

# Underground

**Underground**

**by**

**Gayle O'Brien**

Hookline Books

Bookline & Thinker Ltd

Published by Hookline Books 2011  
Bookline & Thinker Ltd  
#231, 405 King's Road  
London SW10 0BB  
Tel: 0845 116 1476  
[www.hooklinebooks.com](http://www.hooklinebooks.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or stored in an information retrieval system (other than for the purposes of review) without the express permission of the publisher in writing.

The right of Gayle O'Brien to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

© Copyright 2011 Gayle O'Brien

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.  
ISBN: 9780956847652

Cover design by Gee Mac  
Printed and bound by Lightning Source UK

For Ziggy and Sam

## Chapter 1

Annie lay down on her bed and scrutinized her work. The ceiling didn't look bad, considering. She would have preferred dark blue for the sky and gold for the stars, but black and yellow had been the only two colors on the darkened Wal-Mart loading dock. It was no use being picky.

If Annie was still in Virginia, she would have called Jenna and Marcy and told them to come over and see how she'd transformed her bedroom ceiling into a starry night sky. They would, she knew, tell her it was amazing, be jealous that she thought of it first and go home begging their parents to let them do the same.

The truth was she wouldn't have been allowed to do this in Virginia. A year ago, she'd asked her mother if she could.

"Absolutely not," she'd said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a complete waste of time and money and, when you get sick of it, we'll only have to paint over it."

"I won't get sick of it," Annie argued. "It'll be an educational exercise. I'll make sure all the constellations are right."

"You're not painting your bedroom ceiling. This conversation is over."

*I'll ask Dad when he gets home, she remembered thinking. He'll let me.*

But that was the night everything changed. She never got to ask him.

Annie got off her bed and looked out the window. Clumps of snow lay scattered over the brown grass in the front yard and small, icy puddles filled divots in the muddy driveway. The gray mountains were swallowing the setting sun. Across the street, a frozen river glistened.

"So this is Vermont," she said, pressing her fingers on the glass and feeling the icy air force its way in. She shivered and reached for the fraying J.Crew sweater she'd found at Goodwill.

Never could she remember being this close to freezing. In Virginia, it rarely got this cold and, when it did, she'd crank up the central heating to 85 °F and pretend she was in Florida. Compared to all the places they'd lived over the past year, Battenkill, Vermont was the coldest and the most remote.

What made it worse was realizing that in Virginia it was spring. It was the middle of March, which meant daffodils would line the highways and bluebells would lurk in the woods next to the football field. Cheerleading would start again, and Jenna would be pressuring everyone to "burn off that winter weight." It made Annie think of the high school cafeteria, where Jenna would spend the entire lunchtime dissecting the calorie content of everything at the table, then take a vote on who had the "fattiest food."

Annie made sure it was never her, but it didn't go unnoticed that her meal was a close second or third. What could she say? She loved food. Her father loved to make it, and she loved to eat it: enchiladas, fish tacos, chicken with dumplings and beef brisket in the winter; BBQ pork ribs, marinated steak, pasta salad and grilled corn on the cob in the summer.

"Healthy," her dad would say when Annie asked him to describe her shape.

"Ooh, I got more than an inch!" Jenna would shriek, pinching Annie's sides as they changed for cheerleading practice.

If only Jenna could see her now.

A rumbling noise came from Annie's stomach and she tried to recall when she'd last eaten. *Yesterday*, she remembered, at the 7-Eleven in Troy where she'd half-filled the tank of the Dodge Dart and had a hot dog smothered in ketchup.

Since then she had driven the hour to Vermont in the dark, stolen several cans of paint, and helped her mother into their new house. Add painting her bedroom ceiling into the equation and she had more than earned her one meal of the day.

Annie's stomach rumbled even louder. She grabbed her backpack and a pair of mittens and went downstairs.

Her dad always said, "If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is." Annie had never understood what he meant until they'd arrived at this house. The newspaper ad had read: *House for rent. Cash only. No lease.* Now she could see why.

It was an old farmhouse. There were houses like this in older parts of Virginia, but Annie had never seen one this close to falling down. At least it wasn't as bad as the barn out the back, where Annie reluctantly put the Dart after the drive from Troy. She feared the wind would blow the wrong

way, the barn would collapse and she'd be stuck having to steal yet another car. For now though, the Dart needed to stay hidden. Just in case.

Everything in the house was filthy. Whoever lived here last either had no interest in dusting or the place had been empty for a long time. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking at the dirt-encrusted skirting boards and murky windows, she knew she should have spent the day cleaning instead of painting.

She went into the kitchen. Dead flies littered the counter. She opened the oven and the smell was rancid. The house was dirty enough it could make her and her mother ill. Doctors and hospitals weren't an option. Even though there was only so much effort she wanted to put into a house that she might have to leave at any time, Annie resolved to find a store and buy some bleach.

And food. She needed to do something about food.

She peered into the living room and saw her mother still curled up on the couch, asleep. Her hair hung limp and defeated over her face. Over the past year it had grown, her original brown color pushing out her old blonde highlights until only the ends were yellow, as if she'd dipped her hair in paint. She thought of the ceiling upstairs and wondered if her mother remembered forbidding it on the night everything changed. Had Annie painted the ceiling in their old house, there would have been screaming and yelling and threats and privileges taken away. Now Annie was lucky if her mother even opened her eyes.

She slid her feet into her red cowboy boots, basking in the familiarity of their soft leather. As she unbolted the front door she caught her reflection in a large foggy mirror on the wall. She looked older. The gray circles under her eyes and the paleness of her normally rosy skin made her appear older than her 17 years.

How much longer could they live like this?

She braced herself against the cold and threw open the door.

With the Dart sentenced to the barn, Annie set to walking. She thought she remembered seeing a store on the way back from stealing the paint and headed in that direction.

The narrow, windy road was flanked by clumps of trees and the occasional herd of cows. She passed a total of four houses and a brown historic marker. She reached a crossroads and there, overlooking the intersection, was a two-story building covered in gray clapboard. A large painted sign hung from the columned porch: *Store at Five Corners*.

Annie walked across the small parking lot and pushed the door open. A bell clanged overhead. The store was quiet and dark. Tall mahogany shelves held assorted bottles, boxes and cans. A refrigerated cabinet

glowed from the back wall. Pine floorboards croaked under Annie's weight as she sought out bleach and cleaning cloths.

At the freezer section, she logged the price of each pizza, burrito and pot pie, standing there for so long she was soon cold again. The cheapest item was a vegetarian burrito – buy one, get one free. She put a dozen of them into her basket. For her mother, she got M&Ms and Diet Coke.

At the counter, a bell sat next to the cash register, asking to be rung for attendance. Next to it was a laptop, its screen glowing with the familiar white and blue of a Facebook news feed. Annie had to stop herself from reaching out to the keyboard. She last checked her Facebook page a week ago. Her status was as she'd left it on the night everything changed: *...is watching a re-run of Gossip Girl. Not as good the second time around.*

Then she thought of her other Facebook page. Private, with only one friend. She felt for the memory stick in her pocket. Still there.

*Soon, she thought. I'll take care of it soon.*

A teenage boy shot up from behind the counter. "Sorry," he smiled. "Re-lacing my shoes."

Annie's hand leapt to her heart.

"Sorry," he said again, "didn't mean to scare you." He began punching her grocery prices into the cash register. "I'd say you're just passing through, but we don't get many tourists buying bleach."

Annie cleared her throat. "Excuse me?"

"I was wondering if you'd just moved here."

"Oh. Um. Yes. We live just down the road."

"Ah, so you're the ones who've moved into the old Jennings Farm."

"I don't know whose house it used to be."

"Gray farmhouse? Stained-glass 1850 above the front door?"

Was there an 1850 above the door? She hadn't noticed.

"No one's lived there for a while," he added.

*That explains all the dust,* she thought.

"Do you need a bag?"

She put her backpack on the counter and pushed everything in. "No, I'll just use this."

"An environmentalist," he said. "I like you already."

Annie blushed. The bleach fell off the counter and onto her foot.

"Ow!"

The boy came out from behind the counter.

"Here, let me help," he said, leaning over to pick up the bottle. "Hey, cool boots! Where'd you get 'em?"

The day her father gave her the boots flashed behind her eyes.

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart," he had said. "They're authentic. Look, they've even got a knife loop on the inside of the right boot."

She remembered she had laughed. “What the heck do I need a knife loop for?”

Her dad had laughed, too. “Hey, you never know when something like that might come in handy.”

Annie took the bleach and hurried to the door. The boy followed her.

“So,” he said, “will I be seeing you at school?”

“I don’t go to school.”

“You don’t? How old are you?”

“I’m 17.”

She didn’t hold the door for him. He followed anyway, bursting out into the cold without a jacket. *Why is he following me?* she thought.

“Did you graduate early or something? Don’t tell me you’re some kind of child prodigy.”

“No, I just don’t go to school,” she said, fumbling with her mittens.

If he heard the impatience in her voice he didn’t respond to it. “Wow. I’d heard there were kids that didn’t have to go to school, but I’ve never actually met any of them. Are you part of some religious cult or something?”

“No. Just a decision I made.”

The boy laughed. “Oh, man. I can just see my old man’s face if I decided I wasn’t going to school anymore. You’ve gotta tell me how you convinced your parents.”

“Actually, it’s just me and my mom, and she’s fine with it.” Annie’s whole body shook against the cold as the boy followed her across the parking lot.

“Call me old-fashioned,” he called out, “but I think you forgot to pay.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” She pulled \$20 from her pocket.

“Just give me a sec and I’ll get your change.”

Annie needed the change. But what she needed more was to end this conversation. “Keep the rest.”

“Oh, come on, let me at least give you what you’re owed.”

“No, really,” she said, backing towards the street.

“I’m Theo,” said the boy, holding out his hand.

“I’m sorry,” said Annie, reaching the road and setting her pace. “I have to go.”

## Chapter 2

Samantha Weston couldn't breathe.

"Don't pull so hard!"

"Miss Sammy, you knows I's gots to pull hard. What's the point of wearing this thing if you ain't gonna wear it right?"

Nessie put her foot on Samantha's behind and yanked hard on the corset strings.

"Be careful!" Samantha snapped. "You'll make me fall over!"

"Arms up, Miss Sammy."

Samantha lifted her arms. Nessie threw the hoop skirt over her head. The wire circle hit the floor. The skirt blossomed out from Samantha's waist.

"I feel like the Liberty Bell," she moaned.

Nessie mumbled something under her breath as she tied the skirt's belt around Samantha's waist.

"What did you say?" Samantha snapped.

"I said, 'Buck up, Miss Sammy. This here is the price of becoming a young lady.' "

"You can go now, Annessa." The cold voice of Samantha's mother froze the room.

Nessie curtseyed and made a hunched exit. At the Weston plantation, it was common knowledge that if a house slave got too tall, she was sent directly to the cotton field. Even Samantha knew Nessie would be as tall as Samantha's mother if she stood up straight.

"It hurts," Samantha whispered.

"Good," said her mother, inspecting the corset. "Then it's tight enough."

"How am I supposed to sit down?"

"You won't have time for sitting. You'll be lucky if you have time to breathe."

"But Mother..."

Her mother raised her hand. "I don't want to hear another word. You're 17 years old. I started wearing a corset when I was 13."

Samantha rolled her eyes. Her mother raised her hand to strike her, and Samantha winced. Since the planning for Samantha's debutante ball began her mother's fuse had burned down to its crackling base. It wasn't that Samantha did not want her debutante ball – indeed, she wanted it very much. She wanted the music, the dancing, the swishing of ball gowns and the smell of men's cologne. She wanted to be the center of attention, the envy of her female peers and the desire of every man in the room. Never mind that she already knew who she wanted to marry – in fact, had known since she was five-years old – but a debutante ball was a rite of Southern passage and she intended to enjoy every second of it.

If only her mother would remember that this was Samantha's debutante ball, not hers. Or Georgia's.

Her mother snapped her two fingers. Oma and Chimi, two house slaves, entered carrying Samantha's debutante gown like it was rice paper. Samantha's mother had brought it back from Paris. The pale silk bodice was fortified with whalebone, making it practically stand on its own. The skirt was made of a dozen layers of organza and chiffon, embroidered with hundreds of tiny, dark pink roses. It was, quite simply, the most beautiful dress Samantha had ever seen. She reached out to touch it, and her mother slapped her hand.

Oma and Chimi lifted the dress over Samantha's head and guided it over the hoop skirt. She watched their dark hands manipulate the pale, delicate fabric. Oma stood behind with a button hook and began fastening the 120 satin buttons up the back of the bodice. Samantha tried to ignore the corset digging into her ribs.

Halfway up the bodice, Oma stopped. "I can't do no more, ma'am," she said.

"What?" said Samantha's mother. "What do you mean?"

Oma gently turned Samantha so her mother could see the back of the dress.

A terrible pause filled the room.

"Why doesn't it fit?"

No one dared answer.

"Measure her."

Oma pulled the cloth measure from her apron and wrapped it around Samantha's waist.

"21 inches, ma'am," she whispered.

"Give me that." Samantha's mother snatched the measure and pulled it tight around Samantha's middle. No one breathed.

Samantha braced herself. If her mother slapped her for anything, it would be this. Instead she shouted: "Get the dress off her. Now!"

Oma quickly undid the buttons. The dress was lifted over Samantha's head.

"Leave us," she said. The two slaves exited quickly and quietly.

Samantha stood while rage seeped through her mother's low voice like smoke out of a cigar. "Do you want to explain to me how your waist got to be 21 inches?"

Samantha opened her mouth, but nothing came out. How could she explain the inexplicable? The truth was that most days her body behaved independently of her intentions. It was changing, almost daily, and with those changes came an ever-evolving list of desires. Her body wanted food, in all its scrumptious shapes and forms: corn bread, caramelized peaches, creamed collard greens, maple-cured pork, biscuits and gravy. It wanted water, milk, lemonade and tea so steeped and sweetened it resembled Virginia soil after a thunderstorm. Her mother had always made clear the correlation between food and a woman's figure, but even on the days and weeks when Samantha resisted her cravings, her body still seemed determined to mature. The mirror did not always catch these modifications, but Samantha could feel them: the widening of her hips, the slight narrowing of her waist, and the ballooning of her chest. She knew the latter was the real reason her bodice was now too small, but how could she justify this to her mother, who was repulsed by the human body's needs and functions?

"Mother, I..." she stammered.

Her mother's expression shifted from rage to disappointment.

"How could you, Samantha? How could you do this to me?"

"I...I didn't mean to, Mother. I just..."

"You come out in one week. Don't you realize how important this is? Do you know how much money your father spent on the gown alone?"

"I know, Mother. I wish I could..."

Her mother sighed. "There is only one thing to do. Nessie!"

The slave appeared so quickly it was as if she'd never left the room.

"Until the cotillion on Friday, my daughter is only allowed water, apples and plain bread. Understood?"

Nessie curtseyed. "Yes, ma'am."

Samantha's mother left the room. Samantha fought back tears while Nessie quietly untied the ribbons of the hoop skirt and let it fall to the floor.

"Come on, Miss Sammy. Step on out."

Nessie held Samantha's elbow as she stepped outside the frame.

"Get me out of this corset, Nessie."

Nessie stepped back. "But Miss Sammy, you know your mama wants it on all..."

“I said, get me out!” Even Samantha was surprised by the volume of her voice.

Nessie undid the knot and loosened the strings. Samantha took in several deep breaths, as if she’d been under water too long.

Nessie put her hand on Samantha’s shoulder. “You want to talk, Miss Sammy?”

Samantha sneered. “Leave me alone, Nessie. You definitely wouldn’t understand.”

Nessie left the room and closed the door. Samantha pushed the corset off her body and kicked it across the room.

Samantha’s palomino was waiting for her in front, just as she’d instructed. Free of the corset and hoop skirt, she wore her canvas riding dress, durable for riding, but cool compared to the silks, wools and taffeta her mother wore regardless of the weather.

Milo, the horse slave, held onto the palomino’s bridle. When Samantha burst through the front door with her saddle bag, he took one look at her dress and shook his head.

“Oh, no, Miss Sammy.”

“Take the saddle off, Milo.”

He slowly undid the straps. “You know your mama wants you riding side saddle. And in your real riding outfit.” He set the saddle onto the ground and made a stirrup with his hands. Samantha pushed her boot into his pale palms. “Miss Sammy, you trying to get me whipped?”

“Give me my saddle bag,” she said.

Milo tiskied. “Saddle bag, but no saddle. Honestly, Miss Sammy. What’s your mama gon’ say?”

“She won’t say anything because no one is going to tell her.” Samantha kicked her feet into the horse’s sides. As she galloped away from the main house, towards the cotton fields, she turned her face toward the sun.

Spring had arrived early in Virginia. The grass was dotted with daffodils, and the woods were blanketed in bluebells. In a little over a month, cotton planting would begin. For now the field contained row after row of dry branches and brush. Every field hand she’d ever known had scars on their hands from those sharp cotton bristles, miniature versions of the whipping scars that streaked across bare, black backs like the trail of a dozen shooting stars. “The marks of insolence,” her grandfather used to call them.

Once past the cotton fields the landscape gave way to lush woodland. Mont Verity, Samantha’s family’s plantation, was 500 acres in all, 100 of which were filled with ancient trees that her grandfather claimed had been

inhabited by Indians before the family bought the land. Samantha guided her horse towards the stream that marked the property border with Dominion Royale, the Fabre family plantation, and dismounted.

While the horse drank from the stream, Samantha stepped over stumpy rocks to reach a large, flat boulder in the center. Had it been summer, she could have waded in and let her feet dangle in the rushing water. But even on this mild spring day, she knew the water would be too cold. It didn't matter – Samantha was just happy to be out of the house and out of that stupid corset. This part of the stream was where she came every day, and where no one from her family ever bothered her.

“Hold it right there.”

Samantha looked up and saw Eli Fabre standing on the other side of the stream. His pistol was pointed straight at her, concealing his blue eyes and his blond curls. “You're trespassing on Fabre family property.”

Samantha stood up. “I think you'll find that since the stream marks the division, the stream officially belongs to no one.”

“I think if you check the deed the dotted line runs right down the center of the stream, thereby making one half mine and one half yours. You, Miss Weston, are on my half.”

Samantha laughed. “So what are you going to do, Mr. Fabre? Shoot me?”

Eli cocked his pistol. “You know, I just might.”

Samantha put her bare feet in cold water and began to cross the stream. “Well, I can foresee a number of problems with that.”

“Stay where you are, Miss Weston. Or I'll shoot you.”

Samantha ignored him and kept walking. “One, my daddy will kill you. Two, when my daddy kills you, your daddy will try and kill my daddy. Three, if I'm dead, then there's no one to inherit my plantation. And four,” Samantha swiftly pulled her pistol from her cleavage, “you can't kill me if I kill you first.”

Eli let down his pistol and bowed.

“Touché, Miss Weston. Touché.”

They stood awkwardly, knowing what they were meant to do, but unsure who should initiate it. After several excruciating seconds, Samantha leaned in to kiss him. She missed his mouth, and kissed his nose instead.

“You're late,” she said, blushing.

They sat on a fallen tree at the edge of the river.

“I'm sorry. But you'll never guess what happened? Father took me to the auction!”

“A slave auction?”

“Obviously. What other kind of auction happens around here? Your father was there, too.”

This came as a surprise, but she did not say so. As far as she knew, her father wanted to replace slave labor with the industrialized methods used up north. Why was he buying more slaves?

Eli continued. “One of the ones Father bought has the biggest hands I’ve ever seen on any man, which will be good for some of the hard labor Father needs doing. But a man that big might have a big attitude, so we’ll just have to keep an eye on him. And then we got a young thing who’ll probably have a baby in a month or so.”

“Two for the price of one,” she said, absentmindedly. It’s what her grandfather always used to say when a slave was pregnant.

“Nah, we’ll probably sell the baby on. Father’s had enough with black babies running around the place. He says at his age he only wants the ones that can be put to work. Then there’s two your father bought. A husband and wife, but he isn’t going to have them right away.”

“Why not?”

Eli sat up straighter, pleased – it seemed – that he had something to teach her. “I think the wife is sick or something. Actually, I don’t know why your father bothered with her. He could have just had the husband and left it at that. If you ask me, he’s just asking for trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the slave will know that your father is soft and that is the worst thing in the world a slave could think about its master, especially this one. I could see he had an independent streak. Father tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn’t listen. It’ll cost him one way or another.”

“You talk like you’re an expert on this stuff.”

“I’ve got to be if I’m going to run my plantation.”

“Our plantation.”

Eli gave her a gentle nudge. “You know a woman can’t own property.”

“And you know you wouldn’t have the prospect of a plantation if you don’t have mine.”

Eli cleared his throat and shifted on the log. “So, what’s been happening in the world of Samantha Weston today?”

“My dress fitting,” she said. “It didn’t go so well.”

“No?”

Samantha told him about her mother and the small amount of food she was now allowed.

“Well, I’m just going to have to start bringing you some cornbread. I can’t have you looking like you’re ripe for the picking.”

“It’s not funny, Eli. You’ve got to talk to Father soon.”

“Don’t you worry, I’ve got it all planned.”

Samantha perked up. “You do?”

“I’ve just got to get him at the right time,” said Eli.

*So he doesn’t have a plan*, Samantha thought.

“I was hoping I could talk to him at the cotillion actually,” said Eli. “He’ll be looking at all those suitors who’ve come from Lord knows where, and that’s when I’ll present myself. It’s an offer he can’t refuse – keeping his daughter and his plantation.”

Samantha wasn’t so sure, but didn’t say. She didn’t know what to do, either.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” She opened her saddlebag and pulled out a slim, rectangular box made of smooth wood.

“Here,” she said, handing it to Eli. “Happy Birthday.”

Eli smiled. “You remembered.”

“Of course.”

Eli pushed the lid off the box. Inside, resting on folds of deep red satin, was a Bowie knife. Samantha watched him wrap his hand around the wooden handle and pull the hold off the blade.

“Well, my, Samantha,” he said. “It’s a beauty.” The steel blade was almost a foot long. He tapped the tip of the clip point.

“Ow!” he said, as blood oozed from his fingertip.

“It’s sharp,” she said.

“I can see that.”

“You like it?”

Eli put his bleeding finger in his mouth “I sure do.”

“Look,” she said, “the handle is inscribed.”

Eli took his finger out of his mouth and held the knife flat over his palms. An oval copper plate shone against the wood.

He read: “To Elijah Fabre, With Love from Samantha Weston, 1861.”

## Chapter 3

Annie ran barefoot across the highway, darting in and out of cars. Lights blazed and horns blared. Beyond the highway, her father stood in front of their house in Virginia.

“Dad!” she yelled.

He held out his arms to embrace her. As she took a step towards him, an explosion ripped through the air. She waved her hands to clear the smoke and there it was: the Virginia State Police car, set against her house as it burned to the ground.

“No!” yelled Annie, jolting upright as she woke from her dream. Sweat dripped down her back as the stained wallpaper surrounding her came into focus. Outside, icy rain tapped angrily at the window as if wanting to be let in. Footsteps came slowly up the stairs.

*He’s here, she thought. We’re dead.*

She thought about screaming, but if he’d found them, there was no point fighting it. She was tired of running.

Her door creaked open, and Annie held her breath. Her mother appeared at the bedroom door, an apparition in the gray light on the upstairs landing.

“I heard a noise,” she said, her voice almost imperceptible against the sound of the rain.

Annie released her shoulders from where they’d crept up to her ears. “Sorry. I stubbed my toe.”

Her mother turned and slowly made her way back down the stairs, not noticing that Annie was in bed and therefore couldn’t have stubbed her toe. If they’d been in Virginia, Annie might have told her mother she’d had a bad dream, because then her mother would do what mothers do – take Annie into her arms, rock her back and forth, and tell her everything was going to be okay.

Instead, Annie fell back onto the bed and yanked the quilt over her head.

Her empty stomach woke her several hours later. She glanced at her

father's watch – it was 2pm, a full hour before she usually allowed herself to eat.

Annie had been scrutinizing what she ate since the night everything changed. It wasn't that she was deliberately starving herself or trying to make herself ill – it was pure necessity. She and her mother had a fixed amount of money and when it ran out they would have nothing. Eating one meal a day was her way of making the money last longer.

Still, she couldn't deny she liked the effect this regime was having on her shape. Her jeans were looser, she could count her ribs and her cheekbones dominated her face. When she stood with her feet together, there was a few inches of space between her inner thighs. She could just imagine Jenna and Marcy's reaction when they saw her again. "Oh my god, you're so skinny!" they'd shriek. They would notice and they would be jealous.

As she lay in bed, she imagined herself returning home, the center of attention, the past year nothing but a good story that everyone wanted to hear. Both guys and girls would admire Annie for surviving it all, even Jenna and Marcy, and they would envy that Annie got to see the country while the rest of them were stuck in high school.

*Who am I kidding*, she thought. Even if she could go back to Virginia tomorrow, all her friends would be on the verge of graduating, something she could not do after missing a year of school. She'd have a lonely senior year while all her friends went to community college or Virginia State. No matter what happened now, her life was ruined forever.

Her friends had forgotten her already anyway. It was obvious. No one had posted anything on her old Facebook page for months. On the night everything changed, almost everyone she knew posted something.

*Where R U????*

*I just saw your house – WTF?!?*

*Please call me. We're all worried sickkkkk.*

*I just want to know that you're okay. Please know that NO ONE believes your dad could have done such a thing. Get home safe.*

Within a month, the posts stopped. These days, when she had access to a computer, she devoted her time to her other Facebook account.

She reached into her jeans and pulled out the memory stick, holding it in the palm of her hand. This flimsy piece of plastic was the only thing that had kept Annie going over the past year. But it was useless without a computer. Maybe Theo, the boy at the Store at Five Corners, would know where to find internet access in this town.

*Theo.*

Annie spent hours replaying their meeting in her head. Could she have acted more rudely? More foolishly? He'd been so nice and full of smiles, and she'd reacted the only way she knew how: by running.

Her only comfort was that had she been a normal girl, with a normal life, she might have been able to carry on a normal conversation with a perfectly normal boy.

At least, this is what she kept telling herself.

Annie forced her feet to the cold floor and got up, taking the quilt with her like a shroud. She knelt over her small pile of clothes and searched for anything that did not smell. Except for one clean pair of underwear and a pair of mismatched socks, everything else was dirty.

"Guess I need to do some laundry," she said to no one.

As Annie scooped the clothes into her arms, she could hear Jenna's reaction to the thrift-store clothes she now wore – "Since when are you going for the homeless look," or "I think you need to return those to the trash can where you found them."

Annie carried the clothes downstairs, past her mother sleeping on the couch, and to the basement for the first time. Each step down felt like it might give under her weight. There was no railing, so she ran her hand along the wall.

The basement was one large space, exactly the same size as the first floor above. A pile of defeated boxes littered one corner; in another stood a set of rusted metal shelves. A washing machine and dryer sat against the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

Annie blew at the dust on the washing machine and lifted its lid. The drum inside was old, but intact. She pulled the dial to *Normal*. Nothing happened. She pulled out the mini flashlight she kept in her pocket. Cobwebs clung to her arm as she reached behind the washing machine to retrieve its plug and put it into the one socket she could find. The machine rumbled to life. No sooner had Annie turned around to retrieve her clothes than a loud pop sent the basement into blackness and silence.

"Great," Annie groaned. She scanned the room with the flashlight and located the fuse box. As soon as she flicked the errant switch the fluorescent lights came back on, but the washing machine did not. Annie pushed and pulled at the dial until it came off in her hand.

She stared at the piece of plastic in her fist. Why were things that should be so simple so difficult? All she wanted to do was get out of the house and do what she needed to do, in clean clothes. And now she couldn't, because nothing was working. She thought about her father. This – fixing a washing machine – was his job, not hers. He should be here,

doing what dads were supposed to do, but he wasn't. He'd done what he'd done and no amount of wishing was going to change that.

Then she thought of her mother upstairs: why wasn't she down here doing the laundry? Why was Annie, by default, the responsible one?

*I didn't ask for this, she thought. I didn't ask for any of this.*

Annie took one step back and kicked the washing machine with the flat of her foot. It rocked slightly, then settled back in its place. She kicked it again, harder this time. Before it had the chance to settle, she kicked it again and again and again.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she chanted with each blow. It rocked and rocked, until it finally fell sideways onto the floor, hitting the edge of the bottom step as it fell.

The door to the basement creaked.

"Is something wrong?" Her mother's feeble voice.

Annie cleared her throat. "No, Mom. I'm doing laundry."

"I heard a crash."

"Just the drum vibrating."

The door closed. Annie sat down on the stairs and put her face in her hands.

That was when she noticed the gap between the bottom two steps and the rest of the staircase.

Annie turned on the flashlight, got up and crouched down to look through the gap. The sight of something white made her throat tighten. She angled the flashlight down to the floor, but couldn't see anything else. She reached her hand through and pulled, falling backwards when the bottom two steps came away from the rest of the staircase.

Underneath was a space about six feet deep. A small ladder led to the ground. She put one foot onto the first step and bore down to assure herself of its solidity, then she slid through the hole and climbed all the way in.

Annie crouched in the middle of the small space. The white she'd seen through the gap was a rectangular piece of canvas. A mixture of hay and green dust trickled out from underneath. A gray blanket was folded at the foot. A sunken pillow, yellowed with age, lay at the head.

"A bed," she whispered.

Next to the bed was a wooden crate. On top of it was a lantern, its glass black with residue, and a small Bible no bigger than the iPhone Annie used to carry everywhere. She got on her knees and picked it up carefully like a rare piece of china. Flashlight in one hand, she opened it, the pages as delicate as dry leaves on autumn ground. Her eyes marveled at the minuscule print and the familiar names it formed: *Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy.*

Then something caught her eye on the inside of the front cover.

AK - 12/4/56  
JS - 12/4/56  
MB - 4/17/57  
CT - 7/4/57, GB  
ZT - 7/4/57, FD  
AA - 1/8/58  
DF - 3/12/58, M  
HY - 9/23/58  
GK - 7/4/59, DS  
BR - 2/13/60  
HN - 6/29/60, FD  
GR - 7/13/60  
HJ - 9/17/60, M  
EF - 3/27/61  
SW - 3/27/61

Annie blinked, as if blinking would transform the handwriting into an idea she could understand. *Bible passages?* she thought. *A code?* She flicked to the back cover to look for more. As she did, a small, unsealed envelope fluttered to the ground. A faded but perfectly curved script read:

*Mr Sanford Weston  
Mont Verity  
Nr. Beckwith Station  
Virginia*

Annie was almost afraid to touch it. It seemed otherworldly, like a ghost or a phantom. She scooped it up gently, as if it were a baby bird.

“Virginia,” she whispered.

Inside the envelope was a folded piece of paper. Annie struggled to steady her hand as she slid her fingers in to pull it out and unfold it.

*March 27, 1861  
Dearest Papa,*

*There is so much I want to tell you that I don't know where to begin.*

*Firstly, I want you to know that I am safe. For now. It has been a long journey here and I have seen places and people I'm not sure I could have even dreamed of. This is a beautiful country, Papa – do you know this? The beauty runs in the rivers and over purple mountains; it is in the soil on which animals graze and food is grown. And the people who*

*inhabit this country, Papa – they, too, are a spectrum of colors. Our world is more than black and white. I know this now.*

*I cannot tell you where I am. I do not want to endanger those around me. No doubt this letter, when it reaches you, will have a postscript. I will be long gone by then, so please do not try and find me here.*

*I have changed, Papa. I am certain you would not like what you would see if you were here. I have had my eyes opened to the real workings of the world, in all its cruelty and wonder.*

*We will probably never see each other again. After all that has occurred, there are many reasons why a return to my old life in Virginia is impossible.*

*But what I really want you to know is that I am in love. Never did I think the love of my life would come in the shape and form that it has. I do not know what will become of this love, but just to know that there exists in this world someone so kind, so strong, so extraordinary – that is enough for me. Loving him, being able to love him – it has made me happier than I can describe. Know, Papa, that whatever happens to me now, whatever you may think of what I have done, the last few weeks have been the happiest of my life.*

*I love you, Papa. None of this is your fault; nothing you or Mother could have done would have changed the outcome. Please ask her to forgive me. And if it's appropriate, please tell the Fabres I am sorrier than I can say, and that I await God's judgment on my actions.*

*All my love,  
Samantha*

“Samantha,” said Annie, running her finger over the name.

She sat on the bed and read the letter again, willing it to tell her the rest of the story. Then she looked around the small space, the hidden space, wanting the room to have more to say.

So many questions flew off the page in her hands. They whirled around Annie's head, so loud and demanding it was as if they could be reached for and held.

It felt like some kind of trick. How could this have been here, all this time, and no one ever noticed? She half-expected a television personality to jump out and tell her she was on candid camera. “Ha, ha!” he'd say. “You fell for it! You thought you'd found a letter written by a Virginia girl, just like you. And you thought it funny that the some of the contents of the letter could have been written by yourself? Fooled you!”

There was no television personality. *Of course there isn't*, she thought. The longer she sat in the room, the more real it became.

She carefully put the letter back in its envelope and inserted it in between the pages of the Bible. As she crawled out of the room and put the two stairs back into place she felt guilty, like she was closing the door on a newly discovered friend. She let her hands rest on the edge of the stairs and pressed her fingertips into the worn wood.

There were many things that Annie did not know. How long they would be in Vermont? Where they would end up next? When would she see Virginia again? Would it ever be possible to go back to her old life?

But this is what she did know: a Virginia girl named Samantha had written a letter over 150 years ago and never sent it.

Annie had to find out why.