

*It's May and I'm in love. I'm in love with Leonard Russo who has thick curly blond hair and big blue eyes and gives me cigar boxes full of jewelry every day after school. And I'm in love with Victor Panchenko, who asked me for the last skate at the fourth grade roller skating party and leaves bouquets of wildflowers on my desk. I'm in love with them both, but I don't think this is allowed. I'm pretty sure you should only have one love at a time and I'm just about to choose between them, when I unexpectedly fall in love with the boy next door. An Irishman, named Finn Bailey.*

Falling in love with Finn Bailey is sudden and effortless and dramatic and much more dangerous than Leonard or Victor, because Finn is wild and handsome and lives only twenty feet from my front door.

I love his freckles. His hazel eyes. His curly dark hair. And the fact that he is braver than anyone I've ever met. He climbs the water tower ladder all the way to the top and does double flips off the diving board at the Camillus pool. He's lived in India and Germany and, most recently, a magical place called Okinawa. Wherever Okinawa is, it has bestowed upon the Bailey family an exotic set of furniture no one in Camillus has ever seen before; huge round rattan chairs that you can take apart and flip over and make forts out of, blue blown glass vases and ashtrays shaped like fish. Finn's mother is Okinawan. She is petite and beautiful and cooks hot spicy

dishes with seaweed and octopus and everyone in the family knows how to use chopsticks. The Baileys are definitely the most interesting thing to happen to Oakridge Drive in my lifetime. I still love Leonard and Victor, of course. I always will, but Finn is different.

During my time of being in love with Finn Bailey, I completely forget about everyone else. I don't play with my brother or even my best friend Sami. I eat less than usual, which is not much to begin with and I feel dizzy and slightly nauseous, but it's worth it. It's all worth it for the pain and suffering of true love.

Every afternoon, Finn and I meet in our secret hiding place - a narrow space behind the yew bushes that line the front of our house. They're prickly and getting comfortable behind them takes some effort, but when we're settled, Finn shows me a new magic trick he's learned, or does something equally amazing or something disgusting like catching a daddy long-leg spider and pulling its legs off, then watching them dance around in the dirt all by themselves.

Sometimes he squishes the red yew berries into a gooey paste and paints a heart on his arm with our initials inside. I think he's wonderful. Each day he tries to top it with something bigger and more stunning. And sometimes, before his mother calls him into dinner, or my brother and Sami

start getting to close to the bushes, Finn kisses me.

Though I have little experience with kissing, I know he is good kisser. He has big, pillowy lips that suck you right in and he smells like wintergreen and peanut butter. Some days we kiss longer than others. It all depends on what kind of mood we're in. I've kissed other boys before, like Leonard and Victor, but kissing them is kind of like kissing a shoe. Leathery and dry. Kissing Finn is like kissing a warm, sweet piece of bubblegum. I could kiss him all day long. In fact, for a relative newcomer to the field, I think I might have a unique talent for kissing.

One day towards the end of summer, Finn pulls me behind the bushes and kisses me right away. Long and hard, as if it might be his last kiss, like a soldier going off to war and I kiss him back with the same passion. I used to be afraid that the war would go on forever and my brother and Sami and maybe even Finn would be sent to the jungles of Cambodia.

"Don't be afraid," Finn whispers. "It's going to be okay. Don't worry. I'll live. I know I can do it."

I was used to his mischievous smile and impetuous nature, but I'd never seen him scared before. I didn't want him to this thing he was afraid of. I wanted to tell him he didn't have to. I didn't need it. He'd already

impressed me. I already loved him. He had my heart. He could stop now. It didn't matter. But it mattered to him.

He reached into the front pocket of his Levis and pulled out a quarter. Before I could stop him, he'd put it in his mouth and swallowed. I knew you weren't supposed to swallow anything you couldn't chew, and you definitely couldn't chew a quarter, but he had done it and it appeared to have gone down.

He kissed me hard again and I kissed him back. I held on tightly to his shirt and he pulled my hair back from my face, like Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. Then he looked into my eyes like he could see deep inside me. He had made the ultimate sacrifice. He had put his own life on the line to prove his love for me.

I pulled away from him and ran into the house crying. And that was the end. We never met behind the yew bushes after that day. I didn't answer the door when he rang the bell and if I saw him at school, I walked the other way. The quarter eventually came out I heard and he was all right. He lived, like he said he would, but still, the thought of what he would do for me? I didn't want anyone to do that for me. Ever. I loved kissing Finn and I loved the wild, impossible feeling of being in love with him. It was one of the best feelings in the world, but it wasn't worth dying for. That I was sure of.

