

Silence

for Val

Ariel Anderson had the most beautiful voice in Hampstead Township. Some said she had the best voice in all of Massachusetts, but that was mere opinion. That she had the best voice in Hampstead was definitely fact. She was given solos in school concerts and church choirs as a matter of course. She sang at local sporting events with such regularity that she was as much a part of the experience as beer-soaked hot dogs and crushing defeats. The beauty of her voice was such a given that no one really even talked about it - it would be like mentioning that the sun was bright or, oh, did anyone notice today that the sky was blue?

The town's nonchalant attitude towards her heavenly voice did not bother Ariel. Although she loved to sing, she did not seek out attention, preferring instead to remain on the sidelines, making sarcastic comments to her best friend. Too much attention made her forget herself, made her blush and trip over things. The only thing that pushed her behind that shyness was the joy she felt when she sang.

So despite her incredible talent, Ariel lived a pretty normal life. Until one day, in the middle of her freshman year of high school, when something happened. It was the single worst thing that could ever happen to a girl.

She fell in love.

"Who is *that*?" asked Ariel's best friend, Sebastian. He pointed to a boy who was standing down the hall, his hands stuffed into his pockets and a bored look on his face.

"I don't know," said Ariel, distracted. She'd forgotten to do her World History homework, *again*, and now she had a worksheet propped up on the wall, her pencil poking holes in the paper as she struggled to answer question four, the causes of the fall of the Roman empire.

"You didn't even look at him!"

Ariel grinned. "You're looking enough for the both of us."

"Can you blame me? He's almost as cute as I am."

Overextended military, over-reliance on slave labor... "I didn't think that was possible."

Sebastian frowned at her. "I said *almost* as cute." His frown turned to a smile, though, as the mystery boy began walking in their direction. "Quick. Say something so I can laugh at you."

"What did they call the people who sacked Rome?"

Sebastian cracked up, leaning a hand against the wall for support. As he did, he turned a dazzling smile on the boy. Ariel, on the other hand, was so startled by the laughter that she squeaked and dropped her worksheet. It fluttered down to the ground, settling at the boy's feet.

He picked up the paper, and handed it to Ariel without looking at it. "You're thinking of the Visigoths," he told her. Then he turned to Sebastian. "A lot of people suffered," he said. "You shouldn't laugh about things like that."

There was a long, awkward moment where no one said anything. Then the boy smiled. "Just kidding," he said. "See you 'round."

"Did you see that?" whispered Sebastian, when he was sure the boy was out of

earshot. "He smiled at me."

"And he finished my history homework," replied Ariel. "He's a real prince."

"But he's cute. You must admit he's cute."

As he turned the corner, going out of sight, the boy threw his head back and laughed as he greeted a friend. In spite of herself, Ariel was charmed.

"Of course he's cute," she said. "Come on, let's get to class."

The boy's name was Eric, they found out, through some skilled detective work (i.e. asking their friends at lunch). He was a junior, and he was new.

"That explains why we haven't seen him before," mused Sebastian. "Well, what else?"

"His father's a decorator and his mother's in finance," said Shirley, who always knew the best gossip. "He was their soccer team's leading scorer until he hurt his ankle. He had a girlfriend in East Essex but they decided not to do the long distance thing."

Sebastian turned to Ariel, disappointed.

"Well, if it can't be me, I guess I'm glad it's you," he said.

"What do you mean, you're glad it's me?" exclaimed Ariel. "He's said exactly five words to me - and one of them was 'visigoths'."

"You counted the number of words? You *do* have a crush."

And she did. She hadn't, at first. She wasn't the type to be won over by a quick smile or a pretty face. But watching Eric, she'd seen a lot that she liked - the way he always kept a novel in his locker, the way he teased the lunch ladies, the way he helped at soccer practices, even though he couldn't play. Other people seemed to like that, too. After only a few weeks he had made friends with the most popular people in the school.

"Thanks a lot," she muttered to Sebastian as she sat at the lunch table. She'd positioned herself so she could watch Eric without seeming like she was doing so.

"You're welcome," he said. "But for what?"

"I would never have started obsessing over Eric if you hadn't pointed him out," she said.

"You say 'obsessing' like it's a bad thing," he replied.

"It is! I can't concentrate on my schoolwork - "

"You've never concentrated on your schoolwork," Sebastian pointed out. "Look, I understand you, really. But you can't just sit around passively like some fairytale princess, waiting for him to notice you. You've got to be proactive!"

"But how?" asked Ariel, biting her lip. "Every time he gets within five feet of me I turn into a tomato."

"A tomato?"

"I blush bright red and am unable to move or speak."

Sebastian whistled. "You *do* have it bad. Well, don't worry about it. I'll help you out."

That could never be a good thing. "Please, don't, Sebastian - " she began, but it was too late. Eric was walking past them, towards the door of the cafeteria. With one swift move Sebastian had knocked her food tray onto the floor at Eric's feet.

"I'm sorry!" Ariel blurted. She moved to pick it up, but it was a mess - macaroni

and cheese and jello mixing on the floor like avant garde art. Eric spotted the one salvageable thing (her unopened milk carton), picked it up, and handed it back to her. "Um. Uh. Thanks!"

"No problem," said Eric, then looked at her more closely. "Oh, it's you. Do you have some sort of motor problem, or am I just special?"

She had no idea how to respond to that, so Sebastian spoke for her. "You're just special," he said.

"That's what they tell me," said Eric, grinning. "See you kids later." And he took off.

"I can't believe you!" Ariel hissed when he had gone.

"I see you've recovered your voice," Sebastian observed.

"I hate you."

Sebastian shook his head sadly. "People always hate what's best for them. Like school. And medicine. Besides, now he knows who you are."

"He knows I'm a klutz."

"Better than being a tomato, right?" He looked at her closely for a second, sighed, and relented. "Look, Ariel, I may not know much about girls, but I know about guys, all right? He's either going to like you, or he won't. You might as well put yourself out there and find out which it is."

"You're right," said Ariel. She bit her lip in what was, for her, a show of grave determination. "But first I've got to clean up my lunch..."

Ariel's determination lasted about as long as her lunch had.

She really meant to put herself out there - she *did!* - but life offered her little opportunity. She didn't play soccer, she wasn't in any of Eric's classes, and her locker was on the opposite side of school. It was though Eric lived in an entirely different world from her - one she couldn't reach.

After a while, she settled into a routine. Whenever Eric was nearby, she'd watch him secretly, palms sweating, heart racing, and whenever he wasn't, she'd behave like a human being again. It was beginning to take a toll on her grades, her friendships, even her sanity.

Fortunately, at the beginning of February, there came something capable of distracting Ariel from anything, even the love of her life: auditions for that year's high school musical.

Ursula was nothing if not ambitious. What she wanted, she got, and what she didn't really care about, she usually got as well. A young woman with considerable intellect and contemptible morals, by her senior year of high school she'd managed to earn, trade, or cheat her way into being captain of the field hockey team, student council president, and the leading contender for valedictorian in May.

Any other girl might have been satisfied with this, but not Ursula. Ursula also wanted to be the star of the school play.

She had a decent voice. It couldn't shatter glass or win hearts, but she could hit the notes all right, and in any other school, in any other year, that would have been enough. But this year, there was real competition, in the form of a shy, scrawny freshman girl with a voice so beautiful it made principals weep.

Once she'd finished with her audition, Ursula went and sat in the back of the theater and waited for Ariel's turn. It didn't take long - Ursula had bullied and blackmailed the best of the school's singers into not trying out, and the remaining students were usually rushed off the stage by the cringing musical director.

Finally, it was Ariel's turn. She walked to the center of the stage, fiddling nervously with the hem of her shirt. "I'd like to sing 'Til There Was You'," she said.

After a few introductory bars, her voice filled the auditorium, a voice both sweeter and stronger than the piano accompanying it. It was hard to imagine so powerful a voice coming from such a small girl. The voice sailed smoothly through each verse, rising with poignant longing at the chorus, reaching out and touching even Ursula's cold heart -

The music stopped suddenly. After a moment, Ariel did too, turning to the musical director. The man had been so enraptured by Ariel's performance that he'd simply forgotten to keep playing.

"Right, sorry," he said, and continued on.

Ursula sank back into her chair, scowling. There was no doubt about it - Ariel was going to be the lead. Unless, somehow, Ursula could convince her to turn the role down.

The song ended and the back door, a few yards away, banged open. It was Eric, and he was looking around frantically. His eyes fell on Ursula, and he hurried over to her.

"Who was just singing?" he asked.

She frowned at him. "Hello to you, too."

"Hi, Ursula. *Who was just singing?*"

"Not anyone important," she replied, nonplussed.

"Not anyone - how can you - the most amazing thing - "

Her frown deepened, and she folded her arms for added effect. "Complete sentences, Eric."

He took a deep breath and managed to achieve a small measure of calm. "I was standing out in the hallway, and there was this voice, echoing - it was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard - "

She was going to have to work fast. Eric was completely enraptured, and he hadn't even been in the room - who knew how affected the musical director had been, and the poor saps who'd been auditioning? What if she was offered the part on the spot?

She realized Eric was waiting for an answer. "Sorry to disappoint," she said. "It was just a CD. Mr. Gregorio wanted to give us some inspiration. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"*Oh.*" Eric sank into one of the chairs, disappointed. Ursula got up and hurried towards the stage.

Ariel stood surrounded by the other students, blushing at their praise. As Ursula approached, though, they began making excuses and hurried to leave. By the time she reached Ariel, the girl was alone.

"That was beautiful," Ursula said, simply. "Congratulations on getting the lead."
"I haven't - I mean, thank you, but they haven't even finished auditioning people yet."

"They won't find anyone better," she replied. The other girl knew it too, she was certain. "No point in being modest."

"I guess," said Ariel, uncertainly.

"No, none of that," replied Ursula. "We both know it's every girl's dream to be the star of the school play. I bet you wouldn't trade it for anything in the world."

Ariel seemed confused. "No - no, I suppose I wouldn't - "

But even as she spoke her voice trailed off, and her glanced over Ursula's shoulder towards the back of the room.

Ursula followed her gaze and this time, she laughed for real. It had taken her less than a minute to find this girl's weakness! Some people were just too easy. "Come on," she said. "Let me take you out for celebratory pizza or something."

"Really?" asked Ariel, her brows furrowing in a classic '*you* want to take *me* out for pizza?' expression.

"Yes, really." She looked towards the back of the room, where Eric was still moping in the back row. "We can invite Eric."

The effect of that one word was tremendous. "*Eric?*" the girl squeaked, blood rushing to her face.

"Oh, yes, Eric's one of my best friends," said Ursula, thinking as fast as she ever had. "He's only been here for a few months, but I feel like I've known him my whole life."

"That's... really nice... for you."

The other girl was clearly, inescapably jealous. The question was, was she jealous enough? "You like him, don't you?" prodded Ursula. "It's okay, he has that effect on a lot of girls."

Ariel looked like she was about to cry. "Please, don't tell him."

"Of course not," said Ursula, putting a hand on the other girl's shoulder. "Why do that when I can do so much more? Oh, don't misunderstand me, darling, I'm on your side. I think a girl like you would be perfect for Eric."

"You do?"

"Absolutely. And I can make it happen. Eric doesn't know what's best for himself - he wouldn't give you the time of day if left to his own devices. But I can introduce you to him, take you out to dinner with him, invite you to the parties we go to. I can tell him all the things about you that you're afraid to tell him yourself."

The girl's eyes were wide. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course I would," said Ursula. She smiled like the tolerant, nurturing older sister she'd never been. "If you do me a little favor in return."

Ariel was so lost in fantasies of Eric that she barely seemed to hear. "A favor?"

"Just a teensy, tiny one," said Ursula. She waited for a moment, made sure she had the other girl's attention.

"I need you to come down with laryngitis."

Ariel stood, dumb with surprise, as the older girl smiled down at her.

"It's not a big deal. Simply show up tomorrow and don't speak. When Mr. Gregorio offers you the part, write him a little note that says you'd love to, but your doctor says you shouldn't sing. It shouldn't interfere with your schoolwork. No one will know but you and me."

"I could *never* - " Ariel breathed.

"Then you'll never get to be with Eric," Ursula replied. "You barely had a chance before, but now? I'll poison his mind against you. He won't even look at you as you walk by."

She didn't know what was more painful, the thought of not singing - or even speaking! - for the foreseeable future, or the thought of losing Eric forever. Of course, she'd never really *had* him, but if Ursula upheld her part of the bargain - she might actually get to be with Eric -

"You don't have to decide right now," said Ursula. "You can spend all night thinking about it. And in the mean time, I'll spend all night with Eric."

She walked away before Ariel could respond. She went towards the back doors where Eric was sitting and spoke to him a moment before he got up. She put an arm around his waist and looked over her shoulder to give a pointed look at Ariel, before leading him out the door.

Miserable, Ariel went to go collect her backpack, and went to wait for the bus. When it arrived, she slid into the very last seat and pressed her forehead against the window. What was she going to do?

When she got home, her father had already started dinner. "Sebastian called," he said, slipping her a piece of pepper. "Says to call him back."

Ariel chewed morosely as she dialed.

"Hey, superstar. I heard you gave Gregorio a heart attack, you were so good."

"I guess."

"You *guess*?"

"He didn't say anything."

"You've got the part. You know you've got the part. Are you okay?"

She shifted the phone to her other ear and pondered what to say. "Eric was at the auditions."

"That explains the mood you're in. I take it you didn't try to speak to him?"

"... no."

"Damn it, Ariel, you've got to seize your opportunities! Gorgeous, considerate guys don't just fall into your lap, you know - or at least, I can't always trip them for you."

"Yeah... I know." She wondered if she shouldn't take his advice. "Look, I've got to go. I don't feel very well."

"See you tomorrow," said Sebastian, obviously fed up with her, and hung up before she could reply. She stared at the receiver for a moment, as if *it* were the cause of her dilemma.

"Something wrong, princess?" her dad asked as they sat down to dinner that night. She took a deep breath. "I think I might have laryngitis."

"Is your throat sore?"

"Um, a little."

"Does it hurt when you swallow?"

"Yes?"

"Well, your voice sounds okay, and you haven't been coughing," he said. "Why don't you just drink some warm water and go to bed early tonight, and if you feel worse tomorrow, you let me know."

She nodded weakly. At least now she knew how to fake it - not that she'd decided that she was going to.

"Hey, auditions for the musical are coming up soon, aren't they?"

"Yeah," she said, quietly.

"You'd better drink two cups of warm water, then," he said, with an encouraging smile.

"Maybe later," she said. "Can I be excused?"

"Of course, princess."

Ariel sat quietly on the bus to school the next day. She was careful not to speak to anyone. This wasn't entirely unusual - she'd never been a very outgoing girl - but she usually gossiped with Shirley, complained about how early it was, asked for help with homework. Instead, she practiced writing things in her notebook.

I can't do this, she wrote in careful script.

This is the worst idea ever.

This is wrong.

She got off the bus and headed towards her locker where she knew Sebastian would be waiting for her. But before she got there, she heard someone call her name.

Ursula. She turned to face the other girl, prepared to give her a firm - if heartbroken - 'no'. But there was Eric, walking with her, and the words died on her lips.

"How are you feeling today?" Ursula asked, seeming genuinely concerned. She turned to Eric. "She looked awful yesterday at auditions, it's a wonder she even made it through her song." Turning back to Ariel, she added, "I hope you're feeling better by this weekend, I'm having a little party at my house, and I want you to come."

"Really?" Eric looked surprised that she'd been invited, but he didn't seem to mind. "Yeah, you should come."

Before she knew it, she was nodding along, and then she'd picked up her pen and was scribbling into her notebook:

Dr. says I have laryngitis. Can't talk. But can come to party.

"Oh, wonderful!" Ursula exclaimed. "Not about your throat, darling, but about the party. This Friday at ten - we'll see you there!"

"Where were you this morning?" asked Sebastian as they sat down to lunch. "I waited for you - I was late to class."

"I'm sorry," Ariel whispered. She looked down at her notebook, which was already filled with answers and explanations. She'd been faking laryngitis all day, but it seemed infinitely harder to do it with her best friend.

"Hey, it's not that bad, it's not like I care about class anyway. Christ, Ariel, what's

up with you?"

She picked up the notebook and wrote, slowly, **I'm not supposed to talk.**

He looked at her doubtfully. "You're not supposed to talk? Why not?"

She pointed to the bit she'd written out earlier, to show her teachers.

"You have laryngitis? Since when?"

Since yesterday. My throat hurt really bad at auditions. Dad took me to a doctor.

There, she'd done it. She'd lied to him. She was the worst best friend ever. And he immediately made her feel ten times worse by coming around to her side of the table and throwing an arm around her.

"That's why you were so off yesterday, wasn't it? Are you going to be able to be in the play?"

She shook her head 'no'.

"Hey, it's okay. It's just a stupid play. You can always be in it next year."

"Right," she whispered.

"Have you told Gregorio?"

She nodded. She was committed to this, now.

"You know what's really bad for laryngitis?" he said. "Cafeteria food." He took her tray away from her and pushed his store-bought lunch towards her. He bit into her sloppy joe before she could protest.

"And don't tell me that I shouldn't. Oh, wait, that's right - you can't tell me anything at all!"

You're a jerk, she wrote, smiling at him.

"You're too kind, Ariel," he said, and continued to eat her lunch. After a moment, she dug into his.

At first, the idea of not speaking had seemed ludicrous, but after only a few days Ariel was becoming quite used to it. She was adept at shorthand now, and a pretty good mime - Sebastian treated lunchtime with her like a game of charades, which left them both in fits of laughter. Her teachers didn't seem to mind her communicating only in notes. She'd never spoken much in class anyway.

Really, she reflected Friday night, as she waited for Ursula to pick her up and bring her to the party, it was probably the best decision she'd ever made.

"Princess!" Her father called from the other room. "Phone for you!"

Of course, she hadn't told her father about the doctor laryngitis - he'd take her to a doctor. She wondered how to answer the phone. She settled for a soft, strangled, "Hello?"

"Hi Ariel, it's Ursula. I just wanted to let you know that I can't pick you up tonight."

Ariel felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. "But we agreed - "

"Eric's going to pick you up instead. Is that okay?"

"Okay?"

Ursula laughed. "I'll take that as a yes. See you soon!"

Ariel put the phone back in its cradle. Was she more nervous than excited? Or

more excited than nervous? She couldn't tell.

She realized her father was staring at her. "Oh, that was a friend of mine. A bunch of us are working on a project together - she just wanted to tell me that Sebastian's parents are stopping by here to pick me up."

And now she was lying to her dad, too. Before she could feel too guilty about that, the doorbell rang.

"Got to go!" She kissed her father on the cheek and scurried out the door before he could catch her out. She was in such a rush that she didn't see Eric standing there and she bumped into him, dropping her purse.

He laughed and leaned down to pick it up for her. "I really am special, aren't I?" he said.

Yes, you are, she almost blurted out, but stopped herself as she remembered her laryngitis. She had no idea how to answer that one - and luckily, she didn't have to. She settled for smiling up at him, hoping she wasn't blushing too badly.

"Oh, right, you can't talk," he said. "Well, come on, my car's down that way."

He led her to where he'd parked it, a half block down the street. He opened the door for her and shut it after her, then walked around and sat in the driver's seat. As he turned on the car, he said conversationally, "I have to admit, I'm surprised you're feeling up to a party. If I were you I'd be making my mom wait on me hand and foot."

She'd actually thought up an answer to this one, with some help from the library's medical dictionary. She was going to say her laryngitis was caused by allergies. That way, she didn't have to play sick all the time.

Of course, she couldn't tell Eric that. She shrugged helplessly.

"It's a shame about your voice," he continued. "Ursula told me you would have been a shoe-in for the chorus."

The *chorus*! There was another long silence as Ariel struggled not to respond.

"She was my first friend here," he said, eventually. "I was worried I wasn't going to make any friends. It seems stupid, I know, but I never moved before. I never had to make friends. I always just had 'em, you know?"

That's how she felt about Sebastian. She couldn't remember not being best friends with him. She wished she could tell Eric she understood.

"I'm probably boring you," he said. She shook her head frantically but he wasn't looking at her, just staring a little sadly out at the road. "Tell me if I'm boring you."

That elicited a fairly outraged snort. This finally got Eric to look at her, and when he did, he grinned at her expression. "Sorry, my bad. Here, why don't I turn on some music?"

He pressed a button on the dashboard, and sound flooded the car. She smiled at him - at the very fact of being there with him - and settled back to enjoy the ride.

Ursula's house was a nondescript place with a slightly overgrown lawn that would have been completely unremarkable if it weren't for the dozens of cars parked and double-parked along the street and in the driveway. Eric surveyed the scene and decided to park a good two or three blocks away. They walked to Ursula's in companionable silence. Ariel tried not to stare at him too much. Maybe he didn't think it was fair for

him to talk, when she couldn't?

They rang the doorbell and a girl Ariel didn't recognize answered. She beckoned them both in.

Looking around at the older kids, Ariel couldn't help feeling out of place. They all seemed so confident as they danced, threw back drinks, or just sprawled around on the couches. Eric would fit in perfectly here - and she'd be forced to stand to the side, awkward and mute.

"Want a drink?" the girl who let them in asked, shouting a little to be heard over the music.

"Sure," said Eric. "Just a beer. Ariel?"

She shook her head 'no' and then, not wanting to seem like a baby, pointed at her throat.

"She has laryngitis," explained Eric to the girl. "So she probably shouldn't. But, uh, maybe a lemonade?"

Ariel nodded vigorously. At least then she'd *look* like she was drinking. She stood next to Eric, not sure what to do, until the girl came back with drinks for each of them.

"Thanks," said Eric. He took the lemonade and handed it to Ariel. "So."

The music would have been hard to talk over, even if she'd been able to speak. Not that she knew what to say. At least she had an excuse for the way she just sat there, sipping her drink, smiling helplessly at Eric.

"Ariel! You made it!" Ursula pushed her way through a dancing couple to end up at their side. "Oh, fantastic."

"Of course she made it - you were the one who sent me to pick her up."

"I did, didn't I?" She slung an arm around Ariel's shoulder. This close, she could smell alcohol on Ursula's breath. "Ariel's one of my new favorite people, Eric, did you know that?"

"I didn't," he said. "I didn't even know you were friends."

"We sat next to each other at rehearsals, and we got to talking. She's so interesting! For instance, did you know she loves soccer? She went to every game this year."

Ariel nearly choked on her drink. She didn't love soccer - she didn't know a thing about it. Sometimes she used to sing at games, but she never stayed to watch them play. Watching sports bored her.

But Eric was grinning at her. "So did I, even though I couldn't play. The coach was amazing - he let me help, asked for my advice. I told him I thought we needed to work on using the whole field, don't you think?"

What else was there for her to do, but nod?

"She goes to professional games too," said Ursula. "All the time. You know we're *so* much closer to the Kicker's in Hampstead, Eric."

"I know. I've been meaning to go to a game."

"You should go with Ariel!"

This time Ariel *did* choke on her drink.

Eric looked over at her, startled. He placed a hand on her shoulder and tapped her back lightly until she stopped choking, then turned to Ursula. "Um, sure. Maybe."

"Maybe! How about definitely?"

"Well, we don't really know each other. I doubt Ariel wants to go with me."

"Oh, I'm sure she does, doesn't she?"

Eric had left his hand on her shoulder, and Ariel had been too overwhelmed by this to pay attention to the conversation. Now they turned to her, and she looked at them helplessly.

"Yes", Ursula mouthed at her.

"Yes," she repeated, without thinking.

They both blinked at her. "Hey, you've got your voice back!" said Eric. Ursula was glaring at her over his shoulder.

Not knowing what else to do, Ariel pretended to cough. It wasn't hard - her throat was still sore from choking on her drink.

"There, there," said Ursula, coming to her side. She stroke Ariel's hair. "You must have irritated your throat when you tried to speak."

"Oh," said Eric. He looked sheepish. "Sorry."

"You know how you can make it up to her? By bringing her to a Kicker's game," said Ursula. "You say you barely know each other - well, what better way to change that? Come on, Eric, I know there's a game next weekend."

"Well, sure, if Ariel wants to."

Ariel remembered to just nod her head this time.

"Perfect!" Ursula smiled. "Well, I'm going to go find Ted Gregorio. I want to see if I can get him to tell me the cast for this year's musical! I hope you two have fun at the game."

"See you later," said Eric. Ariel waved.

"Just remember not to cheer!" called Ursula with a grin, before disappearing into the mass of people at the party.

Eric watched her go, then turned to Ariel, grinning ruefully. "I'm sorry if she just badgered you into that. We don't have to go."

Ariel made sure Ursula wasn't looking. "No, I want to," she whispered.

"Hey, don't hurt your voice." He smiled at her. He seemed genuinely concerned for her - he was looking at her like he'd never done before. She raised a hand to touch her throat, trying not to blush. "So you like soccer?"

She nodded, glad she didn't have to elaborate.

"Not much for conversation, huh," he said, teasing her. "Well, I guess that means there's only one thing we can do."

Ariel's heart began to pound.

"Do you want to dance?"

The cast was announced on Wednesday. The list was posted on the auditorium door, and Ariel went to look at it, even though she knew she wouldn't be on it. She looked at Ursula's name at the top of the sheet, and felt her chest ache with regret.

Then she thought about going out with Eric - just Eric! - this weekend, and those feelings disappeared, replaced by the dizzy happiness she'd felt as she'd danced with him at the party the week before. She'd put her head on his shoulder and he'd talked quietly, just over the music. It seemed like he was happy to have someone listen to him.

"There's always next year," said Sebastian. He'd come up behind her. "And the year after that, and the year after that. Don't feel too badly about it."

She smiled gratefully at him. They went to sit on a bench by one of the windows. Ariel sat down and drew her knees up to her chest.

"I wish you weren't sick," said Sebastian. "It's kind of lonely, having to be witty enough for two."

She grinned and fished out her notebook. **Now you know how I always felt**, she wrote.

"You know, they're going to start a radio show. To play on the loudspeakers in the morning, before the announcements. Ms. Fishbone asked *me* to be one of the dee jays."

That's fantastic!

"It's nice to see someone besides you appreciates my natural charm." He ran a hand through his hair, then tossed it, for good measure. She reached over and mussed it up. "Hey!" There was a clang as the door to the auditorium opened, and Eric walked out. Sebastian, not seeing him, continued to pout. "Don't touch the hair."

"I have to agree," said Eric. "Never mess with a man's hair."

Sorry! Ariel scribbled quickly, and showed it to both of them.

"Clever," said Eric, looking at the notebook. "You going to bring that to the game on Saturday?"

Yes?

"Great. I'll pick you up at noon, all right?"

She watched him walk down the hall towards his next class, not taking her eyes off him until he was gone. As soon as he was, though, Sebastian waved his hand in front of her face.

"What was that?" he asked. "You guys are going on a *date*? When did *that* happen?"

Don't look so shocked. I thought you wanted me to ask him out.

He shook his head, still looking stunned. "Yeah," he said. "I just never thought you'd do it."

Well, I did. People change.

"I guess they do. I'm impressed, Ariel. I have to say, I'm really impressed." He leaned over suddenly and hugged her. Ariel squeaked in surprise, then hugged him back, feeling slightly guilty. After a moment, Sebastian pulled away and muttered, "That never happened."

Of course not, Ariel scribbled. Then: **We should get to trigonometry.**

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. Did you do your homework?"

She shook her head.

"It's nice to know some things never change," he said, grinning, as they walked to class.

According to Eric, the Kickers were at the head of their division. The stands were packed with people cheering so loudly Ariel was pretty sure she couldn't have been heard if she screamed.

"You made it," said Eric, standing up. She took the seat next to him, and they sat down together. "This is going to be great - the weather's beautiful."

He leaned in close so she could hear him. If someone would only stick a foot out and trip him, he'd land on her lips. Ariel blushed at the thought.

"Did you bring your notebook?" he asked.

She widened her eyes as if to say, 'I forgot'.

He shrugged. "That's okay. You know, I think we get each other anyway."

She grinned, pleased.

He leaned back in his seat, looking out at the game. "I've been coming here since I was a kid," he said. "My parents used to take us every Tuesday night during the season."

That was a lot of games, Ariel thought. She nodded, hoping he would continue.

He did. "It's been almost like a second home. I remember the first time I came here. I remember everything about it. The smell of the hot dogs grilling, the man sitting behind me who spilled beer on my new coat. I remember that the Kickers won off a penalty kick. And I remember this little girl I was half in love with, she sang the Star-spangled banner and she had the most beautiful voice."

Ariel wondered if she was the little girl he was thinking of. She wished she could ask him - she wished she could sing for him right now. Maybe he'd fall half in love with her.

"I always thought I would be one of them someday," he said, turning to look at her. "It's all I ever wanted - and now it's never going to happen."

Her brows furrowed. She pointed to his ankle.

"It's not going to heal all the way. It's never going to heal all the way."

Hesitantly, she reached out and touched his hand. Gave it a squeeze, and then dropped it quickly.

He looked over at her. "What are you supposed to do when you can't do what you love most?" he asked. "I don't even know who I *am* anymore."

She understood. She understood *so well*. She wanted to tell him that, but maybe he could see it in her eyes.

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he muttered. "Maybe 'cause I know you can't tell me it's stupid."

She shook her head quickly. "It's not," she whispered. He took her hand and this time, she didn't drop it. He held it for the rest of the game.

Afterwards, as they walked out of the stadium, he let go of her hand to go throw their trash away. When he came back, he looked at her sheepishly and said, "I hope I didn't bore you with all that sports trivia. I know most girls hate that."

She shook her head and tried to look indignant, even though she would have been bored, if it hadn't been Eric who was speaking.

"Yeah," he said, with a grin. "You're not most girls."

They'd stopped walking, and the crowds streamed past them.

"I know you can't say no," said Eric, "so, you know, feel free to just slap me."

And he leaned in and kissed her.

She floated into school that Monday. Floated through homeroom, through history, through her teachers' disapproving comments and Sebastian's concerned looks. She floated through lunchtime, barely touching her meal, and was just about to float on to trigonometry when Ursula stepped in front of her and she settled abruptly on the ground.

"So, Eric tells me you two kissed on Saturday," she said.

"Um, yeah?"

"Write it in your notebook," Ursula snapped. "You've still got laryngitis, you know."

"Do we really need to pretend anymore?"

Ursula glared, and otherwise didn't respond. Sighing, Ariel opened up her notebook and repeated the question there.

You've got the lead in the play, Ariel added. **Why can't I talk again?**

"How do I know you won't go to Gregorio and steal the part back from me?"

Ursula replied.

I wouldn't!

"Oh, like I trust your little innocent act. You were willing to lie to Eric to get him to like you, why wouldn't you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie - "

"Write it *down*," Ursula hissed. "And you did."

Ariel's pen hovered over the paper. She really had lied to Eric, and the thought made her sick. **How long do I have to have laryngitis for?**

"Until the play's opening night."

Ariel groaned. That was still weeks away!

"You should be thanking me," Ursula said. "You think Eric will still like you once your 'laryngitis' clears up?"

Yes?

"Please. Right now, you're a mystery, a sweet little helpless mystery. Once you get a chance to talk and Eric realizes you still don't have anything to say? The two of you will be over."

That's not true.

"You can delude yourself all you like," Ursula replied. "But just remember that if I hear you speaking again before opening night, I'll tell Eric exactly how you lied to him. And then you two will really be finished - you can't delude yourself about *that*."

Ariel couldn't. Ursula walked off, looking satisfied. Feeling miserable, Ariel trudged on to trigonometry.

"What's wrong?" Sebastian asked. They were sitting in their favorite window seat, down the hall from their lockers. Sebastian was staying after school to learn how to use the loudspeaker system, but he had some time to kill, and Ariel was keeping him company. She was worse company than usual, though. She couldn't speak, and she had trouble smiling.

I bet they're rehearsing for the play right now.

Sebastian made a sympathetic face. "They need to rehearse, you know. They don't have your natural talent."

I miss singing. And talking.

"How much longer until you're better?"

A few weeks.

"That's not too bad."

The voices of the actors began to drift from the auditorium down the hall.

"Look, I've got to go to the audiovisual room. Go home, okay? Don't hang around here like a ghost."

Ariel nodded, but once Sebastian had gone, she found herself walking towards the auditorium, not away from it. She pushed open one of the double doors and slipped into a seat in the back row.

Ursula stood in the center of the stage. Around her, the other girls were arranged in a chorus. Gregorio went to the piano and started to play.

Ursula could sing. Her voice was strong and steady, and pretty, in a simple sort of way.

But Ariel knew that she could sing better. She knew that she could have gotten the role, been the star of the play. It wasn't even that, though, it wasn't even the praise or the popularity or the attention - she just wanted to *sing*.

And she could have. But - "You made your choice," she told herself, and got up to go. She was ready to go home.

But when she walked through the doors out of the auditorium, she ran into Eric, coming in.

"Ariel!" he said, his eyes lighting up. Then he frowned. "Are you *crying*?"

She shook her head and wiped at her eyes. How was she going to explain this?

But she didn't have to. He reached out and pulled her into a gentle hug.

"Whatever it is. You know I'm here for you, right?"

She pulled away a little, so she could nod that she did.

"You okay now?" he asked. When she didn't burst into tears again, he leaned down and kissed her quickly.

"Do you want to go get dinner?" he asked. "My treat."

And she did feel better. So much better. Being with Eric, it was as good as singing, in its own way.

They went out to dinner that night, and the next. After the second date, Eric asked her if she would be his girlfriend. She wished she could say yes, but nodding her head was more than good enough. She wanted to take *him* out once, pay for *his* dinner, but without her voice, it was hard to press the issue.

Still, for the most part, it was as though she didn't even need words when she was with Eric. He seemed to know what she was thinking, how she was feeling. He paid attention to her every need.

And, well, you didn't need words for kissing.

Sometimes she felt bad for going out with Eric all the time, and not hanging out with Sebastian, but he was busy in the AV room, learning how to use the equipment and polishing his on-air persona. The teachers wanted him ready to go on the air before the opening night of the play, so he could interview Ursula.

He wasn't doing that all night, though, so after Eric and Ariel had gotten dinner one evening, he met up with them for milkshakes.

"I'm almost ready," he told them, as he polished off his second shake. "I'm going to have my first show on Friday, the day of the play."

"Congratulations," said Eric. "Are you a big fan of musicals?"

Sebastian gave him a look. "Oh, I think they're fabulous. Don't you?"

Unable to interject, Ariel settled for a loud cough. Sebastian took the cue.

"Anyway," he said. "A musical's not a musical without Ariel in it."

Eric raised his eyebrows. "Really. Ariel, you sing?"

She nodded tentatively, wishing it hadn't come up. She'd been afraid to tell Eric that she even listened to music, in case Ursula found out.

Sebastian was giving her a funny look. "Of course she sings. If she hadn't gotten laryngitis - "

Ariel shook her head quickly, and Sebastian stopped. Eric turned to look at his girlfriend. "Do I get to hear?" he asked, smiling. "Once you're better?"

She grinned and gave him a kiss.

Eric explained to Sebastian: "We've come up with a system. One kiss means yes, two means no. I figure with all that shaking her head yes and no, it keeps her neck from getting sore."

"But what about her lips? No, don't answer that." Sebastian made a face. "You guys are a little too sweet. Between you and the milkshakes, I think I'm starting to get nauseous."

"Wait until you have a girlfriend," said Eric, "and you'll feel differently."

Sebastian shrugged uncomfortably. "No, I don't think I will."

There was a long, awkward silence. Ariel longed to break it. "I'm going to get us another milkshake," said Eric. "Do you like strawberry?" he asked Ariel. But he didn't wait to get a kiss for an answer, just got up and went inside.

"You don't like strawberry," Sebastian pointed out. Ariel pulled out her notebook.

It's no big deal.

"You didn't even tell him that you sing."

I don't want to talk about what I can't do.

"What *do* you talk about, Ariel?"

Very funny.

"It's not a joke, you know what I mean. Do you even use your notebook with him?"

Of course, she wrote, even though it was a lie.

"Whatever," he said, standing up. "I'm going home. I'm going in early tomorrow to work in the AV room. See you there?"

She shook her head. **Eric's driving me to school tomorrow.**

"I should've figured."

Eric returned as Sebastian was leaving. He put the shake down in front of Ariel. "I don't think your friend likes me," he said. "I wonder if he's jealous."

Ariel just shook her head again. Eric shrugged. "There's a soccer game on t.v. tonight. Do you want to come over to my place to watch it? I'll introduce you to my parents."

Pushing aside her doubts, she smiled, and gave him a single kiss.

She didn't see Sebastian the next morning. She felt guilty about the way she'd been treating him, but in a few days she'd be able to talk to him, and she could explain everything.

Well, not *everything*. But she could at least explain to him that she was sorry.

She sat down in a window seat, waiting for the first period bell to ring. She thought about the night before - meeting Eric's parents, his brother, his cats. Sitting on the couch together, watching the game, nestled in the crook of his arm. Making out all through half-time.

A smile creased the corners of her lips. She almost missed Ursula walking right in front of her. When she spotted the older girl, though, she got up quickly and ran to tap her shoulder. Once she'd gotten her attention, she led Ursula to an empty classroom.

"I just want to make sure everything's clear. I can talk again tomorrow, right?"

"Saturday," said Ursula. "After opening night. Although, maybe you should wait until Monday, when the whole run is over."

"We agreed!" exclaimed Ariel.

"Agreements can be modified," said Ursula, smoothly.

"No, they can't!" Ariel wanted to scream. "What's to stop you from changing your mind once this is over, and ruining things for me and Eric?"

"I don't know," said Ursula, with a shrug. "The kindness of my heart?"

The bell rang.

"Better get out your notebook," said Ursula. "Wouldn't want anyone to see you talking to me, and realize you were faking all this time."

Ariel was so angry her hands were shaking as she got the notebook out. **I'll tell Gregorio about the deal.**

"I'm a senior, darling. I don't care what he thinks." She looked at Ariel. "It's you who cares what everyone thinks. *You're* the one with something to hide."

"What are you *talking* about?"

They both turned around. Sebastian was standing there. He looked warily at Ursula.

"What's this about?"

"Oh, nothing," said Ursula. She smiled as sweetly as she could at Sebastian, but of course he didn't buy it. "Ariel and I were just having a little chat. I was giving her some advice about Eric."

"You're a regular Dear Abby."

Ursula shrugged and left, with a little wave over her shoulder at Ariel. Ariel felt sick to her stomach. And how much had Sebastian heard?

She needed to find a bathroom.

"Where are you going, Ariel? This is first period!"

As always, she couldn't give him an answer.

She felt sick for most of the rest of the day. The feeling was only compounded

when she realized she'd lost her notebook. She'd spent study hall and lunch with Eric, and hadn't realized it was gone, but when her history teacher asked her a question and she couldn't find her notebook to answer, she could only mouth her apologies.

Eric had soccer practice after school. Ariel walked to her locker alone, hoping she had left it in there. But as she pulled out her books, her empty lunch bags, scattered clothes, she grew more and more worried.

"Looking for this?"

She turned around. Sebastian held her notebook in his hand. From the look on his face, he had read it cover to cover.

She nodded. Stayed silent.

"Oh, bullshit. You know you can talk." When she still didn't say anything, he flipped the notebook open to the conversation she'd had with Ursula. "What's the deal, Ariel? Why would you agree to do this? What did you get in return for faking laryngitis?"

"You read my notebook," she said. "You *read* my *notebook*."

"And you *lied* to me."

"... yes."

She'd never seen him so angry. His eyes were bright and his words cut sharp. "What was worth it to you, Ariel? Worth lying to everyone? Worth not being in the play?"

"I... Eric - "

"Of course," said Sebastian. "Of course. It all makes perfect sense."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means you've turned yourself into a doormat for him, it's not surprising you'd lie for him, too."

"I'm not a doormat!"

"He makes all your decisions for you. He doesn't know a damn thing about you."

"It's hard," she said. "When I get my voice back - "

"You *have* your *voice*, Ariel. You're just choosing not to use it."

He turned to go. Ariel stood there for a moment, stunned, before chasing after him. "Listen, it's not as bad as you think," she said. "We all hide things about ourselves. If anyone knows that, it's you."

"That is not the same thing at *all*, Ariel, and you know it." For the first time, Sebastian seemed more hurt than angry. "I can't believe you just said that."

Ariel couldn't, either. Maybe it would be better if she never spoke again.

"You know, when you said that people change? I didn't think that *this* was what you meant."

"Sebastian - "

But he wouldn't listen to her. She'd stopped talking to him, and now he'd stopped listening to her.

She'd traded the school play for Eric. But Sebastian had never been part of the bargain.

She watched him walk down the hall and disappear around the corner. Fighting back tears, she went to go wait for the bus to bring her home.

That night, after dinner, she found her father in the library, reading.
"I think I made a mistake," she told him.
He looked up, patted the seat next to him. She went to sit beside him.
"What is it?" he asked.
"I've been - well. I've been pretending to have laryngitis."
He looked relieved, then amused. "Come again?"
"Don't laugh," said Ariel, though she was glad he was. "I pretended to have laryngitis so I wouldn't have to sing."
"Oh, princess," he said. "You don't have to sing if you don't want to. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. You should never be afraid to tell me that."
"No, I know," said Ariel. "That's not it at all. I *want* to sing."
"Then why?"
"There's this girl. She wanted to be the lead."
"Did she threaten you?"
"No, no! She... she offered me this deal. If I pretended to have laryngitis, so she could have the lead, she'd, uh. Introduce me to her friend." She blushed.
"Would this friend be the one you've been going out with every night the last two weeks?"
"Yes," murmured Ariel.
"Well, even if you met under, how shall we put it... odd circumstances, it seems as though he likes you. Maybe even well enough to handle the truth."
"But that's just the thing," said Ariel, slowly. "I'm not sure he really does like me. I'm not sure he even *knows* me."
"Well, there's only one way to find that out."
But she knew him. She knew she liked him. What if when he knew her, he decided he didn't like her?
"That's not the biggest problem, though. I had to pretend to Sebastian, too. And today he found out."
"And he was angry."
"So angry. He said these things - *I* said these things - "
Her father reached out gave her a hug. "If you're sorry, all you can do is tell him that." He ruffled her hair as she tried not to cry. "You and Sebastian have been friends for a long time. I have faith in him."
She pulled back. Smiled shakily. "And in me?"
"Goes without saying, princess. Goes without saying."

The next morning, Ariel waited for Sebastian at their usual spot, but he didn't appear. She walked to first period, feeling miserable. It was only when the radio flickered on ten minutes before announcements were due to start, that she remembered that this was Sebastian's first day as a dee jay.
And she hadn't even wished him good luck.
"Hey, hey, hey, everybody, this is Sebastian, your devastatingly handsome new DJ, here to distract you as you try to do your homework at the last minute."

Ariel grinned.

"If you're trying to do fourth period, chemistry, by the way, the answer is 32 moles." Around the room, people were looking up.

"I'll be coming at you every Friday with a wicked mix of interviews, commentary, and, of course, music. I've been told I have to play 'age-appropriate' music, so here you go!"

There was a pause, then the theme song to Sesame Street came on. Behind her, next to her, people started laughing. After a few moments, it faded out.

"Just kidding. Or am I? You'll have to wait to find out. Before we play any more music, I'd like to bring in our very first interviewee - Ursula Shenck, star of the school's musical, Songs for a New World, opening tonight! Ursula, come on in here."

"Hi Sebastian. Hi everyone!"

"Are you nervous about opening night, Ursula?"

"Oh, no. Well, a little. But we've been practicing so much and so hard, I'm sure everything will go great!"

"Is this your first time on the stage?"

"Yes, it is. I never thought about being in a play before, but it always did seem so much fun. So I thought this year I'd give it a try."

"And you were cast in the lead role. That's gotta take some talent."

"And luck!"

She sounded so sweet and innocent, Ariel thought. Maybe she'd even convinced Sebastian.

"Luck, and the determination to go after whatever you want?"

"Of course."

"No matter what it takes?"

"I - yes?"

"And talent, like I said. After all, an actress has to be very good at pretending."

Ariel sucked in her breath. A part of her was gratified, of course, but she didn't want Sebastian to get in trouble. Not for her.

But the interview was ending. The microphone captured the sound of her pushing her chair back and storming out. "That was Ursula Shenck, everyone. Starring in Songs for a New World, tonight at 8:00!"

Ariel breathed a sigh of relief and glanced at her classmates. They were smirking at each other - everything Sebastian had said was technically correct, but the *way* he'd said it... Up in the front of the class, the teacher was writing, oblivious.

There were still a few minutes left before announcements began. Sebastian came on air again. "One of the perks of this job is that I get to talk at you and you have to listen. My friends are pretty used to that, but I'm sure they can tell you, after a few weeks you learn how to tune me out. Anyway, I want to say a few things that have been on my mind."

"I've been thinking a lot recently about the way we change ourselves to impress others and fit in. You know, putting on make up, going to the gym. I mean, I'm just naturally beautiful, but I know the rest of you do it."

Ariel could picture his cocky grin.

"We don't just wear different clothes, though. We do different things. We pretend we're not good at school, when we are. We pretend we don't like last year's

music, when really, we secretly do. Sometimes we even lie."

"Well, I'm sick of that. I'm sick of pretending to be someone I'm not. So who am I? I'm Sebastian Evans. I'm a junior. I'm pretty good at math, if I could stop forgetting to do my homework. I hate sports, but I like music. No, I love music. And my best friend, Ariel. And making a fool out of myself on the radio." His voice was shaky suddenly. "Oh, yeah, and I'm gay."

Ariel's heart was beating wildly, but she couldn't do anything but listen as he continued.

"So, that's who I am, and I'm not hiding any of it. And I want everyone to know, you don't have to hide anything with me. I'm not going to judge you. I'm just going to be your friend." She heard his long, slow exhale of breath. Then: "Well, that was a very special message from yours truly. We'll finish off with some more age-appropriate music..."

She got up out of her seat. She didn't bother asking the teacher for permission, just walked out the door, out the hall. His song started playing - 'It's Not Easy Being Green' - and she began to laugh, and then to run -

She found him leaving the AV room. Once again, she couldn't find the right words, so she just gave him a hug. She was afraid he'd push her away, but he wrapped his arms around her.

"How'd I do?" he asked.

"Amazing," she told him. She stepped back. "I'm so sorry. For everything. For lying to you - for what I said, yesterday - "

"It's okay," he said. "I mean, it's not okay, not at all, but it's... okay, you know?" She nodded, then looked over at the AV room. "I can't believe you just did that." He grinned. "Neither can I."

"Why did you - not because of me?"

"Yes and no." He looked at her. "I don't know, Ariel. I thought I knew you."

"You do," she said quickly. "I'll never lie to you again, I promise."

"It's not just that," he said. "I never would have thought you'd do this. Change yourself so much, just to make someone else like you. I don't ever want to be like that." She felt so ashamed of herself. "Neither do I."

"So, I figure the best way to do that, is to just tell the truth."

"By announcing it to the school. I can't decide if that's incredibly brave or incredibly nuts."

"Well, it wasn't completely selfless," Sebastian said with a grin. "I also just made sure they can't fire me for what I said to Ursula. If they do, they'll look like they're doing it because I came out."

She grinned back at him. "You always were the brains."

He looked down at her with a smirk. "Does that make you the brawn?"

There was a sound of static, and then the announcements came on.

"That's our cue," said Sebastian. "I suppose we should get to class."

They walked back down the hall together.

They sat together at lunch, for the first time in a week. Sebastian picked at his

food.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly, hoping no one would notice.

"Yeah, sure," he shrugged. "Most people have been really cool about it."

As he finished, he looked up. Shirley had stopped at their table.

"Hi, Ariel! Hi, Sebastian!" She took a sip of the iced tea she was holding, then continued. "I just wanted to say that I thought you were great today. I can't wait to hear you next Friday."

"Thanks," said Sebastian.

"And if anyone gives you any trouble, you just let me know, okay? I'll spread a rumor that they're doing a little extracurricular extra credit for a parking spot."

"That's *nasty*," grinned Sebastian.

"I've been saving it for someone special," said Shirley. She gave them a little wave and, with another sip of her iced tea, walked off.

As she disappeared, Eric approached. He sat down next to Ariel and put an arm around her shoulders. "I was wondering where you'd got to," he said.

She smiled, hesitantly, and didn't answer. Sebastian was looking at her. But she couldn't tell Eric. She just couldn't - especially not in the middle of the cafeteria.

"I bought us tickets to the play tonight," said Eric. "And we're going to go over to Ursula's afterwards, to celebrate."

That sounded, to Ariel, like the worst date ever. She thought about trying to write out a refusal, but how could she explain why? She shrugged unhappily. Sebastian waited for her to say something, then took a frustrated bite out of his sandwich.

"There they are," said Eric, waving them over. "Hey!"

Ursula and two of her friends walked over. Ursula looked even prettier than usual today - and angrier, Ariel thought, as the older girl glanced at Sebastian.

"Aren't you two precious," she said. Eric laughed and gave Ariel a kiss on the cheek. "You're just the perfect couple, aren't you?"

"Well, nothing's perfect," muttered Sebastian.

Ursula turned to him. "My, my. Sounds like someone's jealous!"

"Yeah," echoed one of her friends. "But of who?"

Sebastian reddened. Eric's arm tightened around Ariel.

"Is that why you went after me today?" she asked. "Are you jealous of all the time I spend with Eric?" She smirked. "Are you jealous of Ariel getting to snuggle up next to him when they're all alone in his car?"

Eric's arm was so tense around Ariel that she could barely breathe, but he wasn't saying anything to stop Ursula. Sebastian, for once, seemed at a loss for words.

"Poor Ariel. All this time, he's been secretly pining after your boyfriend," Ursula continued. "You must feel so *used*."

"No," she whispered.

"What was that?"

"*No*." She shook Eric's arm off. "I don't feel used. But I can see how you'd be confused, since you're always the one who does the using."

There was silence at the table. Sebastian grinned.

"What a miraculous recovery, Ariel!" said Ursula, sweetly. "It almost seems too good to be true."

"Just like your getting the lead in the musical, right?" Ariel replied.

Eric turned to Ariel. "You can talk! .. wait, what are you talking about?"
"Do you want to tell him, Ariel, or should I?"
She didn't answer. Eric looked at her insistently. "Ariel? What's going on?"
"I lied to you," she said. "I never lost my voice. I was faking laryngitis so Ursula could have the lead in the musical tonight."
"Why - why would you do that?"
She took a deep breath. "Because Ursula said that if I did that, she would introduce me to you."
Ursula and her friends began to laugh. But Eric was looking at her like he couldn't see or hear anything else. "So you weren't just lying to me. Our whole *relationship* has been based on a lie?"
"I do care about you," she said, miserably. "That's not a lie."
"And why should he trust you?" asked Ursula.
"Oh, shut *up*," Ariel snapped. "Like you're one to talk about honesty and trust."
"Ariel!" Eric exclaimed. He was shaking his head at her. "God, I don't - I don't even know how to think about you anymore. Are you really a - a lying, scheming - "
"I'm not! I'm really not," she said. "I'm just not exactly who you thought I was, either."
He gave an angry laugh. "That's for sure."
"Hey, it's not as though you ever really tried to get to know me," she said. "You were more than happy to make your *mystery*."
He winced. "I was trying not to push you," he replied, defensively.
"And *I* was trying to make you happy."
"Well, you failed," said Eric. "Because I am definitely *not* happy with you any more."
He pushed his lunch tray away and stormed out of the cafeteria. With a satisfied smile, Ursula turned away, too, and motioned for her friends to follow her.
Ariel put her head in her hands and tried not to cry. She felt as if her world had dissolved around her, leaving her with nothing - no role in the musical, no Eric, not even any dignity. Nothing.
"I'm sorry," said Sebastian, quietly.
Well, not nothing.
"Thank you," she said. She looked at the spot where Eric had been sitting. "It figures our first real conversation is breaking up."

"Are you going to the play tonight, princess?"
Ariel looked up from where she sat, wedged in a corner of the couch. "Oh. No, I don't think so."
"Maybe you should."
"I don't see why."
"For closure," said her father.
"Closure?"
"It's what this doctor prescribes."
It was a short ride to the school. By the time they got there, the play had already

started. Her dad waited out in the car while she walked into the school, to the auditorium. She stood outside the double doors, listening to Ursula sing.

*I was sure that all I ever wanted
Was a life like the movie stars led
And he kissed me right here, and he said,
"I'll give you stars and the moon and a soul to guide you
And a promise I'll never go
I'll give you hope to bring out all the life inside you
And the strength that will help you grow
I'll give you truth and a future that's twenty times better
Than any Hollywood plot"
And I thought, "You know, I'd rather have a yacht."*

"She's not actually that bad," said Sebastian.

Ariel turned to look at him. "No, she's not."

"I mean, the costume designer must have had a hell of a time hiding her horns, but her *voice* is nice."

She laughed. "It's really nice."

"Not as good as yours."

"But I chose not to sing." Inside, Ursula had finished her song on a crescendo, and the auditorium burst into applause. "She didn't hold a gun to my head. It was my own choice. I deserve to be out here."

Sebastian nodded.

"And she deserves to be in there."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far." Sebastian grinned and put an arm around her. "Come on. Let's go outside."

They walked back out of the school. At first Ariel thought they were just wandering, but then she realized Sebastian was aiming for the football field. "Wait, my dad's waiting in the parking lot," she told him.

"This will just be a second."

There was someone waiting for them at the entrance. It was Shirley. She was holding some papers in her hand.

"Welcome to tonight's performance," she said, brightly, handing them each a program.

Ariel turned to Sebastian, confused. "I don't understand."

"Oh, come on."

They walked out into the stadium. The lights were on, setting the field aglow. Her father was sitting on the bleachers. After a moment, Shirley joined him.

"Sebastian - "

"Get with the program," he said, and went to go sit with her father and her friends. She looked down at the program in her hands.

Songs for a New World, it said. *Starring Ariel Anderson.*

In the stands, they began to cheer.

Blushing and feeling ridiculous, she walked out onto the field. There was even a microphone set up. Sebastian must have worked his AV connections.

"I feel a little silly," she muttered.
The microphone picked it up. "*You look a little silly!*" Sebastian hollered back.
She laughed, and her laughter carried across the field. Then, not knowing what else to do, she began to sing.

*Lie in my arms while you're sleeping
And think of the rivers you've crossed
I'll tell you the dreams I've been keeping
For moments like this, when your hope is lost
Hear my song - it'll help you believe in tomorrow
Hear my song - it'll show you the way you can shine
Hear my song - it was made for when you don't know where to go
Listen to the song that I sing and
You'll be fine*

As the echoes of her voice faded, and the small crowd in the stands began to clap, Ariel opened her eyes. She smiled. "Closure, huh?" she asked her dad. Even from a distance, she could make out his shrug and his "Who, me?" smile.

She was walking towards them when a movement by the entrance caught her eyes.

Eric.

Steeling herself, she walked towards him.

"I went to the play, but I couldn't stand it in there. I kept thinking about you." He shook his head. "You have an amazing voice. You used to sing at Kickers games, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you were the one at the try outs."

"Yes."

He looked embarrassed. "I've been hanging out at rehearsals, trying to hear you again," he said. "But you weren't there."

"No."

"You gave that up for me?"

She didn't know what to say, how to explain. She bit her lip for a long moment. Finally, she said, "It seemed so easy at first. Just a few weeks of keeping my mouth shut. I didn't realize how quickly everything would fall apart."

He smiled. "I have to admit, it's kind of flattering that anyone would like me that much..." Then his smile faded. "Today at lunch. Did we break up?"

"I – I thought so."

"I'm not sure I want to."

She shoved her shaking hands inside the pockets of her jeans, and willed her heart to stop beating so fast. "I know I don't want to," she said. "But I think maybe it's for the best."

"But –"

"When I first met you, I was crazy about you," she said. "I would have done anything for you. I just wanted to be the person you would like."

"You *were* crazy about me?"

She looked down at her shoes, at the way they smooshed down the freshly mowed grass.

"I still like you. A lot. But I have to wonder what kind of guy falls for a girl who can't tell him off when he needs it."

He looked at her seriously. "Do you think I need it?"

"Well, yeah. Today at lunch, you just let your friends pick on Sebastian without saying anything. Even if he wasn't my friend, he still wouldn't deserve that. And Ursula! Why do you even hang out with her, anyway? Do you know how mean she can be?"

"Let's not talk about Ursula."

"Why not? You know what people's friends say about their character - " Ariel stopped suddenly, and sighed. "See, we're already arguing."

"I guess we are."

"That's just it, Eric. I'm not a quiet person. I'm not sweet and easy to please. I'm gossipy and sarcastic and I hold grudges and I blurt out stupid things all the time and sometimes my sentences go on way longer than they ought to." She swallowed. "And I don't like soccer."

"You don't?"

"I mean, you don't even know me. I could tell you everything I like about you, but what could you say about me? Can you name one thing you like about me? Besides how well I sing?"

He looked at her for a long moment. Then he leaned over and kissed her once, twice. *No.*

It didn't surprise her, but it still hurt so much. She gave him a sad smile.

"We can try being friends," he said. "Maybe gossipy and sarcastic will grow on me."

"Yeah, friends. We can invite Ursula, too. Maybe manipulative and heartless will grow on *me*."

He flinched.

"I'm sorry," she said. And she *was* sorry, she *did* want to be friends. "I just – that's me. That's what you're dealing with."

"Yeah, I get it."

They stood for a moment, just looking at each other, not speaking. Finally he took a deep breath. "Goodbye, Ariel," he said.

"Goodbye."

He turned and walked back towards the auditorium. She watched him for a long while, then turned to look at the others. They were waiting there, patiently, for the concert to resume.

They wanted to hear her sing.

But not just sing, she realized. They wanted to hear her *talk* – hear her make bad jokes and gush over her newest obsessions, hear her yell and complain when she was angry, hear her opinions, her stories. *Her*.

They would wait as long as they had to, she realized. But why make them wait?

She walked over to the microphone. Tapped it twice.

"This thing still on?"

"Yes!" Sebastian shouted back.

“Testing, testing.”
“Oh, get on with it!”
Grinning, she began again to sing.

THE END
