

# Before

**The** way I saw it when I was in high school, even though there were still millions of different life forms left on the planet, there were basically only two kinds of girls: Those Girls and everyone else. Those Girls had hair and teeth and breasts like the rest of us, but on them they weren't just body parts that you need to keep your head warm and chew your food and feed babies. On Those Girls, hair, teeth and breasts were these incredible, super-luxurious accessories that were designed to make men fall in love with their owners at first sight and run after them with bunches of flowers.

Savanna Zindle was one of Those Girls. When she walked down the street, heads spun and horns beeped. When Savanna smiled, hearts melted like the polar ice caps. If hanging from a roof wearing flippers and a neon-pink wig would have guaranteed a date with Savanna Zindle, Crow's Point would have been the Boys-in-Flip-



pers-and-Pink-Wigs-Dangling-from-Rooftops Capital of the World. I'd never had a friend like Savanna before. My friends were always girls like me. Foot soldiers in the army of The Rest of Us. Regular. Ordinary. Plain. Quiet bordering on dull. Invisible to guys unless they wanted to copy your homework or you'd just knocked them into a river. There was nothing ordinary or plain about Savanna. She was practically a natural phenomenon. You know, like sunrise over the Rockies or the Aurora Borealis. If I was a natural phenomenon, it was drizzle. I was the duller thing about her. Being friends with Savanna made me seem a lot more interesting than I was.

Savanna Zindle was the best friend I'd ever had. Which made her my best best friend. Which made her way more than just a friend. She was the sister I'd always wanted; born on the same team, sharer of secrets and dreams. We were virtually inseparable. Even though Savanna had a flat-screen TV with cable and HBO in her room and a queen-size bed, she usually spent most of her weekends at my house. It was way more peaceful than the Zindles'. My dad might have what Savanna called a "tetanus" grasp on modern life (meaning *tenuous* – as in: except for the electricity, heat, washing machine and computer, he might as well live in a cave), but he was pretty low maintenance as parents went. Especially if you were comparing him to Savanna's. Savanna's parents were both pretty insane. And when we weren't together



we talked on the phone for hours. She was the one I discussed sex and boys and periods and stuff like that with. She was the only person I trusted to cut my hair, and I was the only person she trusted to tell her how she looked in something new. If anything happened to either of us – even if it was just her having another fight with her mother or me finding out that another species was on the brink of extinction – the other would be the first to know. We finished each other's sentences and got all of each other's jokes. We were so close, we walked around in our underwear together, and ate off the same fork and drank from the same glass and sat in the same chair and fell asleep on the couch watching a movie, draped over each other like iguanas.

Sometimes, now, when I tell people about Savanna and what happened and everything, they want to know how we ever got to be friends. "She doesn't sound anything like you," they say. "What could you possibly have had in common?"

And the simple truth is that we were nothing alike and the only things we had in common (besides belonging to the same species) were that we were the same age, same gender, came from the same town and went to the same school. My dad said we were a Class-A example of opposites attracting (short, quiet vegetarian who liked old movies and lizards and worried about the environment versus tall, loud omnivore who liked Hollywood



blockbusters and shopping and worried about her nails). But friendship isn't based on reason – like buying a car because it's gas efficient or deciding not to wear the white dress because it'll be covered in stains in about two-and-a-half seconds. Despite all our differences, we were soul sisters and cosmic twins.

“Promise me you'll always be my best friend, Gracie. No matter what happens,” Savanna would say at least once a week.

And I'd laugh. “Of course I will,” I'd promise. “Unless you become a baby-seal killer or run a lumber company.”

Both those career choices were completely out of the question for Savanna, of course. Which meant that there was nothing that could ever happen that would end our friendship.

At least that's what I thought then.



# Chapter One

## Waiting for Savanna - Part One

I was waiting for Savanna by the bike shed like I did every day after last period. We lived on opposite sides of Crow's Point, but in the morning we always met at the Old Road and walked the rest of the way to school together, and in the afternoon we reversed the routine. On this afternoon, Marilouise Lapinskye was waiting with me. Marilouise Lapinskye was Savanna's other best friend – the one she'd had before she met me. (Marilouise wasn't one of Those Girls, either.) She and I liked each other and everything – I'd made friends with her before I even met Savanna – but I never saw her outside school unless she was doing something with me and Savanna, which wasn't that often any more.

We'd been standing there for a while. Long enough for us to have exhausted the topics of the gruesomeness of our gym class, how her dog ate all the candy her mom bought for Halloween, how we wished we were still young enough



to go Trick-or-Treating and how glad we were that we didn't wear make-up because of all the poisons and chemicals in them, and had lapsed into one of those uncompanionable silences that might possibly go on for ever – or until she started talking about what her mom thought about wedges or I started talking about chameleons. I couldn't figure out why she was hanging around.

Marilouise fiddled with the strap on her bag. "You know, I just wanted to say that I'm really glad you can come out for my birthday, Gracie," she said. "It really means a lot to me."

"Me too." I felt kind of uncomfortable. Other people might say something like it really meaning a lot to them out of politeness, but with Marilouise you knew she was sincere. "You know—" I gave her a smile— "I'm really glad you invited me. It sounds like it's going to be fun."

"I hope so." Marilouise had a nervous shrug. "I mean, I'm sorry it's not a real party or anything like that... Mom-my thought we could go to Anzalone's." If she fiddled any more with that strap she was going to break it. "I know it's not exactly fancy or anything, but the food's really good." Her voice brightened. "I really love their eggplant parmigiana."

"It sounds great." The only times I'd ever been to Anzalone's was to pick up a pizza with Savanna. Part of my dad's "tetanus" grasp on modern life was a dislike of eating out. "It's fancy enough for me."



“Yeah, but, you know, it’s only a little celebration – just you and me and Savanna. I hope that’s OK.” Marilouise had a nervous laugh, too.

“Of course it’s OK.” I hated parties. I was more a wading-through-the-river, tramping-through-the-woods kind of girl.

“Really?” Marilouise scrunched her lips together as if she was thinking of smiling. She thought better of it. “I was going to ask Jem, too, but ... you know...” She kind of rocked back and forth. “Savanna and Jem don’t really get along.”

Jemima Satz was Marilouise’s other friend – besides Savanna and me. It wasn’t so much that Jem and Savanna didn’t really get along, it was more like they totally loathed each other. Savanna said that Jemima was a fat, manipulative, jealous back-stabber. Jemima said that Savanna was a big-nosed, judgemental, self-centred witch. (Those weren’t the only things they said about each other, but it gives you the general idea.) Besides being terminally shy and perpetually apologetic, Marilouise had a real gift for understatement.

“The smaller the better, as far as I’m concerned,” I assured her. “I’m not big on major social gatherings.” I jingled the keys in my pocket. I was starting to feel a little nervous myself. If there were any other students left on campus, they were either in detention or in a club. “I never really know what to say.”



“Me neither.” Marilouise was shyer than a monk seal. The year before, she’d fainted when she’d had to read a paper in front of our history class. “But, you know, Savanna does. She *loves* parties and stuff like that.” This time she did smile, but not much. “I’m kind of worried that ... you know ... that she’s not going to have a very good time.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I thought you weren’t inviting Jemima.”

Marilouise giggled. “Well, yeah, right... That would’ve been a total disaster.” Her smile lost some of its pain. “But at least Savanna wouldn’t’ve been bored.”

“Trust me. Savanna’s not going to be bored.” I wasn’t really giving Marilouise my full attention right then. I was thinking more about where Savanna was than how much fun she would have had fighting with Jemima over the eggplant parmigiana. Maybe I’d somehow annoyed her at lunch and she’d left without me. I pulled out my phone and checked the clock. “I wonder what’s happened to her?” I mumbled. “She should be here by now.”

Marilouise shrugged. Philosophically. “Oh, you know Savanna... She’s probably fixing her hair or her make-up.” She gave me the look one asthma sufferer might give another as she reached for her inhaler. “Or something.”

“Or what?”

This shrug was more nervous than philosophical. “Well, you know, Savanna’s pretty easily distracted, isn’t she?”



“I don’t think there’s that much to distract her between the math’s wing and here,” I reasoned. Just empty classrooms and corridors.

“Yeah ... but sometimes ... you know ... she kind of forgets what she’s supposed to be doing, doesn’t she?” Marilouise’s bag swung slowly back and forth. “One time we went to the mall together and I waited by the fountain for over an hour before I realized she’d taken the bus home without me.”

I laughed. The way Savanna told that story, it was Marilouise who’d wandered off for something and never came back. “That sounds more like a major breakdown in communication.” There was no way Savanna would ever *forget* that I was waiting for her.

Marilouise glanced at her watch. “Gosh. Is that the time? I have to get going, Gracie. I have a ton of homework.” She hefted her backpack over her shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I watched her shamble down the driveway the way you watch the traffic when you’re waiting for a bus. Since Savanna didn’t think rules necessarily applied to her, I started wondering if she was being kept after school for texting during class or something like that (Savanna belonged to a couple of clubs, but she never actually went to any meetings.) I was about to leave my post to go check out the detention hall when someone rushed up behind me like a sudden wind.



“Ohmigod, Gracie... I am, like, so sorry I’m late.” Savanna gave me a hug, banging her bag against my hip. “Kiss-kiss. Please say you forgive me.”

“Where were you?” I disentangled a button on my jacket from Savanna’s necklaces. “I was just going to see if you’d got another detention.”

“Nah.” When I shook my head, that was the only thing that moved. With Savanna, you got a big wave of curly, shining hair and dangling, shining earrings. “I was saying goodbye to Archie.” Savanna had been going out with Archie Snell since the summer. “You know what it’s like...”

I had no idea. I’d never even been on a date.

“For forty minutes?”

“Oh, that...” There was nothing nervous about Savanna’s shrug. “I was behind the bike shed – waiting for Marilouise to go.” And nothing apologetic about her either.

“You *what*?” She never ceased to amaze me. Which would be one of the things I loved about her. “You mean you were there all the time?” At least she hadn’t forgotten me.

“And every second was like an hour hanging by my thumbs...” Savanna rolled her eyes. “I mean, like, really, Gracie, I know you have a kind heart and everything, but how could you let her drone on and on like that?”

“She wasn’t droning.” I unlocked my bike and wheeled it out of the rack. “We were having a conversation.”



“About *eggplant parmigiana*?” spluttered Savanna. “Oh, give me a break. I mean, yeah, eggplant parmigiana is marginally more exciting than hearing about Marilouise giving her dog a bath or what *Mommy* thinks about skinny jeans, but it’s still way less exciting than listening to paint dry.” She sighed. “Really, Gracie – I was starting to think she’d never leave.”

I laughed. “You’re too much, Savanna. You knew I was hanging around waiting for you and you hid behind the bike shed?”

Unlike those of us who were sixteen but looked twelve, Savanna was sixteen and could pass for twenty. Except when she pouted, which made her look like she was three and had lost Mr Bunny. “Oh, don’t make me feel bad, Gray. It wasn’t like I was hiding from *you*. And you know that if it started getting dark or there was a tornado or something I would’ve come out.” Savanna tossed her bag into the basket on my bike. “But I had this, like, reallyreally stressful day. And I mean *reallyreally* filled with stress. The stress was packed in there like salmons in a can.”

“*Sardines*.”

“Gracie, please... Have a little pity.” She slid her arm through mine. “I know I asked you to tell me when I get my words confused, but after a day like today linguistic perfection isn’t really a major priority.” We started walking down the drive. “I mean, you wouldn’t believe so



much crap could happen to one person who wasn't a biblical character. It's like everybody and his extended family woke up this morning with only one thought in their tiny minds: Let's give Savanna Zindle a really awesomely hard time today. Let's see that she truly suffers."

I poked her with my elbow. "It couldn't be everybody, Savanna. At least one person must've woken up thinking about breakfast."

Savanna grinned. "OK, maybe one person woke up wondering whether she was going to have granola or cornflakes – but everybody else was thinking about how to ruin my day." She poked me back. "And I'm not even counting the super-catalogue of disasters that happened *before* lunch, Gray." Which would be the fight with her sister ... the fight with her mother ... harsh words from her father ... getting her bagel stuck in the toaster ... forgetting her English homework ... breaking her longest nail because Mrs Pontiac wouldn't excuse her from gym ... a surprise quiz in maths ... "I'm talking about just *since* lunch. I mean, what is that, like a couple of hours? That's not long enough for a manicure and a leg wax, for God's sake. And you know what? I even had to sit next to the window in French because Kira what's-her-face – you know, the one who looks like a cocker spaniel? – she took my seat because I was, like, half a second late, and you know I can't stand to be in the sun like that. I mean it, Gracie, if I get skin cancer I'm suing the school district. It



really is sooo unfair.”

I wasn't too worried about the skin cancer. Savanna was pretty much protected by make-up.

“But I still don't get it. Marilouise is your oldest friend. Why would you—”

Savanna held up her free hand. It was hard to tell if she was surrendering or shielding herself. “I know ... I know ... I'm, like, a terrible person – I admit it. But I just couldn't face her right now. I really couldn't.” She shook her head. “I mean, I am truly fond of Marilouise, you know I am.” She frowned. “And that's even though she hasn't always been the most totally understanding and supportive friend you could hope for.” Curls swirled and earrings flashed. “Remember the time that psycho at Scissor Sisters cut my hair and Marilouise said I looked like a squirrel?”

“Savanna, she *was* joking.”

“But it wasn't funny, Gracie. You know how sensitive I am.” More swirling curls and flashing gold. “And what about how she's always defending Zelda and telling me I should be nicer to her?”

Zelda was Savanna's mother. They had a troubled relationship. (Savanna had a troubled relationship with her dad and her sister too, but the one with Zelda was more troubled.)

“That's just because Marilouise's father abandoned them. You know, she's very mother-sensitive.”



"Maybe." Savanna's shoulders heaved as though she was trying to shake something off them. "But she still makes me feel really bad when she goes into her Miss-Sweetness-and-Light-and-Two-Good-Shoes routine."

*"Goody Two Shoes."*

"Whatever. The point is that Marilouise doesn't live with the horror that is Zelda Zindle. I bet if she did she'd talk to her exactly the way I do."

I wasn't so sure about that. Besides the fact that Marilouise was more the salt-of-the-earth than the salt-in-the-wound type, odds were that if Marilouise had been made of jute she'd have been a doormat. She wasn't really known for being harsh.

"You may be right," Savanna conceded. "I mean, she is like the human equivalent of boiled potatoes, isn't she?" Savanna smirked. "No butter, no salt, and *definitely* no pepper."

"There *are* worse things." I really liked plain boiled potatoes.

"I didn't say she's like this major booga-booga friend from hell, Gray. I mean, she's absolutely not the worst best friend I ever had."

That would be Lena Skopec. Lena Skopec and Savanna had been best friends when they were nine. Lena talked Savanna into giving her the pink leather boots she got for Christmas as a friendship present, and then, when Zelda made Savanna ask for them back, Lena told everyone



that Savanna had lice. My worst best friend was Candy Russo.

“But Marilouise is your oldest friend.” I guess I felt about Marilouise the way I felt about the planet – you know, that I had to defend her because she couldn’t really defend herself.

“Exactly!” Savanna snapped her fingers. “The important word here being *old*. I mean, let’s face the very loud music, Gracie. Marilouise and I have been drifting apart since we started high school. You can’t deny it. I grew up practically overnight, but Marilouise is still like a little kid. Everything’s *Mommy this* and *Mommy that*... I mean, she still has *dolls* on her bed, for God’s sake! You’ve seen her room. It’s like Time dropped dead in there or something. Dolls on the bed ... ruffles on the spread ... pictures of her dogs all over the dresser... It’s like a mega-miracle she finally got rid of her Little Mermaid curtains.” She sighed. “We just don’t have that much in common any more.”

“Yeah, but—”

But Savanna was on a roll.

“And what was the ‘*It’s not like a real party or anything*’ routine? I mean, give me a break, huh? Like there was ever a chance she’d have a real party! Marilouise doesn’t know enough people to fill an SUV, yet alone enough to make a party.”

“*Let alone.*”

“Don’t try to distract me, Gracie. The point is that



she's lucky she knows *us* or she'd be eating her stupid eggplant with only that witch Jemima for company. I mean, ohmigod... How depressing would that be? I'd rather be put on a chain gang."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever seen *Cool Hand Luke*." Savanna had a thing about old movies: she wouldn't watch them.

Savanna didn't let that stop her flow. "And anyway, I don't know why she's obsessing about it now," she went on. "I mean, her birthday's not for, like, *ages*."

"Two weeks."

"Exactly. I mean, like, really, Gracie, who decides what they're going to eat two weeks ahead?"

In my relationship with Savanna, she was the one who was passionate, spontaneous, unpredictable and as emotional as a character in a disaster movie. Four more of the things I loved about her. I was the thoughtful, plodding, reliable one. I was the voice of reason.

"For Pete's sake, Savanna, she's nervous about going out for her birthday, that's all. I don't really think that's a crime. And anyway, she was just keeping me company." I poked her with my elbow. "You know, while I was waiting for *you*."

"Oh, that's right!" wailed Savanna. "Blame me! Everybody else does. But you'll have to get to the back of the line, Gracie. There are at least three million people ahead of you."



“Stop exaggerating,” I ordered. “It can’t be more than two and a half million.”

By the time we stopped laughing, we were at the Old Road. I disengaged my arm so I could get on my bike.

Savanna looked at me. Askance. “Where are you going, Gracie?”

I said that I was going home. “You know, that place where I live? Where I keep my clothes and stuff?”

Savanna said she thought I was going with her. “Didn’t I tell you at lunch that the mother dragonned me into doing the shopping this afternoon?”

*“Dragooned.”*

She flicked a hand. “Whatever. The point is that you said you’d come with me.”

I didn’t remember saying that. All I remembered was Savanna grouching about the Zindle elders, their other daughter and their toaster, and me agreeing it was a miracle she didn’t have chronic indigestion since she never had a meal without a fight.

“Well, I can’t go alone,” said Savanna. With conviction.

“Why not? It’s not as if you have to strap on your snowshoes and go shoot a moose, Savanna. You’re just going to Food First to get some groceries.”

Savanna shook her head. “Not by myself, Gracie. You know how much I hate shopping for food. I mean, how mind-drainingly boring can you get? I’d rather be trapped



in a coalmine with Marilouise. I need moral support. You have to come with me.”

“But I can’t. I have a translation to do for Spanish. That alone’ll take me hours.”

Savanna wanted to know why I always had to make things so hard. In case I hadn’t noticed, this was the twenty-first century.

“It won’t take twenty minutes to do it. You can have it translated online.”

No, I couldn’t.

“But that’s—”

“No, it isn’t,” argued Savanna. “Cheating’s when you copy off someone else. This is using the resources available. Which everyone says is, like, a major sign of intelligence and ability.” Her smile was like a cloudless sky. “Anyway, it’s no worse than using a calculator. It’s what you’re supposed to do.”

I figured my Spanish teacher Señor Pérez would disagree with that. Señor Pérez was pretty much firmly embedded in the twentieth century.

“I wasn’t going to say that it’s cheating, Savanna. I was going to say those sites are—” I was going to say those sites were for morons, but I stomped on the brakes just in time. I was pretty sure she used them herself. “Those sites really don’t work. Not for something like this. They’re mega-literal and they get stuff really wrong.” I was in the Advanced Placement class. Literal didn’t cut much



ice with Señor Pérez. “Besides, the whole idea is to learn the language, not learn how to find a site that’ll do your homework for you.”

Savanna made a face she usually reserved for a lecture from her mother. “Oh, pardon me, Pope Gracie. I wasn’t trying to get you to betray your holy vows here. I just think you should give yourself a break. It’s not, like, going to kill you to ease up on the drudge-till-you-drop routine just this once.”

“But not today.” I gripped the handlebars. Determinedly. “Anyway, it’s my night to cook.” My dad and I took turns.

Savanna’s face darkened with disappointment. “Oh, Gracie, please...” She clutched my arm. At least I was wearing a jacket so she couldn’t draw blood with her stiletto nails. “You and your psychotic work ethic. I mean, I, like, hardly saw you all summer because you were planting butterflies all the time.”

She really did crack me up. “I wasn’t *planting* butterflies, Sav.” I worked on a project with the National Park over the summer doing stuff like teaching little kids about the environment and reinstating wildlife habitats. But not all of us thought that was better than sitting on the beach, self-basting. “I was planting a butterfly garden.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.” Savanna didn’t share my worries about the environment – you know, that pretty soon we won’t have one that actually supports



life. Savanna had an optimistic nature. Savanna said that things couldn't be as bad as I thought, because if they *were* someone would do something about it. She figured that if things did get really bad, then science would come up with a solution. Since this is the twenty-first century. Whereas I figured that was like expecting a murderer to bring his victim back to life. "The point is that I didn't get to talk to you *at all* last night."

I pretended to choke. "Because *you* were busy."

"And I haven't had more than, like, half a second alone with you today..."

As if it was *my* friends who always ate lunch with us.

She gave me the Mr-Bunny's-gone-for-good look again. "Please, I'm begging. I really need some quality Gracie time. Reallyreallyreally. Just a few measly minutes. You can't let me down."

"I want to come..." I was torn. My psychotic work ethic was pulling one way and not wanting to let Savanna down was pulling the other. "But I really should—"

"Pleasepleaseplease..." Savanna clasped her hands. If you'd thrown a shawl over her head she would've looked as if she was praying. "You can't abandon me now, Gracie. You can't let me go by myself. I have a very sensitive nature. You know how the supermarket stresses me out."

And I had a very pliable nature. "I don't know..."

"Don't be unreasonable, Gracie. This is not like a



really big deal. It's like a drop of ant pee in the ocean. I mean, the shopping's not going to take any time at all with the two of us doing it, is it?"

In my heart, I knew this wasn't true. Experience suggested that anything one of us could do by herself in an hour – like baking cookies or mowing the lawn – would take the two of us together at least half a day. Probably much longer. But all I said was, "Um..."

"Oh, come on." She squeezed my arm. Affectionately. "I'll be, like, a gazillion times happier, and you'll be maybe ten minutes later getting home than you would've been."

This last part wasn't true either. I rolled my eyes. "Ten minutes?"

"OK, twenty. Thirty tops." If I'd been taller, she would have leaned her head on my shoulder. She leaned her head on my head. "Pleasepleasepleaseplease, Gracie. Who can I count on in this cold, cruel world if I can't count on you?"

"All right, but we're not stopping for a drink or anything—"

"Of course not." Savanna threw her arms around me. "Only first we have to drop by the drugstore. It won't take long."