





a lump that made it impossible to swallow.

"Do you promise?" she asked. I remembered the way I had once thought of her as strong and funny and smart and wild and carefree. She would be a superstar, be stunning, dazzle the world the way she had dazzled me. Of course she wouldn't die. Of course I promised her.

I visited her in the hospital, bringing cards from her classmates and flowers from teachers and more flowers from neighbors and friends of my parents. I read to her—not that she couldn't read, she just wanted me to do it. She was fed intravenously, but sometimes she vomited anyway. My parents waited in the lounge, sitting stiffly on the vinyl seats. My mother teetered back and forth when she stood, and when she talked to Corie, the only time she didn't sound like a kindergarten teacher was when she said "I love you."

Corie died in July, while I sat in the den and watched a soap opera and tried to decide whether I should get my hair cut. She died even though I had promised her she wouldn't, and even though she had believed me. A hundred times a day, my mother said, "If only we had gotten help for her sooner . . ." and my father patted her gently. At the funeral, a lady crooned a hymn that Corie would not have been listening to. She would have been looking away, making eye contact with a man who was twenty-five, thinking of herself, thinking of tomorrow.

My face became swollen with the tears. Arms were wrapped around me, arms of hundreds of people whose faces I barely noticed. "Poor young Corie," they said, and, in response, I cried a fresh set of tears, my nose dripping, more faceless people stuffing tissues into my fists. I waited for an end, for the finale, but there never was one. There is only what Corie left behind: the dance clothes, her stupid youth, her curly hair, and me, her younger sister. ★

### Queen of Spades

"Watch out for jellyfish," Sashie will yell when we bang open the screen door. We'll be carrying pails, towels around our necks, and sucking Popsicles if any are left from the night before. "And splinters," calls Aunt Terry. Jace will wave one arm in the air to let them know she heard, and then we'll go down to the dock.

Sometimes snakes are curled up by the bushes. We have to pass them because the bushes are next to the stone path that leads to the dock. They're usually long, black, pretty gross, but if you walk fast you can just pretend they're not there. When we were here

last year, Sashie saw a snake her second day and she never went outside again. I'm not joking. Jace and I counted the number of times she left the house and it came to eleven. That includes going out to dinner, once to McDonald's and twice to Baby's for softshell crabs.

I think even Donald is less scared than Sashie, and he's seven. Firstly, Sashie doesn't like being out



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in the country. She's not exactly what you'd call a city girl, but she likes going to movies, shops, whatever. Plus, she thinks she's too skinny and refuses to swim. About two years ago—we would never do this now—Jace and I took her bras out of her bureau and tried them on. Jace was kind of pudgy then and I had to buckle her in and then one of the straps popped because we had started laughing so hard. Just then, Sashie walked in. I almost died! Sashie was wearing this fancy purple velvet thing, it was Christmas, and her face turned about the same color as the dress. "Get out of here, you little brats!" she yelled, and of course, we did.

When we got out in the hall, Jace said, "Shut up, Miss Ironing Board." We started giggling again; I mean, it was pretty funny. But Sashie hadn't shut her door all the way and heard us. She told all the parents, and Jace and I had to go to bed at 9:00, even though it was Christmas Eve.

Since then, Sashie hasn't developed much, if you get what I mean. She grew her hair longer, though, which I told her looks nice. She stared at me all funny, as if to say, "Oh, yeah?" She's impossible to compliment, I swear. The thing that gets Jace and me the worst is how Sashie pretends to be perfect. She won't even admit that she's afraid of jellyfish and snakes and us seeing her dumb little body in a swimsuit. When Donald asks why she won't come to the dock, she says in a purring voice, "Oh, I like to sit in the kitchen and talk to Mom."

That's a joke and a half because everyone knows that Sashie likes my mother better than she likes her own. I've heard her say, "Aunt Paula, you understand me so perfectly." My mom says these corny things like, "You're such a great girl," or "You're my favorite niece." (Too bad for Jace, I guess.) All Sashie talks about to Aunt Terry is can she pleeeeeease go to