

siobhan vivian

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE LIST

STAY SWEET



ALSO BY SIOBHAN VIVIAN

The Last Boy and Girl in the World

The List

Not That Kind of Girl

Same Difference

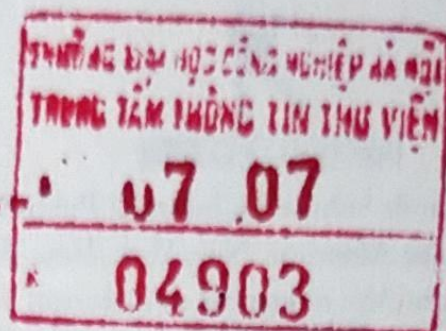
A Little Friendly Advice

COWRITTEN WITH JENNY HAN

Burn for Burn

Fire with Fire

Ashes to Ashes



STAY SWEET

siobhan vivian



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May 3, 1945

Nineteen girls came to the lake tonight and each one brought her very own spoon. Up from the sixteen girls last week, and the eleven who showed up the week before. A month ago, there were only four of us.

I climbed off my bicycle and, for a moment, stood back by the trees and watched them. Most of the girls I knew well, some less so, and a few weren't even from Sand Lake. Not that it mattered. They had spread their blankets out edge to edge on the sand to make a huge patchwork quilt, kicked their shoes and sandals off in one big pile. They passed around Life and the latest Seventeen, fussed with each other's hair, chitchatted while the last of the sun disappeared and they waited for me to show.

I could feel my heart pounding underneath my blouse.

I might have tried to slink away if Tiggy hadn't spotted me and rushed over, grinning ear to ear. For her, more girls meant less time she'd have to crank the ice cream maker. Tiggy complains her arm hurts after about a minute of churning, though

she sure does recover once the ice cream is ready. But I saw more girls I'd be disappointing tonight.

Tiggy lifted my bag out of my bicycle basket and I followed her, apologizing to everyone for being late. I tried to temper their expectations as I poured my ingredients into the bucket of my ice cream maker. The girls had been so keen on last week's vanilla, and I would have loved to make them another batch of it. But sugar rations had been cut yet again and my mother forbade me to even open her pantry.

So I'd spent the whole afternoon trying to sweeten the cream with something other than sugar. I tried raw honey, apple juice, even shavings from one of our victory garden carrots. I'll admit, I enjoyed the challenge, experimenting, churning and tasting small batches, each one a step closer. That is, until time ran out and I needed to get to the lake. I wasn't sure the concoction I'd settled on would even be edible.

The girls didn't seem to care one way or the other, which would have been a relief, had I not cared so deeply. More than I ever expected to.

Normally, those of us who got letters from our boys read them aloud while we took turns on the crank, though I casually suggested skipping them this week, knowing Marcy's family hadn't heard from her brother Earl in nearly a month. Marcy insisted, even managing a weak smile. It amazes me how good we're all getting at pretending to be strong even when we're close to hanging it up.

Luckily, Dot went first and had us in stitches. I honestly can't get over how fresh James Pearson is. His mother would turn red as a beet if she knew how James begged Dot to send him a picture of her in her slip.

I read Wayne's latest letter. In it, he promised that the boys in his unit are as heartsick as we girls are back home. And he's glad to know we're keeping busy with our ice cream nights because being miserable and lonely will make the time we're apart pass more slowly.

I felt sorry as I folded his letter back up. Though I kiss each one I send to him and spray the envelope with what I hope is enough of his favorite of my perfumes to

last a trip across the world—I go through a \$7.50 bottle of Beau Catcher every few weeks—I do write Wayne such boring things. About my ice cream recipes or complaints about Mother, who is intent on turning our wedding into the social event of Sand Lake the minute the war ends.

Maybe I should send Wayne a picture of me. Not in my slip. For that, he'll have to wait until our wedding night. But it might lift his spirits to have a photo of me in my bathing suit. With my hair curled and pinned like Betty Grable.

Anyway, after the letters, and after we'd aired our dirty laundry for the week—fights with parents, the scarcity of pretty dresses in stores, the latest newsreels—Tiggy brought up the idea of my selling ice cream at the Red Cross fund-raiser her mother was organizing. I shot her a look because I had already told her it wasn't a good idea. It wasn't just that sugar rations were getting smaller and smaller. I liked that our ice cream nights were just for us. Ignoring me, she asked the girls to suggest ideas for what I might put on a banner, since each food table needed one, and that went on until the ice cream was ready to eat.

I wasn't listening. My stomach was in a knot as I unscrewed the cap and pulled off the crank. Though the thought did occur to me that if this batch of ice cream tasted terrible, Tiggy's idea of my selling it might disappear.

Tiggy crawled over and dipped her spoon right in, helping herself to the first taste. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she made "mmMMmm" sounds that had the girls squealing and huddling up for a taste. They'd never had anything like it, they said. What was in it? What was this flavor? Their eyes were wide, smiles big.

I figured they were being polite until the ice cream finally came back around to me.

But it really was terrific.

The best I've ever made!

The girls were clamoring for seconds and thirds and fourths, telling me that I just had to sell this. I'd make a fortune, guaranteed. And it would be such a help to our boys.

Tiggy made a joke then, reaching for yet another taste. "Boys? What boys? I've got

everything I need right here," she purred, and naughtily licked her spoon.

The girls giggled, but I gasped and put my hand on Tiggy's leg. "Tig, that's it. My banner could say 'Ice Cream So Sweet, You Won't Miss Your Sweetheart.'"

Everyone went quiet. I closed my eyes.

I could paint the words in pink on some muslin.

I'd have the girls wear their white graduation dresses and curl their hair.

We'd set the ice cream out in rows, perfectly round scoops in thin china. Mother wouldn't want me using her good dishes, but I knew I could make her feel guilty enough to let me. I'd bet the other girls could persuade their mothers too.

How much could we get for a dish?

Thirty cents?

Fifty?

Just as there's a moment in the churning when you first feel the cream and sugar thicken, I could sense the potential of what this could be take hold. I felt happier than I had in months, until the sound of sniffing made me open my eyes.

Tiggy and the rest of the girls were in tears.

"I'm so sorry," I told them, my face burning. "Please forget I said that." Ice cream was supposed to be our distraction from thinking about the war.

Tiggy wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. "Don't apologise. It's perfect," she said, taking my hand in hers and squeezing it. "I think this is going to be big, Molly."

If it were only Tiggy saying so, I'm sure I wouldn't have believed her. Not because she's a liar, but she's my best friend. But the other girls crowded around me with their spoons, wiping their tears and reaching for more.

CHAPTER ONE

AMELIA VAN HAGEN IS KNEELING ON THE FLOOR IN her bra and a pair of khaki shorts, brown hair neatly split into two fishtail braids, a polo shirt draped over her lap. She smooths it, then gently plucks off a tiny fuzz ball and flicks it away.

When Frankie Ko gave her this Meade Creamery polo on her very first day, it was the exact same shade of pink as a scoop of strawberry ice cream. Now, four summers later, and despite the dim morning light of her bedroom, she sees that the pink has faded to a much softer hue, a color closer to cotton candy.

There are lots of summer jobs for the teens of Sand Lake and each comes with its own perks. Being a lake lifeguard means your tan lasts until October. The mall is air-conditioned and employees get a discount at the food court. Babysitters can make serious cash, especially if they get in good with the tourists. But

Amelia always dreamed of being a Meade Creamery girl.

The Meade Creamery ice cream stand has employed all girls and only girls since it opened, way back in the summer of 1945. And though the draw of the place is solely the ice cream, each time her parents would take her, and as soon as the line would bring her close enough, Amelia would lift up on her toes and study the girls working inside. Though the faces changed each summer—as the oldest ones left for college and the newbies struggled to keep up with the pace of things—the vibe between the girls stayed the same. Amelia liked how they talked to each other, a mix of codes and inside jokes, how gracefully they moved in such a cramped and frenzied space. How much fun they seemed to have, despite the heat and the crowds, despite their crappy radio with the foil-covered antenna.

Amelia pulls the pink polo over her head. It sort of *feels* like cotton candy too, soft and light from what probably adds up to a billion trips through the wash between her very first day and this one, a Meade Creamery girl's endless fight against the speckling of caramel dip, of hot fudge, of the bright red juice that the maraschino cherries float in. What hasn't paled, not even four summers later, is the thrill she gets from wearing it.

Frankie Ko handed this very shirt to Amelia four years ago. Frankie was Head Girl that summer, and she had been lying on top of one of the picnic tables, sunning herself while she waited for the newbies to arrive. Her shiny black hair was as long as her perfectly frayed cutoffs were short. She wore ankle socks with little pink pompoms at the heels and she had four, maybe five, woven string friendship bracelets tied around each wrist. She was half Korean, impossibly beautiful, effortlessly cool. That's how every newbie feels about the Head Girl her

boyfriend until further notice. After the introduction, Cecilia let Amelia know that she had already bought them a mini-fridge for their dorm room, and so it would be great if Amelia could get them a microwave (see helpfully provided links for style and color suggestions).

Amelia's reread this email so many times. Cecilia seems fine, way better than some of the dorm mismatches she's heard about when former stand girls drop by for a visit and a free waffle cone. Though she's drafted some potential replies, she hasn't sent one. It feels like the starting gun for a race she doesn't want to run.

Unfortunately, Amelia's last first day at Meade Creamery is undeniably the beginning of the end.

"Amelia?" Cate Kopernick emerges from a heap of blankets and pillows on the floor. Her long blond hair is looped in half with an elastic and it hangs over her shoulder like a golden lasso. She makes the screen on her phone light up and, after wincing at the glow, casts it aside. "You're going in already?"

"I couldn't sleep. I'm too nervous."

"Nervous?" Cate laughs. "Come on. Seriously?"

"I know, I know." Amelia says it as quickly as she's moving now, standing up, taking her tote bag off the back of her desk chair, wriggling her feet into her Keds.

"I heard you downstairs last night."

"I was baking blueberry muffins."

"At two in the morning?"

"I thought it'd be nice to give the girls something to eat before I start assigning chores."

Cate rolls her eyes. "Don't worry about being likable. Everyone already knows that today and tomorrow are going to suck."

She yawns again. "Just give me ten minutes to shower, and I can drive—"

"I'll ride my bike. It'll help me clear my head. Really. Please go back to sleep. I'll see you in a few hours."

"Hold up. Where's your pin?"

"I guess I forgot to put it on." Amelia blushes because she is a terrible liar and makes for the bedroom door.

Cate grabs her ankle. "Amelia! Quit acting weird!"

With a halfhearted shrug, Amelia goes to her jewelry box. Inside, mixed in with her nicer jewelry and the tassel from her graduation cap, is a gold flower pin the size of a Snapple cap, a clear rhinestone anchoring the petals. She hasn't touched it for nearly a year, not since it was given to her last August.

The girls were celebrating the end of the season with a sleepover down at the lake, a Meade Creamery tradition. Amelia was standing next to her half-set-up tent, having temporarily given up on putting it together in favor of using bits of broken sugar cone to scrape out the streaks of chocolate from their last remaining drum of ice cream.

Heather, who was Head Girl last summer, had just picked up the final paychecks from Molly Meade's farmhouse and was handing them out. She paused when peeling Amelia's from the stack, a funny look on her face. Then she shook the envelope so Amelia could hear the clinking inside it.

Amelia froze. A drip of chocolate rolled down her forearm.

"Amelia," Heather said. "Put the ice cream down and get over here!"

Stiffly, Amelia did as she was told. She chased the drip with her tongue, put the bite into her mouth, and forced a swallow. Setting the cardboard drum in the sand, she snuck a look over to