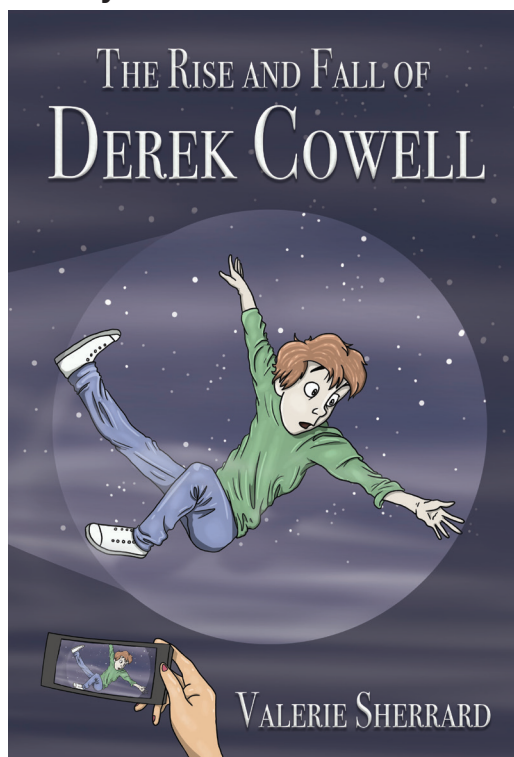


Excerpt from *The Rise and Fall of Derek Cowell*  
by Valerie Sherrard



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## CHAPTER ONE

Nothing ever happens in a small town.

No, that's not quite true. What I should have said is nothing new ever happens in a small town. Repetition is the relentless norm, and that leaves you completely unprepared for change, if it ever comes.

Here in Breval (population 4,300 according to the sign) life was so boring that some of my more memorable moments were actually non-happenings. Like last summer, when the family headed out on vacation and left me behind.

Yes, you heard me right.

And sure, they only got a couple of blocks before my parents realized I wasn't in the van. They came back, but that's not the point. My sisters were all there, buckled in safe and sound. You'd think the fact that the family's only male offspring was missing would have stood out, but that somehow escaped everyone's attention. (Mom gave me a weird excuse about the picnic cooler being in my spot. Because, who doesn't mistake a big hunk of orange plastic for one of their kids every now and then?)

In an effort to salvage a scrap of dignity, I developed a theory. I decided I possessed secret powers of invisibility. Under different circumstances, I'd have been all for that. Cool, superhero invisibility, for example, would have been excellent. Zipping around, performing sneaky feats to put villains in their place, and maybe doing a little eavesdropping.

But *my* brand of transparency was nothing like that. It was as if people actually did not see me, as though I somehow failed to register in the realm of human detection.

Sounds like an exaggeration, I know, but I could tell you a dozen stories to back it up. Like the day in science lab when a classmate

asked if I knew whether or not Derek Cowell was there yet.

*I'm Derek Cowell.*

Or the time we were on a field trip and I had to make a quick dash to the bathroom just before the bus was leaving to go back to the school. Theoretically, there was no danger it would leave without me — we had a buddy system *and* a checklist.

Except somehow, my name got missed when they were going down the list, and my “buddy” never said a word. Asked about it later, he said he plain forgot who his buddy was. No one else forgot their buddies that day and if it hadn't been for a delay at the stop sign on the corner, I might still be there, staring forlornly at the spot the bus used to be. As it was, I barely got to it and pounded on the door before it pulled away.

See what I mean? I'm Derek, the see-through teen.

For the most part I didn't mind being overlooked. Now and then, usually when I did something moronic, it could even be a plus. Either way, I was used to it. After all, it's been this way for as long as I can remember. (Or I should say, it was that way until a freak occurrence changed everything. I'll get to that in a minute.) At home, a big factor was the amount of attention that's left to dribble down when a guy lives in a house full of girls.

I have three sisters. If that doesn't horrify you then you don't have three sisters. Or you're a girl yourself, and your only reason for reading this story is that you heard about the embarrassing parts.

Living with three sisters means I spend a lot of time listening to girl talk. Not that I don't try to protect myself, but I can hardly ever find my earbuds when I need them. That's because *one of my sisters* has “borrowed” them, which is known as stealing in parts of the civilized world that do not include the house I live in.

Kim is the oldest at fifteen, which also means she's incredibly

sophisticated — in her imagination. Kim and her friends have made an art of sighing, rolling their eyes, and raising their eyebrows at each other. It's as if they belong to a secret society that's only allowed to communicate through facial expressions.

Other than that, their favorite pastime seems to be holding thoughtful discussions on important world events. I'm kidding, of course. They mostly talk about romance, but they work in a few other things like clothes and hair products too. Probably so they won't seem shallow.

Steffie Morton is the only one of Kim's friends who isn't like that. She's friendly and funny and not one bit hard to look at. Of all the people who hang out at our house, she's the one I'd most like some attention from. Which was a big part of how this all started — but that's getting ahead of things. I was telling you about my sisters.

Next in line is Paige, who lives and breathes drama. We're both thirteen at the moment, but I'm older by ten months. There is nothing that can't be turned into a matter of life and death if Paige is in the room. As a result, her vocabulary has shrunk to the point that it includes a mere four adjectives. They are: worst, best and WORST, BEST. (Okay, that's actually only two, at different decibels, but I didn't want her to sound like a dunce.)

Paige claims to have a boyfriend. Mom says that is *not happening* at her age. According to Paige that makes her the WORST mother ever. The guy goes by Junior, but I never know if that's a real name or not. He's about as interesting as a blank page, so unless my sister is attracted to dull, I'd say she's trying to get Mom going. Some form of weird female rebellion, maybe.

Either way, it's not my problem except for the odd time when Mom and Dad are out and she sneaks Junior in. Then I feel obligated to give him menacing looks — you know, to make sure he knows I'm around. Watching. Not that there's been anything to

see. Paige hasn't even tried the standard "We're going to my room to listen to music" bit. And when they're sitting in the living room he's usually alone on the couch while she flops in her favorite chair. It's obvious she has zero actual interest in the guy. I think of him as a sort of stuffed toy she's bored with but drags around anyway because she likes the attention it gets her.

Anna is the youngest, at nine. She's also the family extortionist. And let me just say, if you've never been blackmailed, chances are pretty good you're an only child.

She's little and cute and looks so innocent when she's standing there with her hand out, leveling those cold eyes at you, it makes the chill traveling down your spine seem a bit surreal. But that kid is merciless.

Pleading with Anna gets you nowhere. You can tell her any sob story you like, it won't do you a bit of good. Once you're cornered, you're as good as finished. I've learned not to bother wasting my breath. I just fork over the cash and watch her pocket it on her way out the door.

I always know exactly where she's going with her illgotten gains. Anna is like some kind of animal shelter Robin Hood. Every cent she gets her hands on goes to help feed the cats and dogs and whatever else they house in that place. (Half of them would probably have starved to death long ago if it wasn't for me.)

Not that she's all bad. Anna fluctuates from being the worst of the lot to the only one with any redeeming qualities. She reminds me of a poem Mom used to recite — about a little girl who was either very, very good, or horrid.

Given that she lives to blackmail, I'm positive Anna would pick horrid. The good thing (if there can be anything good about being shaken down) is that Anna is too young to ask for much. She also never tries to double dip and she keeps her mouth shut once

you've bought her silence.

Fortunately, there's another, non-criminal side to Anna. That side would save you the last cookie even if she wanted it herself, or cover you with a blanket if you fell asleep on the couch. She's a living, breathing contradiction, my youngest sister. The same girl who can take your last dollar with a heart of frozen stone will also sob her head off over a bird with a broken wing.

You'll get to know more about all of us soon, but first, I need to go back to a day in April and the moment smalltown life went from boring to bizarre.