



The
Promise

A TRAGIC ACCIDENT, A PARALYZED
BRIDE, AND THE POWER OF LOVE,
LOYALTY, AND FRIENDSHIP

RACHELLE FRIEDMAN

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A Tragic Accident, a Paralyzed Bride, and the Power of Love, Loyalty, and Friendship

RACHELLE FRIEDMAN



Guilford, Connecticut

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skirt!® is an attitude . . . spirited, independent, outspoken, serious, playful and irreverent, sometimes controversial, always passionate.

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To anyone dealing with a spinal cord injury and to all of those fighting tirelessly for a cure, this book is for you.



To my alma mater, East Carolina University, and the Pirate nation for all of your support. Once a Pirate, always a Pirate.

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When a soul is sent down from heaven it contains both male and female characteristics. The male elements enter the baby boy; the female elements enter the baby girl; and if they be worthy, God reunites them in marriage.

—THE ZOHAR

~~The names of all of the women by the pool the night of my accident, and of some of my friends, have been changed to protect their privacy. Some details about their identities have been slightly altered.~~

My head hit the bottom of the pool and I heard an excruciatingly loud crack. Whether it was my neck snapping or my head hitting the concrete floor, I'm not really sure. I just remember that sound above all else in that moment. My eyes were open underwater, but I couldn't process what was happening. I simply floated, suspended in time. In those few seconds I didn't see a flash before my eyes. I didn't see a rush of memories. I felt frozen, as if someone had hit a pause button. I couldn't figure out anything. That crack was the only thing I heard.

When you're underwater it's usually so quiet and peaceful. But this moment didn't feel peaceful—I simply felt stuck. I felt no panic or even fear. No gasping for air and taking in water. Just my frozen mind. My body froze, too. I knew I was in water, but I couldn't feel the wetness of it; that was the strangest thing. My mind—knowing I was immersed—and my body weren't syncing up. I couldn't feel anything. I was just floating, still and nearly lifeless, toward the surface.

I had no idea when I crawled out of bed that morning that it would be the last time I'd be able to do it on my own, without help from another person. My world was about to change, as was that of my fiancé and parents.

There was another life that would unexpectedly be robbed of its joy, its ability to laugh, and it would be rocked to the core, maybe more so than mine.

Meeting the One

OUR PLAN WAS TO HAVE EVERYTHING WE EVER WANTED: THE perfect house, a rich and happy marriage, a baby boy and a baby girl. We saw the house as the foundation of our goals and dreams. In the summer of 2009, Chris and I bought it together; it's where we were going to live our wonderfully and carefully planned life, in Knightdale, North Carolina, a small town three hours from where I grew up in Virginia Beach.

It was the Friday of my bachelorette weekend, a month before my wedding. We were home in the morning before work, scrambling to take off for fun but separate celebratory weekends. Chris was packing for his guys' camping trip. He was loading his fishing gear and clothing into the car: rods and reels, tents, all of the things you need to camp. It was all neutral colors—browns, beiges, and greens—we certainly couldn't have been packing for two more opposite events. I was preparing for a serious girly weekend, and he was getting ready for an ultra-guy weekend of roughing it.

My friend Britney and I had gone shopping days beforehand for a fun white dress I'd wear the next evening, and I was carefully packing my dress, curling iron, makeup, and all that I'd need to prime and party the next night. I was so worried I'd forget something, I kept reviewing what I had laid out. I was so consumed by all of the little details that were a big deal to me at the time and seemed so important. None of it turned out to be all that important in the days that followed.

Chris left before me that morning and made a point to kiss me good-bye. He was leaving for his camping trip straight from work, so I wouldn't see him until that Sunday night.

"I love you. Be safe," he said.

"I love you, too," I responded.

He went to work and so did I.

I was completely unaware it would be my last day of work ever. I was a program coordinator at an active seniors facility, and I had planned a Senior Prom for the members of the center. I dressed up in a satin polka dot dress that flared out when I twirled. I had the residents line dancing and slow dancing, and I remember dancing so hard myself. It was a fun morning. One of the couples was celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. We played a special love song for them and had them take the floor like it was their first dance. I remember looking at them and thinking, "I can't wait for this to be Chris and me." I imagined our first dance at our wedding and years of growing old together. It was a magical vision.

When I arrived home later that day, I changed out of the polka dot dress and threw on some yoga clothes for the long car ride back to my hometown. Britney picked me up that afternoon. When I left our beautiful home on May 21, 2010, I left a few dishes in the sink, the bed unmade, and a bunch of outfits on the floor that I had torn out of my closet to pack and never put back. I figured I'd clean up when I returned home. I was too excited to waste time. I had set my bag right at the door, so I could just zip in and grab it after work.

Britney and I headed to my grandma's house for our big Saturday. It's the place I always go when I head to my hometown. It's easier there. My room at my mom and dad's had been turned into a storage office, but my grandma had a real room for me still, so I liked it there. I was celebrating with my girlfriends; Chris was celebrating with his dad. Soon, we'd be husband and wife, a day I'd waited for my entire life.



Chris and I met at East Carolina University in Greenville at a party in 2004, during my freshman year. It was October, and Halloween was a serious weeklong affair there. In fact, it's apparently one of the biggest Hallows' Eve celebrations in the country, almost like a mini Mardi Gras. This was a Friday night, October 29. But two days later, on Halloween night, all the streets would be full of people shoulder to shoulder.

It was an outdoor party, part of the festivities that we'd heard about through the grapevine. None of my dorm mates in Tyler Hall knew the guys hosting it, but we had heard it would be fun. We all got ready together, trying on a bunch of different outfits, clothes scattered everywhere. I settled on light-colored capri jeans, a brown silky halter top, and some dangly turquoise earrings. I had my hair pulled sort of halfway back, so that you could see my jewelry.

My roommate, two other girls, and I set out in the early evening to find the place, which was all the way across campus, but we made a stop along the way. The main part of campus was designed like a square, with everything essentially no more than one mile away. I lived on College Hill, across from the main campus. We stopped at a guy friend's place first, and we began playing beer pong. With a few more people in our crowd, we headed to the party, located close to downtown Greenville. We knew we were getting close as we walked, because we could hear the din of the party blocks away. There was one loud constant noise. We walked around to the backyard, which was full of people—every square inch covered. This was by far the biggest party I'd ever attended.

My friends and I edged our way through the crowd and found our way into the house; we bought vodka and orange juice drinks before heading back outside. I saw this guy Mike that my roommate had already met, and we were all introduced to his two roommates, Chris and Tom. I thought Mike was really cute when I saw him standing there. My roommate Mary was interested in Mike, too.

I kind of flirted with all three of them that night. I was a flirtatious girl then, and it was fun to have that attention. We were all chatting and laughing over drinks. Mike, it turned out, was Chris's cousin and roommate, and as we were all standing there talking, I couldn't stop thinking about how cute Mike was. I didn't notice Chris as much, because I was so drawn to Mike initially. I was talking to the group of them really, not just one person. We talked for a while, getting bumped around by passing partygoers. Mike headed through the crowds with my roommate, so they could chat with some other people. I wound up sort of isolated, alone with just Chris at that point. Since the music was playing and I loved randomly teaching people to salsa dance, I grabbed Chris's hand.

"C'mon, let's dance. I'll show you how."

He was totally up for it. It was crowded, so we were moving in a tiny space as we danced.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

“Virginia Beach,” he said.

“Me, too!”

I had been drinking and, after a couple of songs, took a break. I turned to him and said, “So, where are you from?”

He answered again. We laugh about this, but I asked him twice more that night. He finally said, “The same place you are from!”

Chris and Tom and I all left the party together at the end of the night. Although our other friends headed straight back to Mike’s place, we went to Alfredo’s to get pizza. There was a standing joke in Greenville that the pizza was edible at this place only if you had been drinking. We waited for what seemed like an hour for our pizza, then headed back to Mike’s to hang out for a few more hours, all of us just talking and laughing about the night. This was my freshman year, and looking back I realize that it was the most important night of my life.

Like many of those college crushes, my roommate was over Mike by sunrise. He must have done something to turn her off. Back in our dorm I asked her, “Do you mind if I go for Mike?”

“Go for it,” she said.

We hung out again on Halloween, two nights later. Mike and I were flirting with each other and even holding hands, but it didn’t go anywhere beyond that night.

But by December that year, Chris and I were buddies. I had a lot of guy friends then, so I didn’t think much of it. We were both going home for the holidays, and he offered to give me a ride. He picked me up in his Buick Le Sabre. We lived about two and a half hours away from school, both from the same town (as we’d by now laughed about many times). We talked about a lot of things on the drive, but honestly, since I wasn’t even remotely thinking about him romantically, I don’t remember much of the discussion.

To me, it was just a ride home. But I do recall that he implied he was having problems with his girlfriend, that things hadn’t really been the same with the two of them. I wasn’t in a place to give advice, since I hadn’t ever been in a serious relationship in my life. He said that he was looking forward to a week apart from her to think things through. The term “breakup” wasn’t a part of our conversation, but he suggested they’d assess things when they returned to school in the New Year. I may not have known much about relationships, but I could tell he wasn’t happy. As his friend, his happiness was all I wanted for him.

While I didn’t have those kinds of special feelings about Chris, I was struck immediately by the fact that he was a really awesome, stand-up guy. It was something you could just tell, especially as we rode together that day and I listened to him talk. It sounds so corny and general, but it became obvious to me that Chris was a crazily honest and extremely genuine person. I could tell from the very beginning that he would never intentionally hurt someone, or purposely lie or be mean. He was just always so nice.

He took me to my house, and that’s when we figured out how close we lived to each other. I knew I was in Virginia Beach, but I had never bothered to ask him where exactly. So when I gave him directions to my grandmother’s house, we were shocked that his home was literally in the same neighborhood, and we could have walked to each other’s houses. We did learn that our paths had

crossed before college. We had the same dentist—my uncle. Chris had been to my dad's army-navy surplus store, too. Basically, he'd met several members of my family before ever meeting me. I used to go to the pool in the community when I was little, in the summers, and he said he was there every day for years, as was I, starting at age three. Chris was four years older than me, a big difference then. We're not sure if we played together, but we might have. Virginia Beach is not a small place. It's not a big city, but it's spread out, so to discover we'd been in the same neighborhood was pretty crazy.

He helped me bring my stuff inside and met my grandma for the first time, and she'll tell you to this day that she never saw me look at a guy like that before, that she saw our future right there. She saw it well before I did. I didn't see that at all.

From Friend to Soul Mate

I JUMPED OUT OF BED THE NEXT MORNING, SO EXCITED THINKING about the bachelorette day ahead. My friend Britney had stayed overnight with me at my grandma's house in Virginia Beach. It was like a sleepover. We stayed in one room, and my grandma made us my favorite breakfast that morning: pancakes and scrambled eggs.

There was so much to do. My day was jam-packed with plans and appointments and last-minute shopping. I was getting my final fitting for my wedding dress; having lunch with my mom, Bubba (my dad's mom), and Britney; and then heading off to celebrate my pending wedding with my other friends. Lauren was still making her way to town, and the other girls were busy prepping and planning the night ahead, so they didn't join us for lunch. It was my bachelorette party. I was going to marry my Prince Charming, the man of my dreams: Chris Chapman. This day was all part of the celebration leading up to that.

I was excited to hang out with this group of girls because we would all be going out together for the first time. They knew of each other, but we hadn't spent too much time together as a group before. Lauren, Samantha, Carly, and Britney—all from different periods of my life—would finally really get to know each other and spend time together to celebrate with me. Just the five of us. But before the evening's festivities, the group from lunch went to the bridal shop, so that I could try on my wedding dress for the very last fitting.

I had gone shopping for my wedding dress two weeks after I got engaged. All the girls were there, and each one went and grabbed a dress off the rack. Lauren pulled the one I ultimately chose. It was just beautiful. I tried on only four, but I fell in love with that one immediately. It was a strapless dress corseted at the top and laced down the back. The skirt flowed from there, and it had an incredible train. My mom had seen it when I first picked it out, but when she looked at me in it all fitted and ready to wear, she was overjoyed. She said it looked like it was made just for me. She had wanted to buy it for me and I accepted, knowing how happy it made her to do that, even though she'd have to work very hard to do so. Everyone thought it was beautiful.

The bridal shop finished some of the alterations, and then we all headed out for a quick lunch at Applebee's in town. I brought my veil and some flowers with me. After lunch we went to a local hair salon for a trial on how I'd wear my hair on my wedding day. We tried updos and all down, but in the end, we decided that curls, with half pulled up along the sides, would be best. I left with that look, which was great because I'd wear it out for the party that evening.

The biggest stress of the day was finding the right shoes for the bachelorette night. I wanted the perfect white high heels, or else I felt like the entire outfit would be ruined. I was sort of frantic that I wouldn't find what I had in mind: really high stilettos, strappy and white, of course. I wound up finding the perfect pair, not knowing that even the ideal shoes couldn't change the outcome of the

night.

Chris and I had made it through the entire spring semester in 2005 without dating, but our friendship had grown really deep. He had become my very best friend. His relationship with his girlfriend had withered by then, and by April they'd broken up. He and I spent a lot of time together, but I didn't think anything of it beyond us being friends.

In early June of that year, he invited me to his family's vacation house on Lake Gaston by myself. We were just friends, but I knew at this point that he liked me. It was a little awkward, but I wanted to go because I thought it would be fun, and it was not too weird because we had been hanging out all the time. I remember it was really hot around that time. I was wearing a little red bikini, sunbathing on the dock, which was down a hill a bit from the house. It was over water, connecting the house to the boathouse. The main house was a rustic place—wood, painted brown, not stained. It was on a street called Happy Valley, which was fitting because it was a really happy place. It was one of the original houses built on the lake. Chris's grandfather had built it with his bare hands, and Chris's dad had grown up spending summers at the lake house.

They had two rules at the house: You could have anything you wanted, but you had to get yourself, and there was no skinny-dipping before ten o'clock at night. It was sweet because this house, which had sort of a main section and then some other newer additions, was a throwback surrounded by other large modern houses that were built later. It sat on a little cove, overlooking the main lake. The streets were eventually all paved, but leading up to the house was a long, straight gravel drive. You could smell the water and hear the ripples lapping up against the dock. I later learned that as I lay there that day, listening to the peaceful sound of the water, Chris was checking me out from the back deck as I caught some sun in my little bikini. I wasn't trying to taunt him, but I guess I should have known that wearing a red string bikini in front of a guy with a crush wasn't entirely innocent.

I was still wearing that same bikini when we went out on their boat that afternoon, and that's when Chris shifted his approach from staring from afar to pursuing me. We were on the boat on the lake, and he let me drive. He sat behind me and helped me steer. I'd never driven a boat before, and it was calming to have him guiding me. It felt protective and sweet. He was getting closer to me than maybe he ever had before, and then he set his hand on my thigh. It wasn't completely smooth or subtle, but it wasn't overt, either; he wasn't rubbing it in a sexual way, but it was for sure not the way a friend would touch another friend. I didn't know how to react. It was how a boy touched a girl, and I felt panicked. He left his hand on my leg for a long time; that's how I knew. It was clearly flirtatious, but all new to me.

A couple of weekends later, a group of us went to the lake, including his cousin and some of our other friends. He decided to take me for a walk around the streets in the lake neighborhood, just the two of us, and I remember him holding my hand. It was completely foreign to me, and I was so nervous. I had held a guy's hand before, but not like this, not so tenderly, and definitely not in a situation like this one that was brewing with feelings. I didn't know what it meant or what to do about it, other than to simply hold it back. I liked it, I guess. It felt natural and fun to be holding his hand.

I was wearing a bathing suit, board shorts, and a T-shirt. I hadn't gotten extra dolled up or anything. I was just wearing what I normally wore in the summer. I grew up at the beach, so I was always wearing bikinis. The walk was definitely awkward, but I think I picked up on his motives and panicked just a bit again.

"Everyone we know is in a relationship that sucks, don't you think?" I blurted out for no reason other than nerves. I was thinking things and just saying them without censoring myself at all.

"I guess," he said.

"It scares me. I don't really see many relationships going so well. And then when these people break up, what's left? They can't even be friends anymore. It makes you really think, you know?"

"Yeah," he said.

This guy had basically taken me on a walk to ask me out, and here I was talking about these horrible relationships and how I was scared of them.

We were nearly ending our walk and almost back at his house when he finally found the courage to ask me the question he'd been saving. We stopped halfway up the driveway, and he asked, "Do you see yourself in a relationship ever?"

I was honest. I said, "Yeah." That's it. That's all I said.

Then he grew a little braver and asked, "Do you see yourself in a relationship with me?" He said it like it was an official question that he'd been working on for a while. He didn't ask me out exactly, just inquired about our potential future.

I said, "Yes." I paused for just a second and said, "But I'm really scared." By then my head was spinning. We continued walking at that point, and my head swirled with fear. We were roommates at college for the summer and we were best friends. I didn't want to give up either of those things. I kept thinking, *What if it doesn't work out?* When we walked around the house on the deck, everyone was hanging out, and I knew we needed more time to talk.

We stole a few more minutes away from the crowd by continuing past them all and slipping onto the back part of the deck for privacy. I tried to explain myself, but I just started talking in circles. I told him I was confused, and he said he could tell. I then took my second "yes" back in a way. I could feel myself breaking his heart, but I couldn't stop rambling about my fears.

"I don't know right now. But that doesn't mean never," I said. "I'm just scared right now."

He didn't say anything. He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

I spent the rest of the evening wishing I could take back all of my babbling. What Chris had done, what he had said, was the sweetest gesture ever. But there were so many people around, and I was too afraid of everything happening so quickly.

That night, we actually shared a bed. We didn't cuddle or do anything at all; the house was so full of people, and it seemed the obvious plan that we would bunk together. All night I thought about what he had said and the kiss on my forehead.

We wound up being separated that next week, so my fear and what he had said just lingered unresolved. I returned to Greenville, and he went to Raleigh to see his cousin Mike. While Chris was there Mike called and told me that he had a friend that he thought would really hit it off with me, that we would be a good match. Worse, there was another girl at the house with them that Mike wanted to

set Chris up with. I thought, *I've blown it all with Chris.*

It was an awful week. I was afraid of moving forward with Chris, but then I was suddenly scared of losing him, too. And I was jealous at the same time, which really surprised me. That was a big realization for me. It didn't change the terror of being nineteen years old and realizing that maybe I was falling for my future husband, or worrying that I'd fallen for my best friend but would lose both him and his friendship in the end. It was a weird pull, balancing commitment with potential for loss. There was an indescribable tug of war inside of me.

At some point midweek I took Tom aside in his room to help me sort things out in my head. He was also our summer roommate, and so he'd seen the progression of things.

"I don't know what to do," I said.

"I think you should just do it, go for it," he said.

"I know. I'm nervous, though."

"Chris could be your future husband," he said. He was half joking, I think.

"Don't say that. You're freaking me out!"

"He could be, though," he said.

"I know. But it scares me."

Ultimately, when I thought it through, I realized it was almost inevitable we'd at least give it a go and try to be together, mainly because besides fear, I couldn't make the argument for not being with Chris. He was a perfect guy. He was honest and genuine, we got along, and we both liked the same things—going out, outdoor stuff, and travel. We were both ECU Pirates fans, which was important. We had everything in common, but I had never had a boyfriend, I didn't know how this was all supposed to work, and I didn't want the good stuff to end if the romance fizzled.

The bigger fear, of course, was that I'd messed it all up and it was too late. That I'd let this great guy slip on by.

The Bachelorette Party

AFTER MY HAIR WAS SET AND MY PERFECT SHOES PURCHASED, Britney and I headed over to Carly's house for the evening festivities, but I had to wait in the car for a few minutes because apparently the girls were still decorating outside. I was thrilled to be having a bachelorette party in my honor. This was one of those things we all thought about as a teen—part of the entire wedding celebration—and it was with friends. I really enjoyed being around.

It was early, around five o'clock or so, and the weather was perfect, with that late spring smell in the air, when you know summer and all its excitement are fast approaching. I was wearing the casual clothes I'd had lunch in, but I had the great dress with me to change into for later that night—white, like the one I'd wear on my wedding day. But this one was fun, cute, and short. I was giddy. The four girls—Carly, Lauren, Britney, and Samantha—were going to wear a shade of purple, just like they'd wear for the wedding. Purple was one of my school colors and my favorite color, too.

All of these girls were from such different walks of my life. Lauren was my oldest friend. We'd met when we were two years old, when our brothers were in Boy Scouts together. She was the sister I never had. She lived in Charlotte now, but she was the kind of friend where no matter how much time had passed, it didn't matter; we picked up right where we had left off. We used to make videos together of us dancing and acting silly. Her mom had a whole stack of VHS tapes of us. We took acting lessons together and used to make big plans to live on a farm with a bunch of horses.

Carly and I met in middle school when I was twelve. She ended up going to a different high school, but we stayed friends. We loved to sing together. Carly was a phenomenal musician, great at both piano and guitar. We loved showing off by putting shows on for our friends.

I met Samantha through Carly in freshman year of high school, when Carly brought me to a birthday party. Samantha and I didn't get along right away. She thought I was a dork, and I thought she was a snob. We both judged too quickly. We slowly warmed up to each other and grew closer over the summer. I got to know her really well when we worked together at the beach. We used to have so much fun. Our one job was basically to sit there, a little ways apart from each other on the beach, and wait for people to come and rent stuff from us. We each had our own station, and although we stayed extremely busy, it was still boring work. Sometimes we would sneak away and go bodyboarding for a few minutes in the middle of our shift to break up the monotony. Of course, we'd return to shambles—people using umbrellas they hadn't paid for and such—and we'd have to backtrack to make up for the time. To liven it all up, we made a book. We were just far enough apart that we couldn't sit and talk to each other. So we made this book and we'd write funny things in it—well, things that we thought were funny—and then we'd run it back and forth across the sand. That's how we communicated all day.

We would write things like how cute some of the beach boys were. We talked about going dancing

We were both dancing queens and we'd turned eighteen around the same time, so we could finally go dancing at the clubs downtown at night. Our senior year we went out all the time together on weekends.

So all of the other lifeguards knew about the book and they wanted it. I remember one asking "What's in the book?"

As he was asking I wrote his name in it, big so he could see. Then he kept asking if he could see it. It was fun. It kept us entertained as we sat under an umbrella in a beach chair all day.

Britney and I met in 2009. Her boyfriend and Chris had played ball at the university together. We were in the clubhouse playing pool one night right after college, both living in the same apartment complex. She and her boyfriend had recently graduated, too. It was practically the first week out of school for all of us. Chris and her boyfriend bumped into each other and introduced us. It was a quick encounter and I didn't think much of it at the time, nor did she obviously, as we didn't say much more than hello to each other. A week later, I saw a girl washing "Go ECU!" paint off the side of her car. Drawn to a fellow Pirate fan, I approached, hoping to make a new friend. I began talking and then a minute in, I realized it was Britney. After that we kept bumping into each other. We'd go to each other's apartments and out in downtown Raleigh frequently. It was so nice to have a girlfriend close by.

Britney wasn't in the bridal party, but she was joining our celebration. There were a few more girls who were supposed to come out with us, but they wound up not being able to make it that night, so it was just the five of us. At the time, Britney wasn't a bridesmaid because another friend of mine, Sandra, was in the wedding. But that friend and I had drifted apart, and I wished I could have had Britney in my wedding party because we'd grown so close. Unfortunately, we couldn't get another dress to match, and I couldn't very well ask the other friend to step aside and give up her dress for no reason.

When they finally let me in that night at Carly's, I felt so happy to be with them. They had hung pink banners everywhere and decorated outside beautifully. They were excited to surprise me with the decorations. The patio looked nice, all done up. We sat under an umbrella around a table catching up and enjoying the weather. We grilled some burgers and hot dogs and had a little bit of champagne to kick off the night. The limo would arrive much later to take us dancing. The girls had set up games on the deck, some of them too racy to mention, but ultimately we never played any of them, because we talked too much.

Britney had us in hysterics. She was telling us all how she couldn't go to the bathroom anywhere other than at home, no matter where she was—it was a genuine phobia. She relayed a story about how she went on vacation with her boyfriend for the first time to his family's house, and it was small and she just couldn't relieve herself. She was afraid of people hearing it. She's always had to jump through hoops to avoid using public restrooms, so she often made us laugh with her extraordinary stories.

At some point in the evening, just for a few minutes, my parents stopped by to give me a hug and say hello. It was a very significant hug, though none of us had any idea how significant. It would be the last time they'd see me stand . . . or give me a hug at eye level.

After dinner I was sitting on Lauren's lap, reminiscing.

“How crazy is it that we were just Girl Scouts, like yesterday, playing softball and basketball together, and now we’re getting married within a month of each other?” she asked.

“I know. Soon, we’ll both be married old ladies,” I replied.

“But it’s cool how our lives have always been parallel for so long. We even used to have joint birthday parties together! Now basically weddings, too.”

As we toasted, clinking glasses, I thought about how lucky I was to have such awesome friends to celebrate with, and I was really looking forward to the rest of the evening. We all got along that night and it was one of those rare times when everyone just became fast friends. It was almost an instant connection. I had no way of knowing as we talked exactly how important and significant that group friendship was about to become. We discussed the fact that it was actually kind of unusual that we all got along so well, with only me as the common thread. Someone made the point that everyone was so welcoming and how rare that was these days. In an eerie way, even before an unspoken bond was formed, the promise of continued friendship was apparent. This was a good group of people, period.



In 2002, in tenth grade at my private school, I joined the varsity cheerleading squad. The girls on the team did not like me because I wasn’t Miss Popular. They would leave me out of everything, including dinners before games. I’d remain at school the entire time in between practice and the start of a game, because I couldn’t drive yet. I remember feeling restricted and stuck. Rarely did someone step up and be mean to my face, but behind my back they were awful. The other cheerleaders were always whispering about me, which made it hard for me to defend myself. Looking back now, I really wish I had stood up to them. I did prevail in a sense, though, because that year I was awarded MVP cheerleader, and man, were they pissed. No one said congrats. When I heard my name announced, I felt that all of the tears they’d caused me were worth it. I wasn’t brave enough to stand up for myself back then.

That was the same summer I started working at the beach with some friends, renting out umbrellas. We were such beach bums and would go bodyboarding for hours. We partied with the lifeguards every week, but the most I ever drank was three or four Mike’s Hard Lemonades. That was when I first tried alcohol. I was actually kind of a goody-goody, and I think it annoyed my friends at school, but these girls didn’t care.

I really came out of my shell around then. I’m not sure what changed, but for the first time I felt beautiful, sexy, fun, and popular. I wished I could have felt like that at school, but around the girls there I never really did. It took meeting people like Carly and Samantha to remind me of how friendships were supposed to be, how people were supposed to treat each other. By senior year I had decided to change high schools and graduate elsewhere, because I didn’t want to deal with the drama anymore at the private school.



After dinner and a lot of laughter, we all dolled ourselves up, ready to hit the clubs. It was about eight o’clock, and we were excited to go out dancing. I felt like I was in my college dorm room, all of us in one bathroom, giggling and applying our makeup, cracking jokes about how nicely we had cleaned up

I wore my white satin dress, and they all slipped on their various shades of purple and matching black belts. My favorite dance music was Britney Spears, so as a treat Samantha created a really cool mix of all of her songs, which we planned to blare in the limo.



After about an hour we started taking pictures. Carly's mom took pictures of the group of us, and we all laughed the entire time. The limo was picking us up at ten. Just before we were leaving, we went down to the kitchen and mixed up this crazy red drink concoction to take with us while we headed from club to club. A black stretch limo pulled up in front of the house, and we jumped in with our red drinks ready for a fun night. At one point while we were driving around, I managed to spill the red drink on my white dress. Of course, I was the only one spilling and the only one in white, so it couldn't have felt more disastrous at the time. As I sat there soaked down the front and about to freak out, Lauren yelled up to the driver, "Stop at the next Rite Aid you see."

Within a couple of minutes, he pulled over. Britney and Lauren ran inside, bought five bleach pens, and went to town on the dress. After about ten minutes of intense scrubbing and rubbing, we all looked down and agreed the cleanup had worked. Tragedy had been averted. Later, looking at the dress in the light, I could see that it was still totally stained. I had a pink sash on that said "Bachelorette," so maybe that hid it or helped it blend a little. And ultimately it didn't matter at all.

We went to clubs all over town, and it was so cool pulling up in a limo. We stepped out like we were total rock stars. It was an incredible feeling, being treated to such a decadent night with such great people. But I wasn't quite graceful enough to live up to my pretend status. At the second club everyone poured out of the car. We headed up to the second floor, making our way to the upper deck. We reached the top, and everyone looked our way to acknowledge that a bachelorette party had arrived. Right in that moment, the heel of my shoe got stuck between the wooden deck boards. My

shoe stayed, I didn't, and I fell almost facedown, sprawled out in front of everyone in line. We all thought it was the most hilarious thing that ever could have happened, and we laughed about it as they helped me up. I cheered loudly with them to play it off as cool as possible.

We danced all night, and at one o'clock in the morning, we climbed into the limo to head back home. We had to carry our shoes at this point, because our feet were so sore from the high heels. We had been drinking, but we weren't really drunk. We were sober enough to know when to go home. I've thought a lot about the timing of this night and wondered how it could have gone differently. If I had gotten drunk, would I have gone right to sleep when I got back to Carly's house? If we'd gone to one more club, would we have been too tired for the next series of events? I've thought about how and when we decided to call the night and head home and how that timing determined the outcome of the rest of my life.

The Accident

LAUREN AND I USED TO DREAM OF BEING MERMAIDS WHEN WE were little and argue over who got to be Ariel. Every Sunday, my dad, Larry, used to take me to a cafeteria for breakfast where they had a fountain. I always ask for two pennies to make a wish. I'd use one to wish I was a mermaid, but because I felt that was a selfish wish, I always used the second penny to wish for world peace.

Once we were all danced out, Lauren suggested we take a swim when we returned to Carly's house. We all raced out of the limo and ran upstairs to change into our bathing suits. The night had been so much fun. We had talked a lot about Chris and our future and boys they liked, too. These girls had heard it all before, but part of the fun of the night was getting all the attention as a bride-to-be, and we talked about not only how Chris and I ultimately got together after all my crazy fears but also how we almost didn't.



During that week when Chris and I were apart, before we became a couple, all I could think about was how I wanted to take back everything I had said. I wanted to replace "No, I don't want to date you" with "Oh, I've changed my mind because there is this new girl coming along for you and I don't want to miss out on the greatest thing ever." But I just couldn't yet.

The girl and the guy that Mike had planned for us both did visit, but nothing came of it for either me or Chris. Thankfully. Finally, after that week of being apart, we both wound up at Virginia Beach, and that entire time I could think of nothing else but Chris and our future together. I even had trouble sleeping. I was obsessed with figuring out what my feelings meant and why I had him on my mind.

I would think over and over again in my head, *What do I do? What do I do?* I couldn't focus on anything else. That's when it became obvious that we had to remain good friends *and* become a couple. Both were allowed. Both could work. It took me some time to figure out that we could do both but when I did I knew I'd had a life-altering epiphany. Embracing one didn't mean giving up the other. I think I knew, or at least hoped, that it was going to work out and that ultimately I wouldn't have to sacrifice friendship for love, because we would survive on both levels. I felt it in my gut, and the decision felt peaceful and right.

We arranged to meet, and he picked me up at midnight and then we drove to the oceanfront. We wound up at 65th Street, and we sat on the beach cuddling. I was kind of clingy with him because I hadn't seen him, and I remember thinking, *I am just going to have to ask him because he's definitely not going to re-ask me.*

We were sitting there alone, with a bright moon lighting up the beach, and I said, "We need to talk." I am pretty sure a guy never wants to hear those words, but I said them anyway. He looked worried that much I could tell. Still, I looked at him and said, "I thought about it a lot this week, and I'm ready for us to move forward. I want to be with you."

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