deafies in the outfield, but we’ll let you have this victory,” I say.

“Better keep the ice packs ready—” Bobby is interrupted.

Simone grabs his arm. “Nah, you gotta change that.”

“But it’s my faaaaaaaaavorite,” he drags out the word. What are they talking about? “Can’t right now, anyways.” He holds up his fingers, slimy from the mayo in his sandwich.

I strain my ears over the clatter and echoes of the dining hall and realize Bobby is playing music.

Simone rolls her eyes and reaches into his pocket, retrieving the phone and changing the song. There are clearly zero personal space boundaries between these two, but I can’t figure out if I’m getting relationship vibes or not. As if by instinct, I glance down the table, and my gaze lands on Isaac. This whole meal he’s been in rapid-fire, one-handed sign conversation with two other counselors. I must be watching too obviously, because he turns my way and locks eyes with me. He smiles, and I quickly look away.



“You mind turning it up while you’re at it?” I ask Simone.

“I got you,” she says, adjusting the volume to the perfect point where I’ll be able to hear more of the music without it overpowering her and Bobby’s voices. As she leans back into her seat, the chair nearly topples over with the weight of her bag hanging over the back.

“Wow! What do you have in there?” I ask.

I don’t know why she’d want to carry around such a load all day. All we’re required to have is a flashlight, a first aid kit, and a waterproof Otterbox case to hold hearing aids and other devices during swim time.

She grabs the bag and shoves it under the table. “A few books. I’m close to done with one, but I’ve got two more to have a choice on which to pick next.”

“Oh, are they Braille?” I ask.

“Yep, for reading practice,” she confirms. “They’re massive.”

“And *dirty*,” Bobby adds.

“Shut up, Robert,” Simone says, but her mouth curls into a small grin. “There’s nothing wrong with reading romance, especially during the summer. They’re fun.”

“Hey, dinner wasn’t bad, right?” I say, eager to change the topic. “I remember eating a lot of cold nachos.”

“Yeah, that’s why we make trips to the store,” Simone says. “Or Mackie’s or Freddy’s.”

“Do counselors leave, like, every night?” There’s so much about this part of camp—the after-hours—that I want to explore.

“Gosh no,” Simone says, taking a sip from her water bottle, leaving me in suspense. “It’s literally, like, twenty-five minutes to get to any of those places.”



"We only have from nine thirty until midnight," Bobby says.  
"If we're not on duty."

"That makes sense," I say.

"And it's not like we make enough to be spending money all the time anyway," Bobby says.

Yeah . . . if I want to come back and work again as a full counselor next summer—that is, if there's a Gray Wolf to come back to—I'll definitely need to be earning a bit more so I don't go to college with an empty bank account.



"Hey, girl," Mackenzie says and signs, standing close to me as I refill my water bottle. She lets down the sleeves of her T-shirt, which she'd rolled up for dinner. Everyone else is getting ready to leave the dining hall. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm not sure yet." I don't know what to do at camp without a schedule structured down to the minute and an early bedtime. "What about you?"

"I'm going to go catch the rest of golden hour." She points outside. "Since we have free time during training week, I figured I'd make a bunch of extra videos to post in case the next two months get hectic."

"Videos?"

"For my YouTube channel I told you about! Gotta keep the sponsors, you know?" She nods for me to move aside so she can fill her bottle. "Do you want to guest in one? We could do a fun summer song. I can teach you all the words."

"No, *that's fine*," I sign, and casually walk away.

Just how much does she make with that crap? It sucks that someone like Mackenzie can make money while Deaf creators often struggle to get views. I can't think of a single reason why I would ever want to appear on Mackenzie's channel. I don't want people to assume my less-than-perfect signing skills mean I'm just another hearing person trying to use ASL for clout.

"Hey, junior counselor!" Ethan waves for my attention. I'm relieved, hoping I'm about to be included on some plans for tonight, but then I notice the bucket of soapy water beside him. "I got a first job for you to do," he says. "*Time to put you to work.*"

"Guess that's what I'm here for," I say, mimicking the sign he did. "*Work. Work. Work.*"

Ethan slides his hand down his face as I walk up to him and grab the bucket. "Lilah . . ."

I raise my hands, exasperated. "What now?"

"This is 'work.'" He demonstrates the sign. The right palm taps over the left, forming a small X shape. "This . . ." He repeats the sign the way I'd done it, a bigger, more vertical X with the wrists clashing together. "Is 'make out.'"

*Great.* I made another embarrassing mistake. Ethan taps his foot and continues to do the sign, moving around in a ridiculous fashion, loosely based on TikTok moves. I don't know if I'm ready for this much summer camp counselor enthusiasm.

But Isaac is.

He comes out of nowhere to join Ethan. So do the friends Isaac was eating dinner with, even though they have no idea why Ethan started dancing in the first place. There's so much energy, emotion, and personality that goes into ASL, and it clearly translates to their approach to this job. The way they

move around, eager to take up space. It's not just vocabulary and grammar that I need to learn, but also how to set my expressions and movements free.

I laugh to hide my awkwardness, and hurry to clear any remaining trash on the table so I don't get roped into it. I've already embarrassed myself in front of Isaac today. He doesn't need to witness my incoordination, too.

Stepping aside, I'm about to plunge my hand into the bucket to fish for the cleaning rag, when someone taps my shoulder.

It's Isaac. He takes off his baseball cap and runs a hand through his loose curls, then gives a cute little wave hello and points toward the door. Some of the others are heading out, probably back to the cabins, except Isaac's two friends who are waiting by the entrance for him. Isaac signs something to me, but it's too fast.

*"Sorry, slow, please,"* I sign.

He nods and signs again, slower. He's switched around the order of what he's trying to convey as well. But still, I only get one word.

"Lake?" I ask, repeating the sign. But I still can't piece together the rest, which he assumes from my concentrated stare.

He switches over to fingerspelling. *"B-r-e."*

Crap. I know each letter as I see it, but I'm so focused on identifying each one that once he reaches the end, I can't remember what I just saw so that I can string it all together into a word. So instead, I smile, nod, and step away.

But Isaac is persistent. He waves at me, shaking his head with narrowed eyes. I immediately regret what I just did. He's calling me out on it, and rightfully so. I can't believe I tried the "smile and nod" move here, of all places. I'm used to doing this to hearing people—shutting down conversations I can't

follow—but I’m positive that hearing people must do this to Isaac all the time when they can’t figure out what he’s trying to communicate, like I just did.

“Sorry,” I say and sign. “I’m tired. A lot of signing today. I’m still learning.”

He shakes his head reassuringly. “*It’s fine.*” He spells the word again, but now I’m frustrated and upset at myself because Isaac has to work this hard to try to talk to me. He’s so cute and sweet, but I can only talk to him with, like, a kindergarten-level comprehension.

“Ahh,” I say, theatrically shaking my head and staring at the ceiling. If it was anyone else, I wouldn’t be flustered. But I so badly want to communicate with Isaac better than I am right now. “*I’m sorry. I will practice all night. I’m awful.*”

But Isaac’s laughing. Not at me, but with me. He holds up a hand. Not in a stern way, because his fingers are relaxed and slightly curved. He’s simply motioning for me to wait.

He waves his arms, trying to get his friends’ attention, but they’re facing the other way. So Isaac lifts his foot high and stomps the floor, which gets them to look up. Isaac beckons them to walk over.

The white girl has one light-blue cochlear implant that sits behind her ear and is affixed to the side of her sleek blond ponytail. The Black guy, wearing a White Sox hat, nods hello. He most likely has a similar hearing loss to Isaac, since he’s voice-off and not using any devices.

“*This is L-i-l-a-h,*” Isaac signs to his friends. “*Bug.*”

He signs something else too fast to follow, and fortunately the girl steps in to interpret. “I’m Natasha,” she says with a strong Deaf accent. “And this is Jaden.”

*“Flower and Bat,”* Isaac chimes in with their camp sign names. He quickly tells Natasha something to relay to me. “We have a ‘first day of training week’ tradition,” she says, “where we hang out at the lake at night.”

“That’s fun,” I say.

Isaac and Jaden nod eagerly. Jaden signs something that I kind of catch, but Natasha is already interpreting for me anyway. “Not until it gets dark out. Are you coming?”

“Okay, maybe,” I say and sign. I’m sure it’ll be a good time, but what’s so exciting about it?

*“It’s great,”* Isaac signs. *“There’s a fun surprise, I promise.”*

Natasha starts to repeat, but I’m eager to reply and show Isaac I knew what he was signing. *“Really, a surprise?”* I smile. *“Okay-okay.”*

*“We’ll just ————— for now,”* Isaac signs.

“Chill,” Natasha says, observantly picking up on what I understood and what I need clarification on. But her voice is flat, like she really doesn’t care to be interpreting right now. Some Deaf people choose to “turn off their voice” and primarily sign, even if they still speak occasionally. If this is Natasha’s preference, it is a little unfair that she’s acting as our go-between right now just because she has the implant. I wish we could all just be signing.

The three of them start to walk to the door, signing together about something and not looping me in. I doubt Natasha is excluding me on purpose, but it’s hard not to feel left out.

“I need to finish cleaning first. I’ll catch up,” I shout after Natasha, my hands hanging helplessly at my sides.

“Cool,” she says, indifferent.

When Isaac turns to see why I'm not following them, she signs to him. Part of me hopes he'll offer to stay behind with me. Yet how would that go without an interpreter nearby? Isaac waves back but walks on with his friends.

I'd just slow down their conversation, anyway. I can tell that Isaac switches over to a more English-based sentence construction when communicating with me, which is easier to follow since I'm still unfamiliar with ASL grammar. But when Isaac, Natasha, and Jaden all use true ASL, I'm lost—picking up words here and there, but not truly comprehending yet. I want to get to their level as fast as I can.

I hurry to wipe the table, my head down and arm stretching as far as I can to reach the opposite side. I don't hear the side door open, but I catch a glimpse of its movement out of the corner of my eye. Some guy who looks to be a few years older than me walks in and starts rummaging through the leftover sandwiches. He wasn't at our staff meeting earlier. Gary or Ethan would've mentioned if someone was arriving late.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Sorry to frighten you," he calls out. There's something funny about his voice.

"Are you working here this summer?" I ask. He's clearly not one of the counselors.

"Yeah, just popping in to grab some supper."

He's average height with blue eyes. His swept-back blond hair is damp, and so are the sandals he's wearing, which leave a trail across the hardwood floor. But what my glance can't avoid is that he's not wearing a shirt underneath his unzipped jacket. There's a gold chain dangling at his chest, beneath two tattoos.

“Um.” I shake my head and look back at his face. “But you’re not a counselor?”

“No, I work down on ———.” He points to the window behind him and continues preparing his plate. I can’t remember the layout of the campgrounds well enough to have any idea where he gestured toward, and I couldn’t hear the word he said.

“What?” I ask, tilting my head.

“What?” he repeats, looking mildly offended, but I can’t tell why. “What’s it to you?”

“Well, I didn’t hear you . . .” I say, startled by his slight change in demeanor. “You know, ’cause we’re at a Deaf camp.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t think you were. I’ve never met a deaf person before.” He leans against the counter and takes a bite of his sandwich. “You should say ‘pardon,’ by the way.”

“Pardon?”

“Precisely. Instead of ‘what.’ It’s less aggressive, but then again, you *are* American.”

“Right . . .” I smile, amused by his playful banter despite the cultural misunderstanding. But I can’t hear him well enough to discern his accent. “And clearly you are *not*? What brings you here?”

“The Camp American program. I’m from England. The plan’s to work at Gray Wolf and then travel around the States once the job is done.”

“Interesting.” I didn’t know that program was a thing. It honestly feels like something out of a movie—bringing a cute British guy to the Midwest. “So what exactly is your job?”

“Lifeguard.” He puts his food down on the table I just cleaned, then pulls two chairs over from the stack along the wall.



*Is one of those for me?* I wouldn't mind hanging out and getting to know the lifeguard, but I should go find the counselors. "I wish I could stay, but I've got to get back," I say, gesturing to the spare chair.

"It's actually for my partner." He looks toward the side door as a second lifeguard walks in, stuffing a notebook into his back pocket and eyeing the food. "Ben! Hey, mate, took you forever. I already grabbed the best-looking pieces."

My face flushes red. I'm embarrassed that I assumed the chair was for me. "Right, there's two of you!" I say, picking up my backpack and taking a step back.

"Sorry, I can grab a seat for you if you want," the lifeguard says to me, glancing back at Ben.

"No, really, that's okay," I say, heading out. "I'll see you around."

And I will—at the lake, or the pool, or maybe even after-hours. I don't even know his name, but I can definitely tell this would be Kelsey's choice for a summer romance.

He calls after me, so I turn around. "Did you say something to me?"

"Yeah." He gives a patient smile. "I wanted to say I'm \_\_\_\_\_."

"What was that?" I lean forward, then smirk. "Pardon me?"

He chuckles and—oh gosh, was that a wink? "No worries," he says louder. "I'll turn up the volume. Just saying that I'm Oliver."

"Thank you." I blush again, grabbing my backpack straps with both hands. "I'm Lilah."

"Glad to meet you, Lilah."



There are communication barriers for me with both ASL and English. At least I'm more familiar with navigating the spoken ones. "And hey," I say. "If you're looking for something to do, we're all gonna be at the lake later." I nod to Ben as he takes a seat. "Both of you, of course."

"You are?" Oliver, looking a little alarmed, glances over to Ben to see if he knew about the plan. Oh, I guess lifeguards have to be at the lake whenever anyone is there. Ben just shrugs, and Oliver turns back to me. "All right. We'll see you there, Lilah."

"Right, bye!" I wave and dash out of the dining hall, amused at how easily disconcerted a British accent could make me. Seriously, a hot British lifeguard? Kelsey and Riley will be so jealous. I can't wait to text them later. There's so much about returning to Gray Wolf that I wasn't expecting.